Genesis: The Book of Beginnings

by Keith Krell

Keith Krell's series of studies through Genesis, from creation, the fall and the flood to the patriarchs and Joseph, with lively, contemporary illustrations and practical application drawn from each passage. In copyright; included with a standing offer of removal at the rights holder's request.

56 Chapters

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Chapter 1

Title Index

The Book of Beginnings: Genesis

Study By: Keith Krell

This is 55 studies in the book of Genesis by Keith Krell (Dallas Theological Seminary). Not every section of Genesis is treated, but Krell does a good job at most of Genesis.

Note that in most cases, I do very little to change anything in a work that I take off the Internet. In the case of this module (see link below), I had a Microsoft Word file to work with, and the actual webpages. I followed the Microsoft Word DOC file, but used the outline on the webpage to make the topics. Unfortunately the two don't agree, and I think that the webpages involved are out of order, so I reordered these studies in Bible order (also added the chapter numbers). -- editor David Cox.

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Chapter 2

An Overview of the Book of Genesis

Genesis: The Book of Beginnings
An Overview

Keith Krell

Title

Nearly the entire Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and Genesis is no exception. The original Hebrew title of Genesis is bereshit, which means “in beginning” (see 1:1a). This is an appropriate title, for the book of beginnings. But our English Bibles do not follow the Hebrew title; we follow the Greek title.

The Hebrew Old Testament was eventually translated into Greek (about 250 years before the time of Christ). The Greek translators then gave their own title, “Genesis” to the first book of their Old Testament text. The Greek word geneseos means “origin, source, generation, or beginning.” Geneseos is a translation of the Hebrew word toledot (“generations,” 2:4). This title is also quite appropriate because Genesis is indeed a history of origins, births, genealogies, and generations.

Author:

Although Genesis does not directly name its author; Jesus and the writers of Scripture clearly believed that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible, also called “the Law”; see Exo 17:14; Deu 31:24; 1Ki 2:3; Ezr 6:18; Neh 13:1; Dan 9:11-13; Mal 4:4; Mar 12:26; Luk 16:29; Joh 1:17; Joh 5:44-47; Joh 7:19; Joh 7:23; Act 26:22; Rom 10:5; 2Co 3:15, etc.). Luke reminds us that Moses was trained in the “wisdom of the Egyptians” (Act 7:22). In God’s sovereignty, Moses had been prepared to integrate and understand all the available records, manuscripts, and oral narratives with which he penned the Pentateuch. There was no more prepared or qualified man to take on this immense task of writing Israel’s history.

Date/Setting:

Genesis spans more time than any other book in the Bible. In fact, it covers more than all 65 books of the Bible put together (approximately 2400 years). The total duration is from the time of creation (?) to the time when the Israelites arrived in Egypt and grew into a nation (about 1800 B.C.). The date of Genesis is sometime after the Exodus during the 15th century B.C.

The setting of Genesis divides neatly into three geographical areas: (1) The Fertile Crescent, 1-11; (2) Israel, 12-36; and (3) Egypt, 37-50. The setting of the first eleven chapters changes rapidly and it spans more than 2000 years and 1500 miles. The middle section of Genesis spans about 200 years and moves from the Fertile Crescent to the land of Canaan. The final setting in Genesis is found in Egypt where God transports the “seventy souls.”

Audience:

Since the book announces that all peoples of the earth will be blessed through Abraham (12:3), it seems fair to conclude that all people can benefit from the Genesis account.

Purpose:

To reveal how the sin of man is met by the intervention and redemption of God.

Theme:

God's choice of a nation through whom He would bless all nations.

Key Words:

beginning(s) and blessing(s).

Key Phrase:

"…and in you all the nations of the earth be blessed" (six times).

Key Verses:

Gen 1:1 : "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Gen 3:15 : "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel."

Gen 12:1-3 : "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"

Key Note:

Genesis is quoted from over 200 times in the New Testament. In fact chapters 1-11 is quoted more than 100 times in the New Testament. It's not just mentioned but you'll find it being quoted word for word over 165 in the New Testament.

Key Lesson:

God created us for blessings and chose us to be a blessing to the world.

Christ In Genesis:

Genesis moves from general to specific in its Messianic prophecies: Christ is the Seed of woman (3:15), from the line of Seth (4:25), the son of Shem (9:27), the descendant of Abraham (12:3), of Isaac (21:12), of Jacob (25:23), and of the tribe of Judah (49:10).

Christ is also seen in people and events that serve as types (a "type" is a historical fact that illustrates a spiritual truth). Adam is "a type of Him who is to come" (Rom 5:14). Both entered the world through a special act of God as sinless men. Adam is the head of the old creation; Christ is the Head of the new creation. Abel's acceptable offering of a blood sacrifice points to Christ, and there is a parallel in his murder by Cain. Melchizedek ("righteous king") is "made like the Son of God" (Heb 7:3). He is the King of Salem ("peace") who brings forth bread and wine and is the priest of the Most High God. Joseph is also a type of Christ. Joseph and Christ are both objects of special love by their Fathers, both are hated by their brethren, both are rejected as rulers over their brethren, both are conspired against and sold for silver, both are condemned though innocent, and both are raised from humiliation to glory by the power of God.

Structure:

The literary structure of Genesis is clear and is built around eleven separate units, each headed with the word “generations” in the phrase “These are the generations” or “The book of the generations”:

1. Introduction the Generations, 1:1-2:3

2. Heaven and Earth, 2:4-4:26

3. Adam, 5:1-6:8

4. Noah, 6:9-9:29

5. Sons of Noah, 10:1-11:9

6. Shem, 11:10-26

7. Terah, 11:27-25:11

8. Ishmael, 25:12-18

9. Isaac, 25:19-35:29

10. Esau, 36:1-37:1

11. Jacob, 37:2-50:26.

Nutshell Outline:

1. The Origin of the Universe: Four Great Events (Genesis 1-11)

A. Creation (Genesis 1-2)

B. Fall (Genesis 3-5)

C. Flood (Genesis 6-9)

D. Confusion of Tongues (Genesis 10-11)

2. The Origin of the Hebrew Nation: Four Great Men (Genesis 12-50)

A. Abraham (Genesis 12-24)

B. Isaac (Genesis 25-26)

C. Jacob (Genesis 27-36)

D. Joseph (Genesis 37-50)

Chapter 3

\"Creative Genius\" (Gen 1:1-2)

A New Year marks a season of new beginnings. Thus, many people begin the New Year with “New Year’s resolutions.” The goal is to maintain these resolutions throughout the year…or realistically, at least through the month of January. Those of us that keep our resolutions into February are especially disciplined people. Since most well-intentioned people fail to honor their resolutions, I’d like to suggest starting a New Year with a new study through the book of new beginnings-Genesis.

The purpose of our journey through Genesis is to acquaint ourselves with the roots of our faith, giving us a solid base on which to begin our New Year with God. Perhaps it has been awhile since you frequented the pages of the first book of the Bible. Here is a simple test to see if you need to familiarize yourself with the truths of Genesis. I want to share with you the “Top Ten Ways to Know You Need to Study Genesis”:

1. Your pastor announces a new sermon series from Genesis and you check the Table of Contents to see if it’s in your Bible.

2. You think Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had a few hits during the sixties.

3. You open to Genesis and a WWII War Bond falls out.

4. Your favorite Old Testament patriarch is Hercules.

5. A small family of woodchucks has taken up residence in the Book.

6. You become frustrated because Charlton Heston isn’t listed in your Bible’s concordance.

7. You catch your kids looking at pictures in their Bibles of the garden of Eden and you demand, “Who gave you this trash?”

8. You think the Tower of Babel is in Paris, France.

9. You keep falling for it every time your pastor says, “Please turn to the book of Melchizedek, ch. 14.”

10. The kids are asking you too many questions about your unusual bedtime Bible story: “Noah the Shepherd Boy and His Ark of Many Colors.”

I want to begin our much-needed study of the book of Genesis by summarizing the book and noting some unique and interesting facts about the book itself. Moses wrote the book of Genesis. Chronologically speaking, it is interesting to note that the first three chapters of Genesis cover over a third of the Bible’s history! God has packed a lot of time into three chapters of the Bible. Genesis can be easily divided into two main sections. The first section, chapters 1-11, has to do with the physical universe and with creation, but in the last part, chapters 12-50, God begins to personally deal with man and with His chosen people. God was more interested in Abraham than He was in the entire created universe. What that tells me is that God is more interested in you and attaches more value to you than He does to the entire physical universe. God emphasizes the value of His human creation over the physical universe throughout the book of Genesis.

Let me illustrate this further by way of the four Gospels in the New Testament. Of the 89 chapters that are in the four Gospel accounts, only four chapters cover the first 30 years of Jesus' life while 85 chapters cover the last three years of His life. (Twenty-seven of those chapters cover the final eight days of His life.) Where does that indicate that the Spirit of God is placing the emphasis? I am sure you will agree that the emphasis is on the last part, the last eight days covered by the 27 chapters. And what is that last part all about? It's about the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (1Co 15:1-19). That is the most important part of the Gospel record. God has given the Gospels that you might believe that Christ died for your sins and that He was raised from the dead to give you eternal life (Joh 20:30-31). That is essential. That is the all-important truth that God wants to emphasize. In the same way, the all-important truth of Genesis is that the God of the universe loves and values you more than anything else.

On Christmas Day 1968, the three astronauts of Apollo 8 circled the dark side of the moon and headed for home. Suddenly, over the horizon of the moon rose the blue and white earth, garlanded by the glistening light of the sun against the black void of space. Those sophisticated men, trained in science and technology, did not utter Einstein's name. They did not even go to the poets, the lyricists, or the dramatists. Only one thing could capture the awe-inspiring thrill of this magnificent observation. Billions heard the voice from outer space as the astronaut read it: "In the beginning God"-the only concept worthy enough to describe that unspeakable awe, unutterable in any other way. "In the beginning God created"-the invasive, the inescapable sense of the infinite and the eternal.

There is no other way to approach the book of Genesis but to recognize that our God is awesome. Carefully read these words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). There are two purposes in this opening statement: (1) to identify God as the Creator and (2) to explain the origin of the world. The origin does not imply that absolutely nothing existed or had happened before this. The separate creation of angels and other heavenly beings is already assumed (see 1:26).

The first three words in our English Bible ("In the beginning") translate a single Hebrew word bereshit. This word does not necessarily connote a brief period of time. This means the Bible never intended for us to pinpoint the age of the universe. We cannot say for certain when God created the universe or how long He took to create it. He may have taken billions of years or He may have taken six 24-hour days. The biblical text does not satisfy our raging curiosity. It simply says, "In the beginning God…"

This is an important acknowledgement. The debate of the age of the earth has brought disunity into the Christian community. Those that hold to a young earth criticize old earth Christians. Those that hold to an old earth criticize young earth Christians as having little upstairs. Yet, when all of the crossfire concludes, we must humble ourselves and acknowledge that this is a non-essential issue. When we state or imply otherwise, we are grieving the Lord.

In my previous pastorate, I developed a friendship with a brilliant student at Oregon State University. He was pursuing a PhD in biology. When we began talking about spiritual subjects, the topic of creation came up. My friend believed that God created the universe but he believed the scientific evidence clearly points to an old earth. I agree with this assessment. So I began to explain to him that there are several views proposed by conservative, biblical scholars. Unfortunately, in his college and graduate training, he had been told that to be a Christian you had to subscribe to a literal 24-hour view of creation. I told him that nothing could be further from the truth. I then began to share the Gospel with him and had the privilege of leading him to faith in Christ.

Now, I don't want to suggest that this is what typically happens. It is not. My point is this: The Christian community has been guilty of making the age of the universe a stickler issue. As a result, we turn many people off and we turn many people with a scientific background away from faith in Christ. We really have to pick and choose our battles as Christians. To be fair to the Bible, we have a responsibility to teach the clear tenets of Scripture (e.g., sin, hell, Christ as the only way to God). These are difficult enough; let's not further complicate matters. The issue is not when the universe was created; the issue is who created the universe.

Fortunately, the Bible tells us. The next keyword is the word "God," a rendering from the Hebrew word Elohim, which shows that the Creator is the beginning of all things. The word Elohim occurs 32 times in Genesis 1. The point that is being made is that God existed before all things. There is no attempt in Genesis to prove His existence, because His existence is assumed to be true. From a biblical perspective, only a fool says that there is no God (Psa 14:1). So the Bible just begins talking about God.

It is worth noting that the word Elohim is a plural word. Even in the first sentence of the Bible, God lets us know that He is plural even as He is singular. Later, in 1:26, He shows this in the creation of man because He says, "Let us make man in Our own image" (emphasis added). But then in the very next verse He says, "God created man in His own image" (emphasis added). The text moves freely from singular to plural. Why? Because our God is made up of three Persons.

The Bible says that God "created." The Bible only uses the word "create" with God as the subject. It never has any man or woman as a subject. It never says any person "created" anything. Nowadays we often speak of people being "creative." It is all right to speak that way but we ought to notice that the Bible specially reserves the word "create" for things only God can do. This verse and many others clearly teach that God made all things out of nothing. An artist creates a picture, but he uses acrylics or oils. An engineer constructs a building, but it is made of glass, steel, or concrete. Just think of what that tells us about the power, wisdom, and glory of God. What an awesome creator God!

One day a scientist approached God and said, "God, we don't need You anymore. Science has finally figured out a way to create life out of nothing. We can now do what You did in the beginning." "Oh, is that so?" replies God. "Yes," says the scientist, "We can take dirt and form it into a human likeness, and breath life into it, thus, creating man." "Well, that's very interesting," God said. "Show Me." So the scientist reaches down, grabs a handful of dirt, and starts to mold the soil into the shape of a man. "No, no," interrupts God, "get your own dirt!"

God created the earth, the universe, and everything that exists. This fact is certain. Several years ago a scientist wrote an article entitled, Seven Reasons Why I Believe in God. He argued his case as follows:

1. Consider the rotation of the earth. Our globe spins on its axis at the rate of one thousand miles an hour. If it were just a hundred miles an hour, our days and nights would be ten times as long. The vegetation would freeze in the long night or it would burn in the long day; and there could be no life.

2. Consider the heat of the sun. Twelve thousand degrees at surface temperature, and we're just far enough away to be blessed by that terrific heat. If the sun gave off half its radiation, we would freeze to death. If it gave off one half more, we would all be crispy critters.

3. Consider the twenty-three degree slant of the earth. If it were different than that, the vapors from the oceans would ice over the continents. There could be no life.

4. Consider the moon. If the moon were fifty thousand miles away rather than its present distance, twice each day giant tides would inundate every bit of land mass on this earth.

5. Consider the crust of the earth. Just a little bit thicker and there could be no life because there would be no oxygen.

6. Consider the thinness of the atmosphere. If our atmosphere was just a little thinner, the millions of meteors now burning themselves out in space would plummet this earth into oblivion.

7. Finally, the fact that man is capable of grasping the idea of the existence of God is in itself sufficient evidence.

He concluded by saying, “These are reasons why I believe in God.”

The last four words in this verse, “the heavens and the earth” describe the entire universe. The Hebrew language has no word for “universe,” so instead the author used the phrase “heavens and earth.” This figure of speech, called a merism, refers to EVERYTHING (the sun, moon, stars, plants, rocks, rivers, mountains, and everything else). God created absolutely everything!

Gen 1:1 offers several repudiations of views opposing biblical faith. For example, it repudiates atheism, because Genesis assumes the existence of God. Furthermore, Genesis sets forth a personal God, as well as a universe that was created by God. Second, Genesis repudiates agnosticism, because in reality God does reveal Himself, as well as what He has done. Third, Genesis refutes pantheism, because God is absolutely transcendent to what He creates. Fourth, Genesis repudiates polytheism, as the Scriptures make clear that only one God created all things. Fifth, Genesis repudiates materialism, because there was a clear distinction between God and His material creation. Matter did have a beginning; matter is not eternal. Sixth, Genesis repudiates naturalism. We know that nature, itself, has its own origins. Seventh, Genesis repudiates dualism, as God was certainly alone when He created. Eighth, Genesis rejects humanism. It is God, and not man, who is the ultimate reality. Ninth, Genesis repudiates evolutionism, because God did create all things.

Now back to our text. In 1:2, Moses writes, “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.” First, we must note that the word “earth” (eretz) can be translated either “earth” or “land.” In this context, the translation “land” is preferred. When we hear the word “earth” in our scientific age, we generally think of the big jewel we are on which orbits around the sun. But the term did not generally suggest such a meaning to those in the pre-space-age time when Genesis was written, for they did not generally know of the “global” dimensions of the planet. Thus, the term “earth,” (eretz) in Genesis, does not usually refer to the entire planet, but to a specific section of land.

Second, the phrase “formless and void” is a Hebrew figure of speech that uses two independent words connected by “and” to express a single concept. For example, “nice and warm” means “nicely warm.” The word “formless” means undeveloped, like a blank chalkboard. The word “void” means that the land had no people on it (cf. Isa 45:18). Thus, the phrase means the land was yet unfashioned and uninhabited. To summarize:1:1 explains the origin of the universe and 1:2 pictures the land before God prepared it for human beings. Light is needful for man. Ground is needed instead of seas. There has to be a provision of rain. The sky has to come into being. Vegetation has to be created for people. The sun and the moon are for people to tell time. The animals are for humankind.

How did this shaping of creation for the human race take place? “The Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.” God used the Holy Spirit to prepare the world for the human race. Since this is the first reference to the Holy Spirit in the Bible, it gives us an idea what He will always do. The Holy Spirit is the One that gives life, the One who gives form and direction to our lives.

It is interesting that salvation also follows a similar pattern to what we find here. When God first comes to us He finds our lives empty and without shape or purpose. Then He speaks into our lives. His Spirit moves upon us. This is what Paul declares in 2Co 4:6 : “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” God’s ways of working in creation and salvation are similar. Salvation is His restoration of creation, using a similar pattern. God comes to us in our emptiness. He finds our darkness, emptiness, and hopelessness. His creative Word brings life to us. Again, Paul says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2Co 5:17, ESV).

The implications of this are great. First, if God is the Creator of all things out of nothing, then He owns all things and all people absolutely (Psa 24:1; Psa 89:11; Psa 95:5). God owns all things absolutely. We may think of ourselves as owners only in relation to other people. That is, they have no right to take certain things from us without compensation. But in relation to God we own nothing, absolutely nothing, and He has every right to dispose of all our so-called possessions and us exactly as He pleases. This means that with regard to our possessions we are stewards or trustees of God’s estate, and with regard to ourselves we are slaves of the Almighty. It is very wrong to think that a tithe of our income belongs to God and 90% belongs to us. It is all God’s, absolutely, and we have no right to dispense it in any way but what pleases its Owner. The doctrine of creation implies that we should ask of every expenditure: Am I, by this purchase, achieving the purposes of my Creator?

Not only does God own our possessions, He also owns us absolutely. We are the clay and He is the potter, and He may do with us exactly as He pleases (Psa 29:16; Psa 45:9). As Paul states in Rom 9:20-21 : “The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay…?” The answer is, yes, the potter has absolute right over the clay. Take your spiritual temperature here. If this is sweet to you and you readily submit to God’s ownership, it is the mark of grace and maturity in your life. But if this is offensive to you and you resent the thought of God having an absolute right to do with you as He pleases, it is a mark of the flesh and of need for repentance.

A second implication of the doctrine of creation is that everything that exists has a purpose, a goal, and a reason for being. If God did not create the world then any man’s goal is as good as another. There are no absolutes and everything is aimless and absurd. The only meaning in life is what you arbitrarily create by doing your own thing. But if God did create the world then it has an absolute purpose and goal, for God is not whimsical or frivolous. Nor is His purpose ever in jeopardy for He says in Isa 46:10, “My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose.”

The ultimate purpose of God in creation was and is to display His glory in all its fullness. According to Num 14:21, God’s intention to fill the earth with the glory of the Lord is as certain as His very existence. He says in Isa 43:7, “I created Israel for my glory.” And, in Eph 1:12, rebellious creatures are brought back to God for this purpose: “to live for the praise of His glory.” Since God created everything, He owns everything; everything we have and are belongs to God. Therefore we must ask of every expenditure and every act, “Does this achieve the purpose of my Owner?” And now we know what this purpose is and so we must

ask, “Does this purchase or this act or this attitude display God’s glory?” Thus, the second implication of the doctrine of creation is that God has a purpose in creation, to display His glory, and therefore the purpose of all His creatures is to join Him in that aim. That’s why we exist.

A third implication of this doctrine that I want to mention is simply this: If we are creatures, we are totally and utterly dependent on our Creator for everything. We are weaker than the weakest baby apart from Him, because apart from Him we fly into nothingness. Every breath we take, every calorie of energy we expend, and every good intention we fulfill is a gift from our merciful Creator who owes us nothing. So the lesson is clear: You can’t glorify God as the all-sufficient Creator and Sustainer unless you turn and become like little children who gladly depend upon their Father for everything.

The final implication is that everything that exists must be under God’s control. The creation must be in subjection to the Creator. Forces of nature, enemies, creatures, and objects that became pagan deities-none of these would pose a threat to the servants of the living God. So what are you currently worried about? Are you worried you will become a financial burden to your children? Are you worried about pending surgery or poor health? Are you worried about the future of your children-their physical safety, financial security, and spiritual well being? Are you worried about your career and if it will take you where you want to go? Are you worried that you may not be able to adapt to all the technological changes in our world today and thus be unable to cope in your business?

Perhaps you are like the little girl whose mother found her sobbing uncontrollably. When the mother asked the little girl why she was crying, the little girl raised her tear-dampened hand, pointed to the wall, and said between her sniffles that she was afraid of the nail that was protruding there. The mother gazed at her in consternation and asked why on earth she would be afraid of the nail on the wall. The little girl burst into a fresh deluge as she sobbed, “I’m afraid that one day I will have a little girl, and she will grow up and bump her head on that nail.”

What nail on the wall are you afraid of? Whether they are real or imaginary, worries about our future can rob us of peace and joy at the present. Will you release your nail to Elohim today?

Genesis 1-2: A Biblical Perspective

As we seek to accurately interpret the first two chapters of Genesis, we must strive to honestly respond to the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of the Pentateuch? The purpose of the Pentateuch (i.e., the first five books of the Bible) is found in one very important event: the covenant between God and Israel, established at Mount Sinai (Exodus-Deuteronomy). This covenant relates directly back to God’s initial desire to bless the human race through the descendants of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). Yet, we know from reading the Pentateuch that this covenant failed on account of Israel’s failure to trust God and obey His will (Num 14:22-23; Num 20:12; Deu 34:1-12). Fortunately, the author goes on to demonstrate that God’s promise to restore the blessing will one day succeed, because God Himself promised to give Israel a heart that would trust and obey Him (Deu 30:1-10). Therefore, the entire Pentateuch looks to the future as the time when God’s faithful promise would ultimately be fulfilled.

2. What is the purpose(s) of the book of Genesis? There are at least three purposes of Genesis: (1) to connect the God of the Sinai Covenant with the God who created the world; (2) to link the call of the patriarchs and the Sinai Covenant with the goal of the ultimate reestablishment of God’s original purpose

in creation; and (3) to tie the individuals and events of the Pentateuch account to future revelation (typology).

3. What is the purpose(s) of Genesis 1 and 2? A close study of Genesis 1-2 reveals that Moses was mainly concerned about three specific subjects: (1) God, (2) man/woman, and (3) the land. He tells us that God is owner of the land; He created and prepared it, and He can give it to whomever He chooses (Jer 27:5).

4. What expectations do we bring to Genesis 1 and 2? In our attempt to answer this question, we must be able to acknowledge our preconceived notions and expectations and be willing to part with any excess baggage we may be carrying. The following four faulty expectations seem most relevant:

First, we expect to be able to mix and match the creation account with our scientific bias. The vast majority of interpretive views attempt to do justice to both the Bible and science (not necessarily in that order). This is frequently done by combining exegesis of the Hebrew text with recent scientific theories and conclusions. (What I call “the mix and match approach.”) Yet, there are several problems with this approach. (1) All too often we allow our modern, scientific views of the world to determine what we understand the biblical writers to be saying. But the primary question for any interpreter must always be, “What does the text say?” Although science and history may provide interesting and helpful insights, the focus of all interpretation must be the text itself. We must always remember, the Genesis account is not dependent upon a “proper” understanding of science. After all, the discoveries that have been made and our understanding of science is relatively recent in origin. What must interpreters have done with the Genesis account before the age of enlightenment? That is a question worth pondering. (2) Scientific research is forever in a state of shifting sand. While the Word of God is stayed upon the Rock, scientific conclusions are always disputable and dependent upon further data. Of course, some will say, “Well, the same could be said of hermeneutics” (the science of biblical interpretation). Yet there is a significant difference. Modern science does not hold the answer to the meaning of the biblical text. Rather, the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God (His special, unique revelation) and science is our pursuit of God in His general revelation.

While it is true, on this side of heaven, both sciences will remain ultimately inconclusive (due to the finite, sinful mind of man), there is much more to be said for our illuminating ability to understand and accurately interpret the Word. A truly legitimate view must be one that could have “worked” before the rise of science and its use in biblical interpretation.

Second, we expect to be able to study the creation account in our own historical context. Granted, this particular error is all too common and very easy to commit. The truth is, most students of the Word adopt a perspective that is close to home and timely (e.g., a western, 21st century hermeneutic). While this is difficult to change, we must both acknowledge this to be true and wrestle with the honesty of our interpretive skills.

In the case of the book of Genesis, the background is that of those who first received this book. This background is vital to our grasp of the meaning and message of creation. Assuming Moses to be the author of Genesis, the book most likely would have been written sometime after the exodus and before the entrance into the land of Canaan. So, before we approach the question of what the creation should mean to us, we must deal with its meaning for those who first read these inspired words from the pen of Moses. The initial purpose of this account was for the Israelites of Moses’ day. What was the situation at the time

of the writing of this creation account? Who received this revelation and what needs were to be met by it? What should they have learned? How should they have responded? The ability to answer these questions is crucial to rightly interpreting and applying the message of the creation.

Third, we expect to be able to use the creation account for apologetic purposes. While this may be of some value, this is not in keeping with the author's purpose for writing. Genesis was written to the people of God, not unbelievers. Men who refuse to believe in creationism do not do so for lack of facts or proof (cf. Rom 1:18 ff), or due to their greater knowledge (Psa 14:1), but due to a lack of faith (Heb 11:3). Genesis is much more of a declaration than a defense. After all, Gen 1:1 assumes God's existence (c.f. "In the beginning was God…"). The author sees no need for further evidence.

Fourth, we expect to find in the creation account the answers to mysteries that may or may not be explained elsewhere. We may wish to learn, for example, the age of the earth, how and when God created either the universe or man, or just where Satan's fall and judgment fits into the creation account, but may not be given such information because it was not the purpose of the author to answer such questions. The problem is that these chapters were not intended to give us an account of the creation that would answer all of the scientific problems and phenomenon. It simply wasn't the purpose of the author. There is an air of mystery that permeates these two chapters. We must be satisfied with that realization.

Genesis: The Creation Views

"People who demand to have Creation explained from beginning to end are asking the impossible. We are limited creatures. How can any one of us encompass infinity?"

-Morris West

With the above quote in the forefront of our minds, the following paragraphs will seek to define the various views that exist among evangelicals. Although there are a handful of other respectable views, the following seem to be the most prevalent.

1. Scientific Creationism: Advocates of young-earth creation believe that God created the earth in six literal days and that the whole universe is approximately 10,000 years old. It is also believed that most fossils were formed during Noah's flood, which they view as a worldwide catastrophe (Gen 6:17; Gen 7:21-23). Creationists apply their scientific methods to the flood account in Genesis 6-9 and are convinced that the present condition of the earth, which gives the appearance of being much older, reflects the catastrophic destruction wrought by Noah's flood. Proponents: Henry Morris and Duane Gish.

2. Historical Creationism: God created the universe during an unspecified time, which the writer calls "the beginning" (Gen 1:1). That "beginning" was not a point of time but a period of time, in all likelihood a long period of time. After that period of time, God went on to prepare the "land" as a place for human beings to dwell. This view understands 1:2-2:4a to be a description of God's preparation of the garden of Eden, or more specifically, the Promised Land. Proponent: John Sailhamer.

3. The Gap Theory: Advocates of what is called the gap theory believe that Gen 1:1 speaks of an initial creation, followed by an extremely long time period. Most organisms that we now find in the fossil record lived during that time. According to the gap theory, Gen 1:2 describes a time of death and ruin, caused by Satan when God cast him down to earth. The remainder of Genesis 1 describes how the Lord restored creation in six literal days. Although this view allows one to see Genesis as factual history, while still believing in an old earth, Scripture doesn't seem to show much support. Nowhere does the Bible directly

mention such a gap or any worldwide destruction caused by Satan. What's more, other passages (such as Exo 20:11) explicitly refer to the six days of creation, not re-creation. Proponents: C.I. Scofield, Merrill Unger, M.R. DeHaan, and J. Vernon McGee. This view is not widely held today.

4. Progressive Creationism: Advocates of this day-age position believe that the days in Genesis 1 refer not to six literal 24-hour periods, but to six indefinitely long ages. It is believed that the universe is anywhere from eight to sixteen billion years old and that life began on earth some 3.5 billion years ago. Progressive creationists point out that the Hebrew word for day (yom) is used in three different ways in the creation narrative (1:4-5; 2:4). In these three verses, yom is used to describe a 12-hour period, a 24-hour period, and the whole period of creation. Progressive creationists also quote Psa 90:4 and 2Pe 3:8 as evidence that "days" on God's timescale are a great deal longer than our days. Proponents: Hugh Ross, Gleason Archer, and Millard Erickson.

5. Theistic Evolution: Advocates of theistic evolution teach that plants, animals, and man gradually evolved from lower forms, but that God supervised the process. While young-earth and old-earth creationists believe that God created life forms by divine command, theistic evolutionists believe that God used evolution, or something similar, to do most of His work. Most theistic evolutionists draw on passages like Gen 1:1-1:24 to argue that God created living forms indirectly, using the laws of nature. By their own admission, theistic evolutionists take a poetic or allegorical approach in interpreting Gen 1:1-31; Gen 2:1-4. Proponents: C.S. Lewis and Howard van Till.

6. Intelligent Design: A new school of thought is evolving (pardon the pun). It is known as the "intelligent design" movement. Those who hold to this view are usually agnostics (and even former atheists) who now believe that, in all likelihood, there is an intelligent designer behind creation. They may not know who He is, but they are at least willing to acknowledge what evangelicals have believed all along. This movement really took off in 1996 with the book, Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution by Michael Behe (a Catholic biochemist at Lehigh University).

Here are two excerpts from his book:

[Behe quoting Darwin] If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.

-Charles Darwin, in The Origin of Species

To Darwin, the cell was a "black box"-its inner workings were utterly mysterious to him. Now, the black box has been opened up and we know how it works. Applying Darwin's test to the ultra-complex world of molecular machinery and cellular systems that have been discovered over the past 40 years, we can say that Darwin's theory has "absolutely broken down."

-Michael Behe

Chapter 4

\"The Glory Days\" (Gen 1:1-25)

Several years ago a movie was released entitled Back to the Future. In the movie an old professor designed a car that could be set for a certain date. By driving at a certain speed the professor could break the time barrier and arrive at that date. Although the driver of the car could be living in 1997, he could set the date for 1950 or 2020, drive the right speed, and arrive at that date. The idea was that 1950 or 2020 or 1997 or any date all occurred simultaneously if the time barrier were broken. But God has not just broken the time barrier; He lives without one because He is eternal. He is also outside of space and time. Admittedly, it is mind-bogglingly difficult to understand a God like this.

As we continue our study through the creation account, it is important to recognize the truth of God's words expressed in Isa 55:8-9 : "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts'" Unless we can first agree with the above assessment, we will struggle through the first two chapters of Genesis. Yet, this is not God's intent. Rather, we are to pursue the God of creation as He reveals Himself in Genesis.

As we enter back into the fray of Genesis 1, we need to remember a few important truths. (1) Genesis doesn't tell us everything we want to know; it tells us everything we need to know. Moses, the author of Genesis, selectively chooses what we need to know about who God is and what He has done. We will try to answer questions that are of particular interest to the author. (2) The book of Genesis is a part of the Pentateuch, which means one book in five parts. The Pentateuch encompasses Genesis-Deuteronomy. All five books nicely fit together as a single book. The wise reader will look for similar and dissimilar threads woven throughout the book. (3) The book of Genesis is 3,500 years old. This means it has been working effectively to change people's lives for a long time. It continues to change lives today.

Before we look at 1:3-25, it is worth summarizing 1:1-2. I understand Gen 1:1 to teach that God created the entire universe during a period of time referred to as "in the beginning." Gen 1:1 tells us, in very clear and straightforward terms, that time and history had a beginning. At some point in the past, God created creation. God made creation for our good and for His glory. This creation reaches its conclusion in Rev 21:1, with a new earth (cf. Isa 65:17). Gen 1:2 then narrows the scope from the universe to the earth or more specifically the land of Eden. Verse 2 tells us that the land was uninhabitable for mankind. While God could have instantaneously created the land as it is, for whatever reason, He did not choose to do so. Now in 1:3-25, we will discover how God prepared the land for the first man and woman (see Isa 45:18).

If you're wondering how I made the jump from the "earth" to the "land," let me explain. We must be careful not to fill up ancient words with modern meanings. When we hear the word "earth" in our scientific age, we generally think of the big jewel we are on which orbits around the sun. But the term did not generally suggest such a meaning to those in the pre-space-age time when Genesis was written, for they did not generally know of the "global" dimensions of the planet. Thus, the term "earth," (eretz) in Genesis, does not usually refer to the entire planet, but to a specific section of land.

It is also worth noting that Genesis 2 shows that the focus of Genesis 1 is "the land." It was a common literary strategy of the Hebrews to give a general description of an event followed by a more specific account of that same event. In this case, Genesis 1 gives a general overview of God's work, and Genesis

2 gives a more specific look at that same work. This seems evident even from a quick reading of the chapters. So it seems that both chapters are about the same events viewed from different perspectives. Since the setting of chapter two is clearly a localized section of land, and not the entire planet, it follows that the six days of chapter one concern a localized segment of land and not the entire planet or universe.

Before closely examining this passage, it is worth seeing the forest from the trees. Therefore, let me suggest three elements that stand out. First, the single most obvious point of Genesis 1 is that God is the subject of all these verses. Everything else is an object. Objects are acted upon. Light, air, water, dry land, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, and land animals-all are objects in a creative process where God alone is subject. In these verses we are told that God "saw" (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), "separated" (1:4, 7), "called" (1:5, 8, 10), "made" (1:7, 16, 25), "placed" (1:17), "created" (1:21, 27), and explained to the man and woman what He had done (1:28-30). Moreover, before that, God spoke (1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20), as a result of which everything else unfolded.

Second, note the two adjectives in 1:2, "formless" and "void." The six days are divided into two triads, one referring to the first adjective, how the earth received its form, and the other to the second, how the fullness came to be. So days 1-3 remedy the situation of "formlessness," and days 4■6 deal with the state of "void." Mark the symmetry here with each part commencing with light.

The Symmetry of Genesis

Form | Fullness

Day 1: Light (1:3-5) | Day 4: Lights (1:14-19)

Day 2: Air (1:6-8) | Day 5: Birds (1:20-23)

Day 2: Water (1:6-8) | Day 5: Fish (1:20-23)

Day 3: Land (1:9-13) | Day 6: Animals (1:24-31)

Day 3: Plants (1:9-13) | Day 6: Man (1:24-31)

Summary: In three days God made the uninhabitable land productive, and in three more days He filled the uninhabited land with life.

Third, Moses' description of the six creative days follows a particular pattern as this chart indicates.

The Parallels of the Six Days of Preparation

Preparation Phrase | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 | Day 6

"God said, 'Let there be" | 1:3 | 1:6 | 1:9 | 1:14 | 1:20 | 1:24

"And it was so" | 1:3 | 1:7 | 1:9 | 1:15 | --- | 1:24

"God saw that it was good" | 1:4 | --- | 1:12 | 1:18 | 1:21 | 1:25

"God called" | 1:5 | 1:8 | 1:10 | --- | --- | ---

"There was evening and there was morning, ___ day" | 1:5 | 1:8 | 1:13 | 1:19 | 1:23 | 1:31

Now that we have set the overarching context and clues, we are ready to contemplate the six days of preparation. First, "God said, 'Let there be…and it was so.'" God does not "make" on every day, but He does "speak" on every day. Ten times God speaks! When I speak it is not nearly as effective. When I say it's time for bed that is not always translated into my children all tucked in quietly. When I'm driving a bucket of golf balls and say this drive is going 200 yards, it doesn't always wind up there. But when God spoke, things happened. This has always been the case down throughout history, which is really

His-story. This is a powerful reminder that everything that God says can be trusted, including Joh 6:47.

Second, “God saw that it was good.” Everything that God made that was beneficial for humans, He called “good.” God loved His work.

Third, “God called.” God named the things He created. The act of giving a name meant the exercise of a sovereign right (cf. 41:45; 2Ki 24:17; Dan 1:17).

Lastly, “There was evening and there was morning, ___ day.” It is possible that the order of evening-morning in “And there was evening, and there was morning, one day” (cf. Gen 1:8; Gen 1:13; Gen 1:19; Gen 1:23; Gen 1:31) reflects the Hebrew concept of the day beginning with sunset and ending with the following sunset. Regardless, this informs us that He prepared and ordered the land of Eden over a six-day period.

Day 1 (1:3-5): “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.” Since the sun, moon, and stars were included in the phrase “heavens and the earth” (1:1), 1:3 describes the appearance of the sun through the darkness. The division between “the day” and “the night” leaves little room for an interpretation of the “light” in 1:3 as other than that of the sun. God brought forth the sun, moon, and stars on the first day and assigned them their specific functions on the fourth day (cf. 1:14-18). God began His work on Sunday with a sunrise, the same day that the Lord Jesus rose from the dead. God loved you so much that He prepared a place for you.

Day 2 (1:6-8): “Then God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.” God’s work involves making divisions and distinctions. God showed His power again by putting limits on the waters of the earth (cf. Job 38:8-11). The “expanse” is a reference to the sky (cf. 1:8; 7:11-12; 2Ki 7:2; Psa 104:3; Psa 148:4-6; Pro 8:28). The water above is a reference to clouds; the water below is a reference to the water of the earth. Moses states that God “made this.” The word “make” (asa, 1:7) is not the same word as “create” (bara). Two examples should suffice. Last week, Lori made whole wheat muffins. She created (bara) these muffins. But they were not suitable for her family. So she prepared (asa) the muffins by spreading butter and strawberry jam on them. Another example: Lori and I had the house we live in built (bara). But before we moved in, we furnished it (asa) so that it would be habitable. On a humorous note, it is worth noting that nothing is called “good” on Monday. Nothing was made for human life on that day.

Day 3 (1:9-13): “Then God said, ‘Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear’; and it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, ‘Let the earth sprout vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them’; and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a third day.” On the third day we see God carrying out two distinct acts: He prepares “the land and the seas,” and He furnishes the land with fruit trees. Unlike the work of the second day, both acts are called “good.” They are “good” because both were accomplished for mankind’s benefit. Both acts were related to the preparation of the

Promised Land. In a second work of separation, land is separated from seas, just as in 1:6 waters were separated from waters. Vegetation is created immediately-“Let the land produce vegetation.” The productive power of the earth is a God-given gift. God controls the boundaries of the seas. Even more important for mankind was the provision, on the third day, of dry land, on which he could live, and plants to sustain life (cf. 1:29-30). The distinct varieties of plants (1:11-12) bear witness to God’s organizing power.

Day 4 (1:14-19): “Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth’; and it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.” On the fourth day the lights that God had created were given a purpose, namely, “to separate the day from the night” and “to mark seasons and days and years.” These heavenly bodies were to serve as signs for seasons and days and years (1:14). How did we have days without the sun? How do you have animals and plants living without sunlight? God is explaining His creation in these verses. Don’t worship these things; I’ve made them! Worship Me!

Pagan contemporaries of Genesis regarded these bodies as gods in their own right. To avoid any suspicion that the sun and moon were anything but created by God, Genesis calls them just lights. They were appointed to regulate the fundamental rhythms of human life by defining day and night and the seasons of the year. In astrology people use stars and planets for guidance, but the Bible says they merely display the handiwork of God (Psa 19:1). What folly to follow astrological charts of the Babylonians or worship the sun god in Egypt; rather, one should trust the One who made these objects in the heavens. However, many humans repeatedly reject the Creator to worship the creation (Rom 1:25). G.K. Chesterton said, “It is most often supposed that when people stop believing in God, they believe in nothing. Alas, it is worse than that. When they stop believing in God, they believe in anything.”

The Bible also indicates several symbolic purposes for the creation of the celestial bodies. (1) To demonstrate God’s faithfulness. God’s promises for the survival and future glory of the nation of Israel are based upon the faithful witness in the sky (Psa 89:33-37; Jer 31:35-36).

(2) To demonstrate God’s power. God sustains the stars, calls them all by name, and has created them all (Psa 8:3-4; Psa 147:4-5; Isa 40:25-26).

(3) To demonstrate God’s coming judgment. The prophet Joel spoke of a day when there would be signs in the heavens (Joe 2:30-31). The sun would be turned into darkness and the moon into blood “before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” The Gospels also speak of a coming day of judgment when “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Mat 24:29; cf. Luk 21:25-28). These unusual events in the sun, moon, and stars point to God’s coming judgment.

(4) To demonstrate God’s purpose. Verse 14 speaks of the sun, moon, and stars being designed by God “for seasons.” The Hebrew word is used over 200 times in the Bible, and over half of these usages occur in the context of a gathering for worship. The word “seasons” points to celebration, feasts, and worship. In fact, the religious calendar of the Jewish people is based upon the visual changes of the moon. The seasons in 1:14 are designed to fulfill God’s purpose for His people; He wants us to worship Him.

Day 5 (1:20-23): “Then God said, ‘Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.’ God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ There was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.” On the fifth day God populated the land with many kinds of living creatures (birds and fish). The word “created” (bara) is used to draw our attention back to 1:1. This serves to remind us that “in the beginning” God had created these creatures with which He is now populating the land.

Each new step in the account is marked by the use of bara: the universe (1:1), the living creatures (1:21), and man (1:26). The primary interest of the author is to show the creation of all living creatures in three distinct groups: on the fifth day, sea creatures and sky creatures, and on the sixth day, land creatures. This is the first time God “blesses” in the Bible. The word is used over 80 times in Genesis where it usually speaks of fertility. The earth is alive. He is a great God that blesses. God brought up out of the water the Promised Land (the Middle East). God is preparing the land as a gift for people.

Day 6 (1:24-25): “Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind’; and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good.” The “living creatures” are divided into three groups: “cattle, creeping things, and beasts of the earth.” God brings forth these creatures for man’s benefit.

First, we should be thankful for God’s creation. Most Christians express gratitude for God’s gift of salvation-and rightly so. But throughout the Scriptures there is a greater emphasis on expressing gratitude and worship for God’s creation. A great example of this is found in Revelation 4: God is to be praised just for being (4:8). Then He is to be praised for being the Creator (4:11). Before we can praise God for being our Savior, we must recognize that He is, first and foremost, our great Creator God. This causes us to see how big God really is.

Second, we should delight in God’s creation. God calls His creation good. There is beauty in creation. God is a great artist. God Himself enjoys the goodness of His creation (Ps 104; Pro 3:19; Pro 8:22). If pagans worship nature in idolatry, we should worship God for it. God’s creation is amazingly diverse and is completely overwhelming to man. Why? Only a tiny fraction of all the species on earth (animals, plants, insects) have been discovered and named. Biologists have cataloged a total of between 1.5 million and 1.8 million species. Estimates of the true number of living species range, according to the method employed, from 3.6 million to more than 100 million. What is more astonishing is that scientists estimate that more than 95 percent of all the species that have ever existed are extinct! Two amazing examples of God’s infinite creativity: In one 2.5-acre area of Brazil’s rain forest, there are 425 kinds of trees. In one small corner of Peru’s Manu National Park, there are 1,300 butterfly species. We should delight in this. We should be awed by God’s beauty as revealed in creation.

Finally, we should demonstrate a responsibility toward creation. The world is becoming dirty and ugly. The air is being turned into smog. The rivers are polluted. Toxic chemicals fill the soil. The oceans have become garbage dumps, trash is piling up on the edges of our cities, and oil spills pollute our beaches. All the while many Christians laugh at environmentalists. We must change our actions and attitudes. Maybe you feel like you don’t have the time to spend upholding the environment. Can you encourage someone who is involved? Are there little things you can do like be informed? Can you do your part?

How can we boil down this beautiful section of Scripture? By worshipping the God of creation and preparation. Tony Allen, one of our members, is a gifted photographer that put together the following slide show. Please watch this and worship the God of creation.

Chapter 5

\"The Crown and Climax of Creation\" (Gen 1:26-31; Gen 2:1-3)

Christian psychologist James Michaelson once counseled a woman who felt lonely and abandoned. As she explained how she felt, he couldn't concentrate on what she was saying, because a Scripture kept running through his mind: "It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves" (Psa 100:3). This verse had no apparent connection with her problem, but he couldn't quit thinking about it. After she finished talking, she sat in silence waiting for a response. Dr. Michaelson didn't know what to say other than quote the verse, although he realized it might sound foolish since it seemed unrelated to her dilemma. "I think God wants you to know something," Dr. Michaelson said. "'It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.' Does that mean anything to you?" The woman immediately broke down and cried.

After composing herself, she explained what it meant. "I didn't tell you this, but my mother got pregnant with me before she was married. All my life I believed that I was a mistake-an unplanned accident-and that God didn't create me. When you quoted that verse, I pictured in my mind God forming me in my mother's womb. Now I know that God created me and that I'm not a mistake. I'll never be the same again! Thank you, Dr. Michaelson. I'll never forget this day as long as I live!" God knew this woman needed to know she was His marvelous creation and not an accident. Her perspective changed dramatically once she understood that God had crafted her in the womb (see Psa 139:13-16).

Many of us haven't fully grasped the significance of God's creative work. We may understand certain truths at an intellectual level, but they have not been fully assimilated into our hearts and lives. That's why, throughout the Bible, God deliberately answers the questions of life like, "Where did we come from?" "Where are we going?" "How will we get there?" God wants us to know who we are and who He wants us to become. If we heed the wisdom and example found in Gen 1:26-31; Gen 2:1-3 we will be confronted with two challenges that will enable us to rediscover these truths.

1. Keep up the image (1:26-31). In 1:1, Moses recorded the creation of the universe. In 1:2-25, he made quick work of 5½ days of God's preparation of the land. But now on the sixth day the narrative slows down and the story becomes unhurried and gives greater detail. In 1:26, Moses writes, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" After creating the universe and putting everything in its proper place, God deliberates with the Godhead. The plural pronouns "Us" and "Our" are a reference to a plurality of God, hence a hint of the Trinity. God's deliberation shows that He has decided to create man differently from any of the other creatures-in His image and likeness. This phrase means several things; I will just share three. First, to be created in God's image means that a relationship of close fellowship can exist between God and man that is unlike the relationship of God with the rest of His creation. Our greatest claim to nobility is our created capacity to know God, to be in personal relationship with Him, to love Him, and to worship Him. Indeed, we are most truly human when we are in fellowship with our Creator. If you're feeling empty and unfulfilled, it could be that your relationship with God is unhealthy. Wholeness comes when we are in a love relationship with God.

Second, to be created in God's image means that we reflect God in our personality and communication. This is why we have value, dignity, and worth. I will venture to say that we who name the name of Christ

are going to have to stand up and be counted in the days to come. Abortion, euthanasia, and bioethics, to name just a few, are going to demand ethical and moral standards. The bedrock principle upon which such decisions must be made is the fact that all men are created in God's image. In this light, I can now see why our Lord could sum up the whole of the Old Testament in two commands, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (?Mat 22:3740).

The attitude of the future seems to be to love only those "neighbors" who are the contributors to society, only those who may be considered assets. How different is the value system of our Lord, who said, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Mat 25:40). In my estimation, here is where we Christians are going to be put to the test. Some are strongly suggesting that those who our Lord called "the least" are precisely those who should be eliminated from society. May God help us to see that man's dignity is that which is divinely determined.

Third, to be created in God's image and likeness means we need to be in community with others. The Bible is all about community: from the Garden of Eden to the City at the end. One of the greatest fallacies of individualistic Western Christianity is that a person can be just as faithful to God by himself as he can in connection with a body of believers. Phooey! Jesus did not say, by this shall everyone know that you are My disciples, if you pray and read your Bible every day by yourself. While these are disciplines not to be neglected, He said, "By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (Joh 13:35).

Verse 26 further explains because human beings are created in God's image they are His representatives on earth and should "rule" over all the earth" (cf. Psa 8:4-8). Rule implies lordship but not exploitation. Man, as God's representative, must rule His subjects, as God does, for their own good. While legitimizing human use of the world's resources, God gives no license for our abuse of His creation. As the divine image bearer, man is to subdue and rule over the remainder of God's created order. This is not a license to rape and destroy everything in the environment. Even here he who would be lord of all must be servant of all.

Verse 27 is the first poem in the Bible. The shift to poetry highlights God's creation of humanity as God's image bearers. Moses writes, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Lest we should miss the point, the word "created" is repeated three times over in reference to the man and woman. God wants us to understand He created us; we were not the result of random chance.

In A Short History of Nearly Everything, Bill Bryson marvels at what makes up human life: No one really knows, but there may be as many as a million types of protein in the human body, and each one is a little miracle. By all the laws of probability proteins shouldn't exist. To make a protein you need to assemble amino acids…in a particular order, in much the same way that you assemble letters in a particular order to spell a word. [For example, to make collagen,] you need to arrange 1,055 amino acids in precisely the right sequence. The chances of a 1,055-sequence molecule like collagen spontaneously self-assembling are, frankly, nil. It just isn't going to happen. To grasp what a long shot its existence is, visualize a standard Las Vegas slot machine but broadened greatly-to about ninety feet, to be precise-to accommodate 1,055 spinning wheels instead of the usual three or four, and with twenty symbols on each wheel (one for each common amino acid). How long would you have to pull the handle before all 1,055 symbols came up in the right order? Effectively forever. Even if you reduced the number of spinning

wheels to two hundred, which is actually a more typical number of amino acids for a protein, the odds against all two hundred coming up in a prescribed sequence are 1 in 10260 (that is 1 followed by 260 zeros). That in itself is a larger number than all the atoms in the universe, yet we are talking about several hundred thousand types of protein, perhaps a million, each unique and each, as far as we know, vital to the maintenance of a sound and happy you. God has created you creatively and perfectly.

Have you ever noticed the pockmarks, or dimples, covering the surface of a golf ball? They make the ball look imperfect. So, what's their purpose? An aeronautical engineer who designs golf balls says that a perfectly smooth ball would travel only 130 yards off the tee. But the same ball with the right kind of dimples will fly twice that far. These apparent "flaws" minimize the ball's air resistance and allow it to travel much further.

Most of us can quickly name the physical characteristics we wish we had been born without. It's difficult to imagine that these "imperfections" are there for a purpose and are part of God's master design. Yet, when the psalmist wrote of God's creative marvel in the womb, he said to the Lord, "You formed my inward parts (Psa 139:13) and "Your eyes saw my unformed substance" (139:16, ESV). Then he said, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:14, ESV). If we could accept our bodily "imperfections" as part of God's master plan for us, what a difference it would make in our outlook on life. The "dimples" we dislike may enable us to bring the greatest glory to our wise and loving Creator, who knows how to get the best out of our lives.

Carre Otis was among the world's top super models for 17 years, beginning her career at the age of 14. To prepare for each photo shoot, she routinely binged and purged, took laxatives and diet pills, and exercised intensely. Being extremely thin made possible a modeling career that earned her $20,000 a day. Cocaine helped her to diet, and she used heroine later on in her career. She married actor Mickey Rourke, but they soon divorced. This destructive lifestyle led to a mental and emotional breakdown.

After treatment at a mental institution, she emerged committed to changing her life. She began eating normally and abstaining from all drugs and alcohol. She gained 30 pounds, went from a size 2 to a size 12, and is now successful as a "plus size" model. Last year, on her 32nd birthday, a friend invited her on a humanitarian mission to distribute clothes and toys to kids living in orphanages in Nepal. For the first time she saw what starvation really was. Looking back on her experience, she explained to reporter Cynthia McFadden: "It wasn't about somebody being concerned that they were going to fit into a size, and that's why they weren't eating. It was because there wasn't food to be had. There was no money to get food…I thought, you know what? This is how the rest of the world lives. If somebody asked me, 'When did you feel the most beautiful?' I would say when I was traveling through the Himalayas in dirty clothes, dirty hair, hadn't had a shower in a week, and was giving kids clothes. That's when I felt like the most beautiful woman, and the woman I've always aspired to be."

God has a great love for us. He wants us to know and experience this. The primary reason we don't is we are unsatisfied with who we are and as a result we attempt to earn other people's approval for how we look, what we do, or what we will become. Yet, the Lord wants you and me to know that He loves us and He has created us special.

After creating man, "God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (1:28). The importance of this blessing cannot be overlooked. Throughout the

remainder of the book of Genesis and the Pentateuch, the “blessing” remains a central theme. According to the creation account, the chief purpose of God in creating man is to bless him.“Blessing” denotes all that fosters human fertility and assists in achieving dominion. Interpreters have generally recognized the commands to “be fruitful and multiply” as commands to Adam and Eve (and later to Noah, 9:1) as the heads of the human race, not simply as individuals. That is, God has not charged every human being with begetting children. This seems clear from the fact that God has made many men and women incapable of reproducing. Consequently, one should not appeal to this command as a support for the theory that God wants all people to bear as many children as they possibly can. This verse is a “cultural mandate,” not an individual mandate.

I would also add that the blessing here must be understood as a privilege rather than an obligation. This means that those countries that regulate the number of children a couple may have cannot be accused of countermanding biblical dictates. Likewise, those couples who choose not to have children are not in violation of this Scripture.

With that said, it is important for us to recognize that children are a blessing not a burden. The psalmist says it well, “Children are a gift of the Lord” (Psa 127:3). I love what Bill Cosby said, “The greatest joy and reward I’ve ever experienced is raising my children.” He’s right, being parents of children (even many children) is a joy that one will not regret.

Moses states that Adam is supposed to subdue the earth. The word translated “subdue” (kabash) means “bring under bondage.” The word doesn’t mean “destroy” or “ruin.” It means “act as managers who have the authority to run everything as God planned.” The concepts of “subdue” and “rule” remind us that we are responsible to care for creation.

In 1:29-30, Moses records, “Then God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food’; and it was so.” God provided food for mankind in the form of seed-bearing plants and fruit trees (1:29). According to 1:29-30, both people and animals were apparently vegetarian before the flood. It was not until after the fall, and perhaps after the flood, that meat was given as food for man (cf. 9:3■4). Genesis, however, is not primarily interested in whether people were originally vegetarian but in the fact that God provided them with food.

Chapter 1 closes with these words: “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day” (1:31). The definite article (“the”) is used only with the sixth and seventh day, perhaps to signify the climax of the narrative on these two important days. God evaluates only this day’s work as “very good.” These two facts indicate the climactic nature of the sixth day.

[We are responsible to God to keep up the image but we are also responsible to…]

2. Take a break (2:1-3). Moses writes, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” It is likely that the author intended the reader to understand the account of the seventh day in light of the “image of God” theme of the sixth day. If the purpose of pointing to the “likeness” between man and his Creator was to call on the reader to be

more like God (e.g., Lev 11:45), then it is significant that the account of the seventh day stresses the very thing that the writer elsewhere so ardently calls on the reader to do: “rest” on the seventh day (cf. Exo 20:8-11).

The author sets the seventh day apart from the first six not only by stating specifically that God “sanctified” it. We’ve all heard the song “Oh Holy Night.” Well, this is “Oh holy, day”! On this day God did not “speak” nor did He “work,” as He had on the previous days. God “blessed” and “sanctified” the seventh day, but He did not “work” on that day. This theme is repeated three times in these three verses. The author is making the emphatic point that since we have been made in the “image of God,” we must also prioritize the rest of God. We are expected to copy our Creator. Indeed, the context implies that a weekly day of rest is as necessary for human survival as sex (1:27-28) or food (1:29). This is an emphasis that seems to have been forgotten today, even amongst Christians.

We function at peak performance when we take one day off a week to rest and replenish. If we violate this design, we are abusing our bodies and soul, and little by little we diminish our effectiveness. So important was this principle for living that God modeled it Himself by taking the seventh day for rest. Did God do this because He was tired? Does divinity perspire? I don’t think so. God did not come to nightfall on the sixth day and say, “Thank Me it’s Friday.”

God is reinforcing a pattern that is essential for healthy, productive living. He is suggesting that it’s an act of God to take a day off. We must not attempt to be more spiritual than God. If He chose to take a day off, so should we.

But if you’re like me, this will be very difficult for you. As I was wrestling with this concept this week, I began to think about my financial giving. Ever since I was a small boy, I’ve sought to honor the Lord with whatever money He has blessed me. I’ve never thought about holding back a portion of my income from the Lord. One of the reasons being, I am absolutely convinced that I can’t out give God. I believe that He will supply all of my needs as I honor Him in my giving. What quickly dawned on me is, I don’t really believe that if I take a day off a week that God will meet all of my needs (Php 4:19). It seems to me that there is just too much to accomplish. If I take a day off for the purpose of rest and worship, I will never catch up. Things won’t get done. I won’t be as productive as I could be. This kind of thinking lacks faith and dishonors God. I must come to the place where I become convinced that God will multiply my time as He does my finances.

So when should we take our day of rest? For years folks have quibbled over what day we should take off. In America, we have a two-day weekend because we couldn’t agree on the Jewish or Christian Sabbath. Yet, the biblical model is to work six days a week and take one day off. What day should you take off? In Rom 14:5-6 a, Paul makes it clear that your day off can be any day that works for you. In Mar 2:27, Jesus says, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” So take whatever day you want to take off and do whatever is restful or worshipful for you. If you enjoy gardening, celebrate your Creator God. If you like to exercise, work out to the glory of God. Just ensure you take some time off during the hectic workweek. The truth is: You and I will remember the sacred moments over the productive. Activities like playing with your kids, reading as a family, watching a family movie, talking with your spouse, and taking a drive will stand the test of time.

I know this admonition is especially difficult for the self-employed or stay-at-home moms. You are always burning the candle at both ends. There are always things to do that are often out of your control. You may

not always be able to carve out an entire day of rest. That is why you must recognize that rest is not just in a day; rest is in a Person. Jesus says, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mat 11:28-29).

Last May I went on a short-term mission to Siberia. On one of my flights, I sat next to a man from Spain that was currently living in Switzerland. In our conversation, he shared with me that Switzerland celebrates a legal day of rest every Sunday. Juan Carlos explained that the police will show up at your door if your TV is too loud, if you nail a picture into the wall. Noise is prohibited! As a result of this law, crime is nearly non-existent. People live in overall harmony. He described it as “a piece of heaven on earth.” This can be a result when people take a break.

A minister was concerned when two of his three sons began to stutter. He made an appointment for them to see a speech therapist (who was also a psychologist), and later had an appointment himself. “That psychologist literally cursed me,” the minister said. “He told me I was responsible for that speech defect, and that I was ruining my boys’ lives. ‘When did you last take your family on a vacation?’ he asked me. “Well, it had been a long, long time. I was too busy to take time with my family. I remember I used to say that the Devil never takes a vacation, so why should I? And I never stopped to think that the Devil wasn’t to be my example.”

“From the Garden to the Grave” (Genesis 1-50)

What do Americans like to do in their spare time? USA Today recently reported that 96% of Americans like to watch TV. Now, I want you to think back to the last time you watched your favorite television program. Were you drawn in? Did you pay careful attention to the episode? Did your spouse or children attempt to talk to you, but you did not respond? If we are honest, most of us would have to say “yes” to these questions. When we are watching a program that we like, many of us can be oblivious to our surroundings.

This reality can also apply to the Scriptures. We have devoted 53 Sundays to studying the book of Gen. I have enjoyed our journey through the first 2400 years of human history. Yet, a potential drawback to a lengthy and detailed study of Gen is that we may miss the forest for the trees. Don’t get me wrong, examining the forest’s remarkable trees has been beneficial, but we need to step back so we can see the magnificence of the forest itself. This we will attempt to do as we conclude our study through Gen.

We must begin with a summary statement for Gen. I would suggest the following: God has graciously redeemed us from the curse of sin so that we may be His channel for blessing all people. This defines the forest (or the big picture) of Gen. Since it is difficult to succinctly summarize 50 chapters, I will recap Gen in this way: Genesis tells us who God is, who we are, and what we must do.

1. Genesis tells us who God is. Genesis begins with these simple, yet profound words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1). In the opening verse of the Bible, we are brought face to face with the eternal God who spoke the universe into existence (Psa 33:6). There is no introduction to lead up to that point, no argument to prove His existence, no room for speculation or curiosity. You must either accept God as the source of all or reject Him. Of course, the revelation of God’s awesome power in creation might tend to put us off, to make us feel like we can’t approach such a powerful God. Yet, the early chapters of Gen show that this creative, all-powerful God is also a personal God who communicates with the people He has created. He talks with Adam and gives him meaningful work to do in the garden.

He knows Adam's need for a helper and creates Eve for his wife. The first couple communes with God each day in the garden. But just when we're starting to relax and feel like we might be able to approach this awesome but personal God, sin enters the picture and we see God pronouncing curses on the serpent, the woman, the man, and the ground. We learn that God does not take sin lightly as He expels the fallen couple from the garden. Then, as sin spreads through the fallen human race, we recoil at God's terrible judgments in the flood and again at the tower of Babel. We see that God is a holy God who must judge all sin. But in all of this, there is hope. Rather than striking the fallen couple in the garden dead on the spot, God graciously offered them hope in the promise of the seed of the woman. He would bruise the serpent's head, although the serpent would bruise him on the heel (3:15). This is the earliest promise in the Bible of the coming of Christ the Savior, born of a woman (not a man, through the virgin birth). In His death, He was bruised on the heel, and it seemed as if Satan had triumphed. But Christ's resurrection turned what seemed like Satan's victory into his defeat, as the seed of the woman bruised the serpent's head.

Then God graciously provided animal skins to clothe the fallen couple (3:21). This provided for their physical nakedness, but obviously it went far beyond that. Just as man's nakedness goes beyond the physical and points to the exposure of the soul resulting from sin (3:7), so God's provision of clothing went beyond the physical need for garments. It is a beautiful illustration of what God would do through the Lord Jesus Christ to provide salvation for all who stand shamefully exposed before Him in their sin. God's provision of the animal skins shows us four things:

1. We need a covering for our sin. The thought of standing with my sin exposed in the light of God's holy presence is more intolerable than the thought of showing up for a job interview at the White House stark naked. I need some sort of covering.

2. Our attempts at covering ourselves are inadequate. Adam and Eve made fig leaves, but that wouldn't do. Modern man tries the fig leaves of good works to cover his sin and to make himself presentable to God, but God cannot accept that.

3. Only God can provide the covering we need for our sin. He takes the initiative in properly covering our sin and guilt. Adam and Eve were passive; God did it all. We cannot receive God's salvation as long as we offer Him our fig leaves. We must let Him provide everything, as He has in fact done in Christ.

4. The covering God provided required the death of an innocent substitute. An animal had to be slaughtered to provide this covering for Adam and Eve. If, as we can probably assume, Adam and Eve witnessed this slaughter, it must have shocked them. This was the first time they had witnessed death. As they saw the animals having their throats slit and writhing in the throes of death, they must have gained a new awareness both of the seriousness of their sin and of the greatness of God's grace in not requiring their own immediate death for their sin. They learned that without the shedding of blood, there is no adequate covering for sin, but that God would accept the death of an acceptable substitute. In light of subsequent revelation, we know that the substitute is Jesus Christ, to whom these animals pointed as a type. So Gen shows God as the almighty Creator who yet can be known personally. Genesis shows God as the holy Judge of all sin, yet the Savior who Himself provided the payment of the penalty for our sin.

The book of Gen also shows us several other attributes of God.

• God is all-powerful (Genesis 1-2). In the book of Gen He speaks creation into existence. He brings a universal flood. He destroys Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day. He brings a famine in Joseph's day. He opens the womb. He performs miracles. The God of Gen is an amazing God, capable of any display of power. This God has not changed; He is still powerful. You can call on Him today.

• God is all-present (Genesis 26; 28; 32; and 39). God told Isaac, "I will be with you" (26:3, 24). God's presence with Isaac was so obvious to the Philistines, they declared to Isaac, "the Lord has been with you" (26:28). Four times in the Joseph narrative we are told that the Lord was "with" Joseph (39:2, 3, 21, 23). Even when it seemed that God was a million miles away, He was present in power with His people. He is present with you today through the power of His Holy Spirit. Even when you go through dark and challenging times, He is right there with you.

• God is all-knowing (Genesis 16 and 18). One of the clearest expressions of God's omniscience is found in 6:5: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Only God could make such a statement. In Genesis 16 and 18, God speaks with Hagar and Sarah and demonstrates that He knows all about their lives. God understands what you're going through. He sees all the injustices that have been done to you. He knows your motives. He will care for you.

• God is sovereign (Genesis 15 and 25). God is sovereign in history, life, and grace. Whatever He predicts comes to pass. He chooses to open wombs when He pleases. He picks and chooses the younger over the older. He answers to no one. He is in complete control.

• God is providential (Genesis 45 and 50). God is so sovereign that He can use even human sin to accomplish His purposes (45:7-8; 50:20). God can take the lemons of your life and make lemonade. Thus, when difficult circumstances enter your life, recognize that God can take your trials and tragedies and use them to accomplish His glory and your good (Rom 8:28-29). We serve such a great God that there is never any need to fret. He will protect us; He will provide for us. He is more than able to work His will in our lives. We can trust Him completely, knowing that He is a good God and only wants the best for us.

2. Genesis tells us who we are. The British skeptic, George Bernard Shaw, in response to the German concentration camps, reluctantly concluded, "There is only one empirically verifiable doctrine of theology-original sin." While that doctrine looms large in Gen, it is not the first picture of man. The first statement about man is God saying, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (1:26). While the image of God in man was marred by the fall, it was not obliterated. We know this because after the flood, God establishes the death penalty for murder, basing it on the fact that man was created in God's image, a truth that still applies (9:6). That great truth lies behind the proper Christian view that every human being should be treated with respect. It lies behind Christian opposition to abortion and euthanasia. It is the motivation behind Christian hospitals and health care. It lies behind Christian charity toward the poor and underprivileged. It lies behind a proper Christian respect of men for women and of women for men, since 1:27 distinctly states that God created man in His image as male and female. It hints at what the second chapter confirms-the basis for Christian marriage and family relationships. It forms the basis for the proper understanding of one's self, showing that we each have a unique role in God's purpose.

But Gen also shows us as fallen in sin, alienated from God. The devastating effects of sin are displayed in full view throughout the book. The beauty of the first couple, innocent in the garden, is destroyed as they are expelled because of their sin. Their oldest son, the first man born into the first family on the earth,

jealously murders his younger brother. In Noah's time, the sinful condition of the human race is summed up: "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). So our view of self has to be molded not only by the encouraging truth that we have been created in God's image, but also by the sober reality that our hearts are inclined against God and toward sin. While it may not be a pleasant thing to look into the mirror that Gen holds before us, it bears witness with reality. You read the book of Gen and come away saying, "Yes, that is what human nature is like. Even more, that is what I'm like!" Apart from the work of Jesus Christ in my life, I am completely sinful. Due to my relationship with Christ, I am no longer a sinner by nature…I am a saint. However, I continue to sin because I have a wicked flesh that remains inside of me.

How does a worm get inside an apple? Perhaps you think the worm burrows in from the outside. No. Scientists have discovered that the worm comes from inside. But how does he get in there? Simple! An insect lays an egg in the apple blossom. Sometime later, the worm hatches in the heart of the apple, then eats his way out. Sin, like the worm, begins in the heart and works out through a person's thoughts, words, and actions. It is ugly and we must recognize just how severe our sickness is. Fortunately, Gen doesn't leave us there. That would be hopeless. Instead, Moses weaves a message of faith and promise throughout Gen.

3. Genesis tells us what we must do. Genesis shows us, as we've already seen, that God offers us redemption and how we must respond. I'd like to illustrate it from the first instance of faith, when Adam believed God's promise of redemption. After God pronounced the curse for man's sin (3:14-19), there is a verse that at first seems to be out of context. Gen 3:20 reads, "Now the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living." Then the text goes on to tell of God's provision of animal skins and of His expelling the couple from the garden. But after the grim words of 3:19, which inflict toil and death upon the human race, you would not expect 3:20. At best, you would think that it would read, "Now Adam called his wife 'the Grim Reaper,' because she was the mother of all the dying." It was ultimately because of her sin that death came to the human race. Yet Adam calls her "Eve," which means life-giver or mother. And, remember, this was before she had any children. What does 3:20 mean? It is Adam's response of faith to God's promise to send a Savior through the seed of the woman (3:15). Adam heard and submitted to God's penalty of death (3:19), but he also grabbed on to God's promise that there would come forth from the woman a descendant who would bruise the serpent's head. And so by faith, before his wife had conceived, Adam named her Eve, the mother of all living. Salvation is now and always has been by faith in God's promise. Before Jesus Christ came into the world, a person's faith had to look forward to the promised Savior (Rom 3:25). Since Christ, faith looks back to the Savior who has come. Salvation has never been based on keeping the commandments or on a person's good works balancing out his sins. We are made right with God by trusting what He has said concerning His Son, Jesus Christ, the only Savior, who took our penalty on Himself on the cross.

A healthy faith always results in obedience. Noah didn't just say, "I believe you, God, that you're going to send a flood to destroy the earth." His faith resulted in 100 years of hard work and ridicule as he built the ark and got on board when God told him to. Healthy faith always affects our behavior in this evil world. That means that we will commit ourselves and all the resources God has graciously entrusted to us to His great purpose of blessing all the families on earth through the seed of Abraham, who is Jesus Christ. If we really believe what Gen teaches about God's judgment on sin and about His provision in Christ, we cannot be complacent as billions go into eternity without Christ. Rather, we will do all we can to be channels of God's blessing to those who are lost and perishing.

An old man, walking along the beach at dawn, noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the youth, he asked what he was doing. The young man answered that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun. “But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish,” countered the old man. “How can your effort make any difference?” The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. “It makes a difference to this one,” he said.

In Rom 10:12-15, Paul tells us that the Lord is “abounding in riches for all who will call upon Him; for ‘whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!’” God wants those beautiful feet to be your feet!

What are your summer plans? Will you commit today to invest in being a blessing to others? Genesis tells us who God is, who we are, and what we must do. God has graciously redeemed us from the curse of sin so that we may be His channel for blessing all people. Will you respond to the message of Gen? Will you be blessed and be a blessing?

Chapter 6

\"Party in Paradise\" (Gen 2:4-25)

What is the most beautiful place you've ever seen? What makes that place so beautiful? There are some beautiful places in this world, in spite of our pollution and environment. But often a so-called natural disaster, such as an earthquake, tornado, or hurricane, will turn a potential paradise into a disaster area.

Before earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, and human desecration could ever begin, there was a beautiful place on planet earth, unlike anything our eyes have ever seen. It was indeed a paradise. It was called "a garden" and was located in a place called "Eden." Gen 2:4-25 describes this beautiful place, the original home of humanity on planet earth. This is where it all began.

Many people have suggested that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 contradict each other. But this is not the case. Gen 1:1-31; Gen 2:1-3 gives the chronological account of what God made on each day, with man being created on the sixth day. Gen 2:4-25 gives a descriptive account, with man being the central theme, and is not meant to be chronological. The two accounts look at a similar series of events from two distinct points of view. The one is concerned with the big picture, the other with a few tantalizing details; the one sees the entire forest, the other a few trees. Another way of explaining it is: Genesis 1 is the wide-angel lens; Genesis 2 is the close-up zoom. So let's zoom in and study Moses' account.

In 2:4, Moses writes, "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven." This is the first of ten units in Genesis introduced with "the account of." As we learned in 1:1, the phrase "the heavens and the earth" (2:4a) is a figure of speech (merism) that refers to the entire universe. In 2:4b, Moses then reverses the order of this phrase and refers to "earth and heaven." When this happens, we no longer have a merism. The word translated "earth" refers to the land and the word "heaven" refers to the sky. These are the topics of discussion in 1:2ff. God is taking a close-up of the land, specifically the garden in Eden.

In 1:1f, Moses identified God as Elohim, the general title for the Supreme Being. Now, in Gen 2:4 f, he adds the word "Lord" (Yahweh) to "God." This stresses God's covenant relationship with His people. This suggests that Moses wanted to reveal the majestic, sovereign Creator is the same personal, loving God who speaks directly to Adam and Eve and seeks to have an intimate relationship with them.

In 2:5-6, "Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. But a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground." Verse 5 shows that the land had to be specially prepared for mankind. The land was unsuitable for the human race because there was no vegetation, no rain, and no cultivation. Verse 6 shows how God prepared the land for men and women. These verses are a flashback to conditions before 1:26. In these two verses, Moses draws a comparison between life before and after the fall. There are no shrubs or wild plants because these would come as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. These are the "thorns and thistles" and "plants of the field" that Adam is told he must work to cultivate in 3:18-19. The land hadn't experienced rain but it was going to be flooded (6:8f). There was no man to cultivate the ground but that too would come about as a result of the fall (3:23). So the text prepares us for what the results of man's disobedience will be, even as the garden is being made. This is the setting of the stage. The land is set up and poised for man to enter the scene.

In 2:7, man arrives on the scene. Moses writes, “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” The term “formed” (yasar) describes the activity of a potter (Isa 45:9; Jer l8:2-4). God is pictured as a potter that shapes and molds man from the dust. This word implies that God deliberately did this with tender loving care and attention to detail.

Using language that humans can understand (anthropomorphic), this verse states that God created us with His hands, not just His words. God Himself handcrafts every person He creates (Ps 139). Man is a work of art! We don’t come off of a conveyor belt. We are formed. God is intimately involved in the creation of human life. This is just one of the many reasons you have dignity, value, and worth.

The fact that God forms man out of “dust” (aphar) reflects man’s lowly origin (cf. 3:19). Even though man was created in God’s image, he was a creature like other creatures God had created. From a strictly financial standpoint and without God’s energizing power, the chemicals in the average human body are worth less than ten dollars. John Calvin wrote, “He must be excessively stupid who does not here learn humility.” Yet, while we are “but dust” (Psa 103:14) we are priceless to God!

Not only is God a potter, He is an animator as well. Verse 7 says that God breathes the breath of life into man. “Breathed” is warmly personal, with the face-to-face intimacy of a kiss. The “breath of life” (nesama) was God’s breath that gave Adam life, spiritual understanding (Job 32:8), and a functioning conscience (Pro 20:27). Since Adam’s life came from God’s breath, man, therefore, is a combination of dust and divinity. To the Lord, and to Him alone, we owe our very life and breath, for in Him we “live and move and have our being” (17:25-26, ESV).

In 2:8-9, “The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” In theses two verses, God’s care is made evident by His provision of a “paradise.” Two trees are specifically mentioned that will come to bear later in our story: “the tree of life” and “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The Tree of Life is in heaven. When Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “Today, you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luk 23:43) we can infer that paradise is no longer on earth. This is further confirmed in Revelation 22 where we learn that the Tree of Life will come down from heaven to the new earth (Rev 22:2).

In 2:10-14, Moses spends an unusual amount of time laying out the boundaries of this garden in Eden. “Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.” The modern equivalent of the Pishon River is unknown for certain. The Gihon may be the pre-flood Nile since Cush, in the Old Testament, usually describes modern Ethiopia. The Tigris and Euphrates are now in Babylonia. Eden (meaning delight, pleasure, or perhaps place of abundant waters) therefore appears to have lain in the general area of the Promised Land. The garden in Eden seems to have been in the eastern part of Eden. This rather extensive description sets the stage for Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the garden in 3:24. It probably also encouraged the Israelites to anticipate the Promised Land. It can hardly be a coincidence that two of these rivers are exactly the ones that God uses to explain to Abraham where the Promised Land will be (15:18).

Think of the parallels. In the same way that God prepares a special place for Adam and Eve, a place they will be driven out of if they are disobedient, so too, He promises first Abraham, and then the whole nation of Israel, a special place that they will be driven out of if they are disobedient. In fact both are sent the same direction, to the east, when they do disobey. And then, where will the Messiah come to? Exactly the same area as the first Adam lived! And where is the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 located? Just where God placed the first Jerusalem, which was in the same place that He created for Adam and Eve: Eden!

In 2:15, “Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.” After God made the beautiful garden, fully stocked with its full-grown vegetation, He placed Adam in it. The Hebrew word translated “put,” in 2:15, is not the same one rendered “put” in 2:8. The latter term is the normal one for putting something somewhere. However, the former one connotes rest and safety as well as dedication in God’s presence. God put man in the garden where he could be safe and rest and where he could have fellowship with God (cf. 3:8). He then gave Adam three mandates. The first two were mandates of responsibility and the third one was the mandate of access to garden privileges. The first area of responsibility is indicated by the word “cultivate” (abhad), which means “to serve.” It means, then, to do whatever is necessary to keep the garden esthetically attractive. The details of this service are not provided but we do know that, before Adam was created, there was no one to do it (2:5). We also know that the nature of the service did not involve the kind of activity that Adam had to do after the fall, when he was kicked out of the garden (3:23). There, he must serve the ground from which he was taken, cursed with the “thorns and thistles” of agricultural disharmony (3:17-19). God placed man in Paradise for the purpose of serving Him. Interestingly, this word is also translated “worship” elsewhere in the Old Testament. This indicates that Adam served and thereby worshipped God by tending the garden.

God ordained work. All kinds of work-paid and unpaid-are necessary in the world for us “to subdue it” according to God’s will (1:28). Even if your daily responsibilities may seem dull and unimportant, or cause you to associate with and support worldly, God-hating people, remember, “the Lord takes pleasure in His people” (Psa 149:4). And He takes pleasure in us not just at church, but at work too. He’s as attentive to us in our work routines as He was to Joseph in his service as Potiphar’s slave, to Jesus in the carpentry shop, and to the apostle Paul when he was making tents. Enlarge your vision of your spiritual life to include your daily work. “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Col 3:23-24). Present your work to God. You are working for Him.

In 2:16-17, “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’” It is interesting that seemingly God tells Adam, alone, that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil must not be eaten. One can only conjecture as to how effectively God’s command to Adam was communicated to Eve. Could this explain Eve’s inaccurate appraisal in 3:2■3?

It is important to note that there is a positive aspect to this command: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely.” God gave man the enjoyment of all of the luscious trees in the garden. It was an all-you-can-eat buffet smorgasbord. He says, “Go for it! Enjoy My creation!” The Lord says the same thing today. You are free to do anything but sin. God is a fun God; He is a good God. We have freedom in Christ. The prohibition just puts one tree off limits. Unfortunately, this one tree becomes the greatest temptation for mankind. As humans, we seem to naturally desire and gravitate to that which God forbids. We don’t seem to realize that what God forbids is for our good. Yet, God is a good God and provides for our needs where He places us, if we will only trust Him. We must depend upon His provision as sufficient.

It is important to note that “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is not a sinister tree. All of God’s creation was pronounced “good.” The name “good and evil” does not brand the tree as partially evil. As in English when we say, we “search high and low,” two opposites are chosen to include everything in between (cf. Gen 1:1; Psa 139:2). The knowledge of good and evil then involves the whole moral spectrum, just as the Tree of Life is related to living forever. This unique tree grants the ability and power to determine what is good and what is evil. Of course, this is God’s prerogative alone. He has never delegated moral autonomy to any of His creatures.

So the temptation to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was to seek wisdom without reference to the word of God. It was an act of moral autonomy-deciding what is right without reference to God’s revealed will. Adam and Eve desired wisdom, but they sought it outside of the word and will of God. They usurped God’s role in determining what is right and wrong. So here we get to the very heart of original sin. It was to sidestep God’s word in order to become wise. Moral autonomy brings death.

Why did Adam and Eve not die immediately? Although the statement may refer to physical death, primarily in view is spiritual death, which entails a loss of fellowship with God and with one another. When the man and woman eat from the tree, they immediately change their relationship with God and with one another (see 3:7-13). Physical death, an additional judgment, is an indirect blessing, ending life’s pain and opening the prospect for life apart from sin and death.

In 2:18-25, Moses enters the apex of the first two chapters. In 2:18, he records, “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’” Before we consider this verse, it is important to underline or circle the word “not” as in “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Interestingly, it is God who determines that it is not good for man to be alone (see Pro 18:22). Everything up until this point was called “good” but now the Lord says, “It is not good.” There is no indication that Adam himself was dissatisfied with his circumstances. He is likely oblivious of his need. After making His evaluation (2:18a), God proposes a solution (2:18b). God will provide a helper for Adam. God already is Adam’s Helper (but a superior Helper). The animals are also Adam’s helpers (but inferior helpers). This helper, then, must be one that will be equal to him. The term “helper” (ezer) does not mean a servant. Jesus Christ used the same word (the Greek equivalent) to describe the Holy Spirit who would help believers, following the Lord’s ascension (Joh 14:16; Joh 14:26; Joh 15:26; Joh 16:7). It means one who supports us in our task of doing the will of God. It is not a demeaning term since Scripture often uses it to describe God Himself (e.g., Psa 33:20; Psa 70:5; Psa 115:9).

Husband, your wife is your helper. And let’s face it…we need help. Not just with laundry and cooking but in every arena of life (e.g., investments, purchases, family decisions, etc.). Any husband that doesn’t consult his wife is a foolish man. I run everything by my wife. She is discerning and wise. She is mature. Think about this. When the time came for a strategic decision during His ministry, Jesus made an interesting choice. He gathered 70 workers, like regional representatives, and sent them to various towns to prepare people for His visits (see Luk 10:1). He could have sent each disciple separately and reached more towns. Instead, He chose to send 35 teams of two. An efficiency expert might criticize that decision for duplicating effort and cutting productivity in half, but Jesus knew that some ministries are performed best by two not one. When two people work together, one can protect the other. One can encourage the other. Two can split the work, offset each other’s weaknesses, and draw on each other’s strengths. Companionship makes two more effective, not less, than one.

Have you ever asked the Lord, “Lord, what do You want our lives to accomplish for You?” Almost every organization or company or church has a mission statement or statement of purpose. Why can’t a marriage? Today, if you are married, it would be a great thing for you to talk to your spouse about your mission as a couple. God brought you together as husband and wife to multiply His kingdom impact.

Furthermore, Adam’s wife is to be suitable for him. The Hebrew word for “suitable” suggests something that completes a polarity, as the North Pole is “suitable” to the South Pole. One without the other is incomplete. Find a woman that fits and complements you. This not only means a woman that shares your interests, but a woman that is different. If both of you are the same, one of you is unnecessary.

God made us all individuals. Then He made half of us male and the other half female. Then He created marriage. Unless you think this was a cosmic practical joke, He must have had a reason. One explanation is that God wanted to challenge us to change and grow to our fullest potential as human beings.

And there’s no better laboratory than marriage to help each other do that. Marriage teaches you loyalty, forbearance, self-restraint, meekness, and a great many other things you wouldn’t need if you were single. Incompatibility is one of the purposes of marriage! Socrates said it well, “By all means marry; if you get a good wife, you’ll become happy. If you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.”

In 2:19-20, Moses writes, “Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.” In 2:19, God invites Adam to study the animals. Adam giving names to the animals means that he is studying their nature. Names in the ancient world were descriptions. It is as if Adam is looking to see whether any animal can be an adequate companion for him. The text does not mean that Adam named every individual animal. He apparently gave names to the different kinds God brought before him. This exercise demonstrated Adam’s authority over the animals and the dissimilarity between humans and animals. He became aware of his own need for a companion as he named these creatures.

In 2:21-22, the Lord meets Adam’s need: “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.” It has been said, “God created man and said, ‘I can do better than that,’ and then created the woman.” This brings new meaning to the expression “our better half.” More than once, when God initiated a new relationship for someone, He first put that person to sleep (cf. 15:12; 28:11). He evidently did so to assure the recipient that his own works had no part in his receiving it. It was totally a gift of God’s grace. What a great reminder that God can accomplish His best work when we are asleep.

God “fashioned” (lit. “built”) woman from one of man’s ribs. I like what Matthew Henry (1662-1714) said, “…the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor 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.” This brings a whole new meaning to the term “prime rib.”

How did Adam respond to all this? “‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (2:22-23). I like the way the RSV renders Adam’s initial response, “At last.” In this expression there is a mixture of relief, ecstasy, and

delighted surprise. When Adam discovered that God had provided him with a partner like himself, not like one of the other animals, he rejoiced greatly. Adam was now beside himself! (Pardon the pun.) He received his mate as God's good gift to him because he trusted in God's wisdom, goodness, and integrity.

Likewise, it is essential for every husband and wife to thankfully receive the mate God has given us as His best provision for us. To do so we must know and trust God's goodness. Our mate's differences are good things God brings to us that He will use as tools to shape us into the people He wants us to be. Failure to accept one's mate as a good gift from a loving God leads to many problems in marriage and frustrates God's purpose and plan for marriage. It expresses rejection of God and His provision for one's life. It also demonstrates unbelief, disobedience, and displeasure with God's character. Your mate needs your unconditional acceptance.

The first preserved words of human history are not the primeval grunt of a narrow-browed Neanderthal but poetry. When Adam says that the woman is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23) he is giving the ancient equivalent of our "in weakness and in strength." One of the meanings of the verb behind the noun "bone" is "to be strong." "Flesh," on the other hand, represents weakness in a person.

The man is to leave his father and mother (neither of which Adam has!) and cleave to his wife. The man is responsible for the cleaving. This implies faithfulness, permanence, and loyalty is the responsibility on the part of the man. Elsewhere in the Old Testament these are covenant terms. When Israel forsakes God's covenant she "leaves" Him. And when Israel is obedient to God's covenant she "cleaves" to Him. Already 2:24 is saying that marriage is a covenant simply through the use of covenant terminology.

Leaving and cleaving probably means both psychological and physical separation and union under normal conditions. A newly married couple is wise to establish relative independence from both sets of parents-emotionally, physically, financially, and in other ways. The couple also needs to establish commitment to one another. Cleaving resembles weaving two threads into one new piece of cloth. The word suggests the ideas of passion and permanence. In marriage a man's priorities change. Before, they were primarily to his parents, but now they are primarily to his wife. Husbands, your spiritual success will depend upon your ability to nurture your marriage.

Chapter 2 ends with the following: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (2:25). The climax of creation is this: the man and his wife were both naked. How appropriate!

The naked condition of Adam and Eve does not just describe their unclothed, physical appearance. It also refers to the physical and psychological oneness and transparency that existed in their relationship. Physically they were naked; they shared their bodies with each other openly. Psychologically they were not ashamed; they hid nothing from each other. They were at ease with one another without any fear of exploitation for evil. Transparency should increase with trust, commitment, and friendship. It involves communicating what we know, think, feel, and are with the person or persons we choose. We should not be transparent with everyone, however, only with people who commit themselves to us. A transparent person is an open and vulnerable person.

Verses 18-25 teach us much about marriage.

1. God instituted marriage. All marriages are important: my marriage, your marriage, and the marriages of friends, neighbors, and fellow church members.

2. God intended marriage to be monogamous (not monotonous). One woman completed Adam (cf. Mat 19:8).

3. God intended marriage to be heterosexual. Marriage is one man and one woman!

4. Marriage involves a physical union (cf. Mat 19:4-5). In the context of marriage, sex should be enjoyed to its fullest. Today the world wishes to believe that they have invented sex and that God only seeks to prevent it. But sex, apart from God, is not what it could or should be. It is unfortunate that we don't talk about sex much in the church, but everybody else does. The best reason for the church to talk about it is because the Bible does.

5. The husband was to be the head of the wife. God created Adam before Eve, and He created Eve for Adam (cf. 1Co 11:8-9; 1Ti 2:13). God intends the husband to be the head of the home.

6. A woman can be a complete person without bearing children. Her basic function in marriage is to help and complement her husband, not to bear children.

If there's one thing that we learn from Genesis 1-2 it is this: God created and prepared the world for our good. God desires and expects us to enjoy all that He has created for us. Today, will you express your gratitude to God for the many good gifts that He has blessed you with? (Jam 1:17)

Top Ten Pickup Lines Used By Adam

10. "You know you're the only one for me!"

9. "Do you come here often?"

8. "Trust me, this was meant to be!"

7. "Look around, baby. All the other guys around here are animals!"

6. "I already feel like you're a part of me!"

5. "Honey, you were made for me!"

4. "Why don't you come over to my place and we can name some animals?"

3. "You're the girl of my dreams!" (Gen 2:21)

2. "I like a girl who doesn't mind being ribbed!"

1. "You're the apple of my eye!"

Chapter 7

\"Paradise Lost\" (Gen 3:1-7)

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
And all the king's horses and all the king's men,
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Now I would venture to say that in your mind there is the image of an egg…right? Why? There is nothing in the nursery rhyme that mentions an egg. The one who wrote it probably did not have an egg in mind. Someone probably picked it up from the old New England Primer. Many of those in colonial days learned their grammar from that very familiar book. I also want to suggest that the child picked up his idea from the couplets used in that primer for the letters A and X. In the primer it reads, "In Adam's fall we sinned all; Xerxes the Great did fall and so must you and I." In a subtle fashion, that little couplet teaches not only the letters A and X, but also a very significant spiritual truth. That is, in the fall we sinned all. You see the one who wrote that little nursery rhyme was not talking about an egg that fell, but a man. And all the king's horses and all the king's men (the soldiers of all the kings throughout history) could not repair what had been lost when this man fell. Of course, it was Adam who fell. He sat on a great wall of love and fellowship from which he had a great fall. And no one, from king to servant, could possibly put him together again. His name was not Humpty Dumpty, of course. It was Adam.

Gen 3:1-7 records the account of Adam's sin. By studying this passage, we will learn how sin entered the world and how we can overcome our sin. Let's first set the scene: At the end of Genesis 2, life is perfect. Adam and Eve are naked in a lush and plush garden enjoying fellowship with the Lord and each other (2:25). Then something happens that forever changed the world.

1. The Serpent's Scheme (3:1): Our story begins with the following description: "Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made" (3:1a). Mankind's first temptation comes through the mouth of "the serpent." The creature here is a literal serpent that Satan embodied to carry out this temptation. The Hebrew word for "serpent" carries the idea of bright and shiny. This describes its general appearance as beautiful and pleasant to be around. The serpent made a good pet and was probably constantly around Adam and Eve. In fact, it is also probable, that for this reason, Satan chose to use the serpent as his disguise to deceive Eve.

The serpent is called "more crafty than any beast of the field." The Hebrew word for "crafty" (arum) sounds like the word for "naked" (arumim, 2:25). While Adam and Eve were naked in innocence, the Serpent was crafty in deception. The word "crafty" is not primarily a negative term in the Bible. Rather, it often suggests wisdom. The description of the Serpent as "crafty" is in direct contrast to the foolishness exhibited by the first man and woman. In man's quest to be wise like God (3:6), man made a most foolish decision. Instead of enjoying all that was "very good" (1:31) man went after that which was clearly forbidden (2:16-17).

In 3:1b, the Serpent speaks to the woman and asks the first question recorded in Scripture: "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" This is not an innocent conversation starter. The Serpent reduces God's command to a question. Satan is so subtle. He does not directly deny God's Word, but introduces the assumption that God's Word is subject to our judgment. Notice how Satan spins the question. He does not say, "Why would God keep you from eating the fruit of one tree?"

It was couched in more deceptive words as he implies that God, who has forbidden one tree, has forbidden them all. However, the issue was one tree, not “any [every] tree of the garden.” The Devil’s words were misleading, and that is the way temptation always comes.

Satan focused Eve’s attention on God’s one prohibition. He suggested that God did not really want what was best for Adam and Eve but rather was withholding something from them that was essentially good. He hinted that God’s line of protection was actually a line that He drew because He was selfish. The Serpent wants God’s Word to appear harsh and restrictive. Satan is cleverly attempting to plant a seed of doubt in Eve’s mind concerning God’s Word and God’s goodness.

I have a few rules in my family. Don’t play with our knives. The blades are razor sharp and you can easily cut yourself. Don’t run around in the kitchen. Our kitchen island has sharp corners and you can crack your head open. I have these rules because I am a killjoy that wants to rob my kids of good clean fun, right? No, I have certain rules because I want to preserve my kid’s lives. God has the same intentions for us when He makes rules that prohibit us from doing certain things.

Do you believe God is holding something back from you? Is He preventing you from attaining something that is rightfully yours? Satan does not wish us to ponder the grace of God, but to grudgingly meditate upon His denials. We are to understand that denials (doing without, prohibitions) come from the hand of a good and loving God: “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psa 84:11). When temptation comes, stop to think before you take and eat.

Instead of rebuking the Serpent for its craftiness and calling Adam in for spiritual assistance, Eve listens. Eve’s first mistake was to listen to teaching that did not come from either God or Adam. Her second mistake was to listen to teaching that was contrary to God’s previous instructions. Eve placed herself in a vulnerable position by accepting dialog with the Serpent.

One of the questions you may have is: why did the Serpent talk to the woman? Why didn’t he talk to Adam or both of them as a couple? I believe Satan attempted to put a wedge between husband and wife to conquer by dividing, thus to capture their minds and cause them to act in disobedience to God’s Word. That’s why God puts such a high premium on the oneness of husband and wife and why, as husbands and wives, we need to encourage one another and build up one another. The minute Satan’s wedge is in, we are candidates to be chewed up by Satan and spit out in little pieces.

2. The Woman’s Response (3:2-3). Instead of shunning the Serpent, Eve obliged him by carrying on a conversation. Rather than running from this one who dared to mock God’s character, she stays to debate. This is never wise. The Devil is not reasonable so there is no point in trying to reason with him. Not to mention, it is always dangerous to flirt with temptation. The moment Eve detected the Serpent insinuating something suspicious about God’s goodness, she should have kicked dirt in his face and made tracks. But instead, she stayed to argue. There are many Christians today that think they can counter the Devil. So they talk trash to him, stomp him under their feet, and make light of his power. How very stupid! Satan laughs at us and could eat us for breakfast if he wanted. We must always remember to have a healthy degree of respect for Satan. He is powerful. We are no match for him apart from Christ’s power working in and through us.

Let’s take a close look at Eve’s reply in 3:2-3: “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” In her reply to the Serpent, Eve attempts to defend God’s honor but in the

process distorts His Word. First, while God said, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely” (2:16), Eve said, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat” (3:2). Eve omitted “any” and “freely,” the two words that emphasized the generosity of God (cf. Rom 8:32). Eve subtracts from God’s Word.

Likewise, Eve had a distorted impression of the severity of God in prohibiting the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. She expressed God’s instruction in these words: “You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die” (3:3). But God had said, “But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (2:17). Eve magnified God’s strictness-“Just touch the tree, and zap you’re dead!” Her comment suggested that God is so harsh that an inadvertent slip would bring death. Here, Eve adds to God’s Word (see Pro 30:5-6).

While exaggerating the prohibition to the point where even touching the tree was evil, Eve had unconsciously downplayed the judgment of God by omitting the word “surely,” and by failing to report that death would come on the day of the offense. In other words, Eve emphasized God’s severity, but underestimated the fact that judgment would be executed surely and soon. Satan’s first attack on the woman was that of a religious seeker, in an effort to create doubts about the goodness of God and to fix her attention on what was forbidden as opposed to all that was freely given. In this final example, Eve softens God’s Word.

Original Command (Gen 2:16-17) | Eve’s Reply (Gen 3:2-3)

“From any tree of the garden you may eat freely.”

“From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat.”

“But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.”

“But from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’”

Satan’s scheme was quite diabolical. Had he begun to challenge the rule of God or Eve’s faith in Him, her choice would have been an easy one. But Satan erroneously stated God’s command with a question so as to appear that he was misinformed and needed to be corrected. Few of us can avoid the temptation of telling another that they are wrong. And so, wonder of wonders, Eve has begun to walk the path of disobedience while supposing that she was defending God to the Serpent.

3. The Serpent’s Kill (3:4-5). In 3:1b, Satan operated as a sly ole dog, but now in 3:4-5 Satan unleashes his beastly self. Moses records, “The serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (3:4-5). In the first question (3:1b), Satan tiptoed up to Eve on her blindside, but now he steamrolls over her on the broadside with a bald-faced lie. The Hebrew places the word lo (“not”) in front of God’s declaration: “Not-you shall surely die!” Take that God! It’s the Serpent’s word versus God’s Word-an absurd juxtaposition. It’s crucial to understand the “Father of Lies” (Joh 8:44) is so saturated with lies that he even attempts to make God out to be a liar!

Satan’s strategy began rather innocently by introducing and encouraging doubt. His strategy quickly culminates in a blatant denial of God’s Word (cf. 2:17). In denying it he imputed motives to God that were not consistent with God’s character. God’s true motive was the welfare of man, but the Serpent implied it

was God's welfare at man's expense. This added suggestion seemed consistent with what the Serpent had already implied about God's motives in 3:1. Having entertained a doubt concerning God's Word, Eve was ready to accept a denial of His Word.

As 3:4 reveals, the first thing Satan wants to deny is the doctrine of God's judgment. He denies the penalty for sin. He says in effect, "You won't reap what you sow." Here is the lie that has allured the human race from the beginning: There is no punishment for disobedience. But the Bible again and again makes it clear that no one can get away with sin (Gal 6:7-8). Disobedience brings death (Rom 6:23). It is imperative that we recognize there are consequences for sinful actions. To imply or suggest otherwise is to undermine God's holiness, justice, and wrath (Hab 1:13).

To make this direct contradiction of God's Word seems reasonable; Satan invents a false motive for God. God, he says, has really invented a nonexistent penalty to keep you in your place. He is afraid you will rise to His level. If you knew as much as God knows, you would become a threat to Him. Eve's response is fatal. She divorces her God-given reason from God's Word and relies on her own limited experience.

This constitutes the great sin of man: to live independently of God. That is the root of sin. As Burger King says, "Have it your way." I read this past week that among the unbelieving population, Frank Sinatra's song, My Way is in first place as a funeral favorite. The chorus is frightening: "But best of all I did it my way." But the truth is, My Way is the dirge of death, marking the imploding of autonomous self. But what a deadly magnetism it carries.

It is interesting to note that what the Serpent said about Eve's being as God was a half-truth. Adam and Eve did not die immediately, and their eyes were opened. Ironically, she was already as God, having been made in His image (1:26). She did become like God in that she obtained a greater knowledge of good and evil by eating of the tree. However, she became less like God because she was no longer innocent of sin. Her relationship with God suffered. Though she remained like God she could no longer be with Him. The consequent separation from God is the essence of death (2:17). The first doctrine Satan denied in Scripture was that sin results in death (separation from God), or we could say, the doctrine that God will not punish sin. This is still the truth he tries hardest to get people to disbelieve.

Also interesting to note is that the Serpent only speaks twice (3:1b, 4-5). That's all the talk that was needed to plunge man downward into the spiral of sin. The success of the Serpent can be attributed to his cunning ability to question the goodness of God. The central theme of Genesis 1-2: God will provide the "good" for human beings if they will only trust Him and obey Him, is challenged by the Serpent. He cleverly suggests that God is indeed keeping "good" from His creation. The Serpent's claim directly contradicted the main point of Genesis 1 and 2, namely, that God would provide what is good for man.

[Again, Eve should have run buck-naked, streaking through the garden, but she stays to tease temptation.]

4. The Man and Woman's Sin (3:6-7). In 3:6a: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate." In 3:1-5, the Serpent initiated the first two steps. But in 3:6, he let Eve's natural desires carry her into his trap. This is why we can't follow Flip Wilson and claim, "The Devil made me do it!" James countered this argument 2,000 years ago when he wrote, "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust" (Jam 1:14).

Eve's basic needs and desires fell into three categories that share parallels with 1Jn 2:15-17. First, physical: "good for food." This parallels "the lust of the flesh": the desire to do something contrary to God's will (i.e., "eat the tasty fruit"). "It will feel good." The desire for food was a part of what drew Eve into sin. The body exercises a pull on us and sin can use various physical appetites. There are various desires of the body, the desire for ease, laziness, appetite, greed for physical pleasure, sexuality. All of these are channels down which we may be drawn into sin.

Second, emotional: "delight to the eyes." This parallels "the lust of the eyes": the desire to have something apart from God's will (i.e., possess the beautiful fruit). "It looks good." The power of eyesight has an amazing ability to stimulate the desire for sin. It is stronger in this than any other of the body's senses. Seeing it will heighten our appetite for something. There is an added desire that comes by looking-enticements that come through the imagination, stirred by something seen. If sinless Eve could be pulled down, how much more those who are born sinful.

Lastly, intellectual: "desirable to make one wise." This parallels "the boastful pride of life": the desire to be something apart from God's will (i.e., as wise as God). "It will make me better." "I need something I don't have to be happy." Here is the essence of covetousness.

Human Need | Gen 3:6 Temptations | 1Jn 2:15-17 Parallel

Physical

"Good for food"

The lust of the flesh

Emotional

"Delight to the eyes"

The lust of the eyes

Intellectual

"Desirable to make one wise"

The boastful pride of life

The next phrase is absolutely devastating: "and she [Eve] gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (3:6b). Not only did Eve sin, but in her distorted thinking and her false sense of accomplishment, she also gave the fruit to her husband. When Eve brought the fruit to Adam, she was acting contrary to the "helper" principle (cf. 2:18). Instead of benefiting and aiding Adam, she is contributing to his downfall. She is actually inviting him and pressuring him to accept that which is contrary to divine viewpoint.

What sin have you invited a loved one to talk you into committing? Disobedience of God's Word almost always affects someone else. Most tragically, it affects those we love the most. Eve's disobedience affected her husband, her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren, and every descendant since. The problem of sin doesn't stop with the choice. Choosing to sin leads to consequences.

The word "with" is what is so devastating about this verse. Adam was with Eve while this tempting dialogue with the Serpent was going on. Sadly, Adam did not say a word and then he sinned willfully by

eating of the fruit. Make no doubt about it; although the woman was deceived, the man was not (see 1Ti 2:13-14). Adam passively watched everything. He sinned willfully, eyes wide-open, without hesitation. His sin was freighted with sinful, self-interest. He had watched Eve take the fruit, and nothing happened to her. He sinned willfully, assuming there would be no consequences. Everything was upside-down. Eve followed the snake, Adam followed Eve, and no one followed God.

It is analogous to Lori (my wife) and I sitting in our family room watching the Super Bowl. All of a sudden the doorbell rings. Lori gets up to answer it while I keep on watching the Super Bowl. I can overhear Lori letting in a vacuum cleaner salesman and listening with increasing interest to his sales pitch. I do not want to stop watching the game, so I let the conversation continue, even to Lori signing a contract. If she were then to come into the room and say to me, “Here, you have to sign this, too,” it will come as no shock if I sign it without protest. By default, I have allowed my wife to make a decision and I have chosen to go along with it.

In this biblical account, the man chooses to obey his wife rather than God (cf. 3:17). Adam sees and hears her in a fallen condition, spiritually dead and different, and having all the facts, he must decide to embrace her or to embrace God. With all the facts, Adam rejected his relationship with God and embraced Eve. He said no to the Creator of all his blessings, and said, “Yes,” to a created one. He turned down the divine design of Gen 1:28 and turned it over to Satan.

Husbands and fathers, if you don’t lead your family, Satan will. Ladies, please don’t take this personal; this is not intended to cause offense. It is a statement of biblical truth. God has set up the home so that the man leads. If the man doesn’t lead, pray that He will but don’t assume his role.

Our passage closes in 3:7 with these tragic words: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.” For the first time in Scripture, the word “then” is portrayed in a negative sense. The moment Adam and Eve sinned, they received the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, they “knew that they were naked.” Up until this point, their sexual organs were like their hands, feet, and mouth. Their nakedness was beautiful. But when sin entered the world, nakedness became shameful outside of the marriage relationship (cf. 2:25).

Having committed the sin themselves, and now living with its immediate consequences, they attempt to alleviate the problem themselves. Rather than driving them back to God, their guilt leads them into a self-atoning, self-protecting procedure: they must cover themselves. This is the tendency of mankind when it comes to a relationship with God. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that man can only have a relationship with God through simple faith. God has orchestrated this plan so that no man can boast before Him (Eph 2:8-9). Today, will you stop trusting in yourself and believe in Jesus Christ as your substitute for sin?

How can we boil this down? I would suggest knowing and applying the following information.

Satan’s Strategy:

1. Satan attacks the family. He didn’t concern himself with Adam until he was married.

2. Satan attacks new believers and those that aren’t in relationships with other believers. They are usually easy prey.

3. Satan attacks when you least expect it. He loves the element of surprise. When you are at ease, relaxed, off guard, or secure, watch out! Eve was in a perfect environment, without a care in the world, when Satan attacked.

4. Satan attacks our trust in God.

5. Satan poisons truth with lies.

6. Satan appeals to our pride.

7. Satan makes promises that won't be kept.

Your Response:

1. Realize your vulnerability.

2. Strengthen your weakness. Beware of sowing "wild oats" and then praying for a "crop failure"!

3. Deepen your faith.

4. Know and utilize God's Word (2Ti 2:15). "It is written" (Matt 4). Ignorance or disregard of God's Word makes one very vulnerable to temptation (Psa 119:11).

5. Stand strong. Refuse to yield (Eph 6:10).

6. Resist Satan (Jam 4:7; 1Pe 5:8-9).

7. Trust in God's provision (Psa 16:11). Express gratitude to Him for all that He has done for you.

Chapter 8

\"Eat MY Dust!\" (Gen 3:8-24)

This past Christmas morning (2004), a 22-year-old man robbed a Chevron station and then led Poulsbo, Washington police on a high-speed chase. After cleaning out the cash register, the robber and a passenger took off in a red Honda and soon cops from four towns were in pursuit. The caravan zoomed at speeds up to 100 mph through the winding roads of western Puget Sound, where twists and turns can leave even locals disoriented. After a while the fugitives managed to lose their pursuers in the darkness but they had no idea where they were. That's when the robber pulled his Honda into a Chevron station to ask for directions to Seattle-unaware that it was the very same establishment he'd just robbed. Police caught up to the Honda soon afterward.

Sometimes, playing hide-and-seek doesn't work out so well. Have you ever played hide-and-seek with God? Have you ever sinned and then tried to run away from Him in shame? If so, you've probably realized that no matter how good you are at hiding, you can't hide from God. Fortunately, God doesn't play hide-and-seek, He plays "seek and hide." He is the great pursuer that always tracks down His man or woman. Today, if you're feeling far away from God, I have a word of hope for you. It is found in Gen 3:8-24.

[In 3:1-7, we learned how to win over sin by overcoming temptation. Now in 3:8-24, we will learn how to recover from sin by confessing our sins and learning from discipline. How can I recover from sin? In this narrative, we will be able to see two clear prescriptions.]

1. Confess your sin without blaming God or others (3:8-13). In 3:8, Moses records: "They [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." "The sound of the Lord God" represents the grace of God reaching out to man in a crisis situation. The "cool" of the day can be translated, literally, the "wind" or "spirit" of the day. In the Bible, the wind/spirit is the symbol of God's presence (see 1:2). God came to Adam and Eve in this wind. He began to seek them; yet our text records that they "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." A more complete transformation could not be imagined. The trust of innocence is replaced by the fear of guilt. The trees that God created for man to look at and enjoy (2:9) are now his hiding place to prevent God seeing him..

In the midst of this game of hide and seek, God calls out to the man because he is the one in authority, the one first created (1Co 11:3). He is responsible for where they are and why. The Lord says, "Where are you?" (3:9). The Lord's question carries the force of "why" are you there. God asked, "What's the problem? What's going on?" Of course, the Lord knows, but is demanding that man give an account of his actions. He wants Adam to take personal responsibility for his actions. This is all grace. Even in Adam's sin, God lovingly woos Adam back to Himself. He is seeking a confession.

In 3:10, Adam answers the "why" question with these words: "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." As soon as Adam heard God's presence, he remembered about spiritual life and relationship with God. He now realized that the attempt to cover up his disorientation to Eve had been in vain. He realized that it was the loss of spiritual life that was the cause of his disorientation to Eve and that there was nothing he could do about either. That's why he still viewed

himself as naked, even after covering up. And that's why he was afraid. It was "spiritual" nakedness that was the real issue. The only solution he could devise was denial and avoidance. He hid himself, but of course it didn't work. Because the human race is naked, there is no end to their attempts to avoid the truth of God's grace. Denial and substitution has been the evidence of man's nakedness all throughout history.

In 3:11, God answers Adam in the form of another question. He says, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" God is being specific to make certain they understand exactly what happened. Eating from the tree of which God commanded Adam not to eat was the only way he could become alienated from God and Eve. God is making it perfectly clear that the failure was in not obeying the Word of God. Yet, bear in mind, God took the initiative in seeking out the sinners to re-establish a relationship with them. Evidence of God's love is His unwillingness to abandon those He loves, even when they failed to do His will. He is a compassionate and gracious God.

Adam responded to God's question by saying, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (3:12). Remember Adam's ecstasy when he first laid eyes on Eve? "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (2:23a). Now he turns on her like a wild banshee! What infamous treachery! Here, Adam implies that a good God would not have given him Eve. He makes excuses for himself and plays the blame game.

A woman was walking along the beach when she stumbled upon a Genie's lamp. She picked it up, rubbed it, and a Genie appeared. The amazed woman asked if she got three wishes. The Genie said, "No. Due to inflation, constant downsizing, and fierce global competition, I can only grant you one wish. So, what'll it be?" The woman didn't hesitate. She said, "I want peace in the Middle East. See this map? I want these countries to stop fighting with each other." The Genie looked at the map and exclaimed, "Lady, these countries have been at war for thousands of years. I'm good but not THAT good! Make another wish." The woman thought for a minute and said, "Well, I've never been able to find the right man. You know, one that's considerate and fun, likes to cook and helps with the housecleaning, is romantic, gets along with my family, doesn't watch sports all the time, and is faithful. That's what I wish for-a perfect husband." The Genie let out a long sigh and said, "Let me see that map again."

After hearing Adam's response, the Lord God moves on to the woman and asks, "What is this you have done?" (3:13a). "And the woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate'" (3:13b). The Lord's question has the sense, "What in the world have you done?" or "Do you realize what you've done?" Instead of taking responsibility for her actions, the woman blamed the serpent. Can you see the progression? Adam blamed the woman, and then blamed God for having given her to him. Eve blamed the serpent. This is typical of human nature. The sinner blames everyone but himself. It's been said, "To error is human; to blame it on others and upon God is more human."

Adam and Eve are guilty of "passing the buck" and blaming others. Mankind has been guilty of this behavior ever since. We sometimes blame God for placing us in circumstances that we regard as too much for us. Some students cheat, rationalizing that God is to blame for giving them a difficult professor and a busy schedule. Some thieves steal, blaming God and life for their stealing. "God, you know my weaknesses, but there it was. Why did you allow it?" Consider the adulterous man who blames God for the ingredients that led to his sin-his depression, his poor self-image, that woman, his loneliness. Mankind loves to find someone or something to blame for their behavior (e.g., spouse, parents, siblings, children, co-workers, the boss, the weather, the neighbor's dog).

Yet, if you're going to "pass the blame," why not pass it on to Jesus? The Bible tells us that the Second Adam took all the sins of the world upon Himself and died to cover the penalty for sin (Rom 5:17). Have you stopped passing the buck? Have you humbled yourself before God and others and said the guilt for your sin is yours alone? And then, have you passed it on to Jesus? When you come to the realization that you have sinned and there is a penalty for your sin, if God is drawing you to Himself, you will also recognize your need of a Savior. The moment you trust in Christ, you enter into a relationship with God that can never be lost. What hope! What blessing!

[Whether you are a pre-Christian or a Christian, you can recover from sin by confessing your sin to your loving Father. The second prescription for recovering from sin is to…]

2. Trust in God's care as you face the consequences (3:14-24). The consequences of sin are detailed in 3:14-19. First, God deals with the serpent. Then He deals with the woman, and finally, the man. God's judgment on each trespasser (the snake, the woman, and the man) involved both a life function and a relationship. In each case the punishment corresponded to the nature of the crime. In 3:14, Moses writes, "The LORD God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life.'" The snake had been "crafty" ('arum), but now it was "cursed" ('arur). In the Bible, to "curse" means to invoke God's judgment on someone, usually for some particular offense. It is the opposite of "bless." The text says the snake had to move on its belly. Some commentators take this literally and conclude that the snake had legs before God cursed it. Others take it figuratively, as a reference to the resultant despised condition of the snake. I opt for the latter. I believe snakes did not originally walk upright on their feet. This was just a way of saying that the serpent's downfall would be certain. This is confirmed by the phrase "and dust you will eat all the days of your life." In the Bible, this describes humiliation and total defeat. To boil this down, recognize that even Indiana Jones feared snakes. Since the fall of man, snakes continue to keep the revolting image of Satan before our eyes. While God cursed all animals and the whole creation because of the fall (Rom 8:20), He made the snake the most despicable of all the animals for its part in the fall.

In 3:15, we have one of the most important verses in the entire Bible: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." The word "enmity" means "hostility and antagonism." There would be antagonism between the Serpent and human beings (3:15a). This obviously exists between snakes and people, but God's intention in this verse seems to include the person behind the snake (Satan) even more than the snake itself.

The "seed" of the Serpent refers to natural humanity whom he has led into rebellion against God. The "seed" of the woman refers to her descendants. Eve's descendants were the Jewish people. However, the "seed" of the woman in 3:15 also refers to one particular individual, not a whole group of people. It is referring to the Messiah, who would come forth from the Jewish people. The moment the Serpent delivers a blow to the heel of the Messiah is the same moment in which his head is crushed (cf. Gal 3:16; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:14-15; 1Jn 3:8; Rev 19:1-5). The Bible connects the death of Jesus Christ with the defeat of the Devil (Joh 12:21-33). Satan would strike His heel, but the wound would mean that the Son would strike a deathblow to Satan. Jesus suffered a terrible but temporary injury (Joh 12:31; Col 2:15). Satan only crippled Christ. Christ would deal Satan the fatal blow. The forces of Satan did not realize that the plan of God would actually be promoted and fulfilled by the death of Christ. God's curse upon Satan meant that His own Son would one day become a curse for us. Grace is rooted in Christ's victory. This first judgment

on sin is tinged with hope, something that recurs throughout Scripture (cf. 6:5-8), as God's mercy outweighs His wrath (cf. Exo 20:5-6).

Now in 3:16, God turns His attention toward the woman. He says to the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." God speaks to Eve about her role as mother (3:16a) and as wife (3:16b). Biblically speaking, these are the two points where a woman experiences her highest fulfillment. And at these two points there will be pain and servitude. The "pain in childbirth" refers to the whole process from conception to birth. This includes anxiety about whether she will be able to conceive a child, anxiety that comes with all the physical discomfort of the pregnancy, anxiety concerning the health of the child in the womb, and anxiety about whether she and the baby will survive the birth process.

God also speaks of the woman's "desire" for her husband. Desire is a source of conflict between husbands and wives, just as sin desires to dominate and control (4:7). This is the first battle of the sexes. Each strives for control and neither lives in the best interest of the other (Php 2:3-4). The woman's role and the man's role both become perverted. The woman tends to want to subtly control the man. The man tends to dominate and tyrannize. Partners become competitors. It has been this way ever since the fall.

Wives, in what ways do you attempt to usurp your husband's authority? Do you nag? Are you critical? Are you cynical? Do you use your emotions to dominate him and get your way? While this behavior is one of the consequences of the fall, you are not to use this verse as an excuse to justify your behavior. Rather, you are called to recognize that your husband is your spiritual head, therefore, you must exhibit a "gentle and quiet spirit" (1Pe 3:4).

In 3:17-19, God directs His final words to Adam. The judgment on Adam is given last because, as the one who sinned without being deceived, having all the facts, he bears the greater responsibility. The Lord says, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." God's punishment or discipline fits the crime. A form of the word "eating" is used no less than five times in response to Adam's sin of eating. It is also worth noting that, in each of these three verses, God says to Adam, "You will eat." The food produced by the man would sustain the lives produced by the woman, and it would sustain their lives as well. Even in His discipline, God manifests grace.

God speaks to Adam about his role as a worker. Here is where the male experiences his highest fulfillment. And for him, too, there will be pain. Rom 8:20 explains that creation is subject to vanity. This is the law of entropy. The second law of thermodynamics demonstrates that there is an innate tendency towards decay and disorder in the universe. We are currently experiencing this consequence of the curse.

In these three verses, man's natural or original relationship to the ground-to rule over it-is reversed; instead of submitting to him, it resists and eventually swallows him (2:7; Rom 8:20-22). In the Old Testament, in particular, the ecology of the earth is partly dependent on human morality. Sin always puts a wedge between things or people in Genesis 3. It puts a wedge between God and humans, between man and woman, between man and himself, and now between man and the soil. These are the consequences we must face.

In 3:20-21, “Now the man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living. The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.” Adam expressed confidence in God’s promise about the “seed of the woman,” as he calls his wife “Eve,” which means “the mother of all living” or “she who gives life.” I do not think this name means merely that the whole human race will descend from her. That may be true, but that is not the point of the name. Surely, it is an expression of faith in the promise of Gen 3:15. Adam believes that somehow, through Eve’s seed, life will come to the human race. Here is hope in the midst of judgment.

Previously, Adam and Eve “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings” (3:7). That was their attempt to solve the immediate consequences of their sin. God provided special clothing for them instead of their fig leaves. He used “garments of skin” and clothed them. So with the sentence given, God does for the couple what they cannot do for themselves. They cannot deal with their shame. But God can, will, and does. God’s provision of clothes is a way of expressing the fact that, when we believe, He clothes us with garments of salvation (2Co 5:21).

In 3:22-24, the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever-therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.” The author uses irony to demonstrate that when the human race, who had been created like God (1:26), sought to “be like God” (3:5-7), they found themselves, after the fall, no longer with God. Their happiness does not consist of being like God so much as it does their being with God. The goal must always be, to be “with God.” There is nothing better than enjoying the presence of God (cf. Psa 16:11).

The phrase “like one of us” probably means like heavenly beings (God and the angels; cf. 1:26). Cherubim, in the Old Testament, surround and symbolize God’s presence. They are similar to God’s bodyguards. Moses pictured them here defending the Tree of Life with a flaming sword. The cherubim at Eden kept man from eating the fruit from the Tree of Life. This was critical because the Tree of Life perpetuated physical life in the perfect environment of the garden. When man acquired a sin nature in the physical body, he started the process of physical deterioration, which would lead ultimately to physical death. If he were to eat of the Tree of Life at this time, it would perpetuate his physical life forever with the presence of the sin nature. And even though man is now back in relationship with God, through faith in the promise of a coming savior, perpetuation of physical life with the sin nature, would perpetuate soul distortion and deny access to the fullness of fellowship with God. Therefore, God forbade man to eat from the Tree of Life and removed him from its presence.

The cherubim also guarded man from the Tree of Life to remind him that his legacy was death, caused by sin. And if he considered the cherubim his enemies, it was only because he had forgotten that his own worst enemy was himself. As the late cartoonist Walt Kelly used to express it through one of his characters in the comic strip Pogo: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

So how can we go on? This passage provides several applications:

1. Humble yourself and take responsibility for your sin (3:8-13).

2. Prepare for the pain of discipline (3:14-19).

3. Live by faith in spite of your failure (3:20).

4. Trust in God's ability to remove the shame (3:21).

Trust in God's loving protection against unseen consequences from your sin (3:22-24).

Parallels in Genesis 1-3 and Revelation 20-22

Genesis | Revelation

In the beginning (1:1) | I am. . .the Beginning and the End (21:6)

God created the heavens and the earth (1:1) | I saw a new heaven and a new earth (21:1)

Let there be light (1:3) | God gives it light (21:23)

The darkness He called "night" (1:5) | There will be no night there (21:25)

The gathered waters He called "seas" (1:10) | There was no longer any sea (21:1)

God made the two great lights (1:16) | Does not need the sun/moon (21:23)

He also made the stars (1:16) | The Morning Star (22:16)

Subdue [the earth]. Rule over (1:28) | And they will reign forever (22:5)

God blessed the 7th day (2:2-3) | 7 angels, 7 bowls, 7 last plagues (21:9)

[God] made it holy (2:3) | The Holy City (21:2, 10; 22:19)

Tree of Life (2:9) He must not take from the Tree of Life (3:22-23) | Tree of Life (22:2) God will take away His share in the Tree of Life (22:19)

A river watering the garden (2:10) | River of the Water of Life (22:1) The free gift of the Water of Life (22:17)

There is gold (the gold of that land is good) (2:11-12) | A measuring rod of gold (21:15) The city was. . .pure gold (21:18) The street. . .was pure gold (21:21)

The bdellium stone (pearls) (2:12) | Pearls, each gate made of a single pearl (21:21)

Onyx (2:12) | Sardonyx (21:20)

You will surely die (2:17) Or you will die (3:3) | No more death (21:4)

A man will. . .be united to his wife (2:23-25) | The bride of the wife of the Lamb (21:9-10)

The serpent. . .was crafty (3:1) | The Devil, who deceived them (20:10)

Shown a garden into which sin entered (3:6-7) | Shown a city into which sin will never enter (21:27)

The Lord God. . .was walking in the garden (3:8) | Nations will walk by His light (21:24)

Walk of God with man interrupted (3:8-10) | Walk of God with man resumed (21:3)

I was ashamed [naked] (3:10) | Anyone who does what is shameful (21:27)

Initial triumph of the Serpent (3:13) | Ultimate triumph of the Lamb (20:10; 22:3)

Cursed. . .cursed (3:14, 17) | No longer. . .any curse (22:3)

Eve's offspring (3:15) | The Offspring of David (22:16)

I will greatly multiply your pain (3:16-17) | No more. . .pain (21:4)

The Lord God made garments of skins and clothed them (3:21) | Blessed are those who wash their robes (22:14)

God banished him (3:23) | They will see His face (22:4)

He drove the man out of the garden (3:24) | I saw the Holy City (21:2)

Cherubim. . .to guard the way (3:24) | With 12 angels at the gates (21:12)

A flaming sword (3:24) | Fiery lake of burning sulfur (21:8)

The Significance of the Parallels in Genesis 1-3 and Revelation 20-22

1. Immutability: While we are prone to change, God does not change (Mal 3:6 a). Even when we are faithless, He remains forever faithful (2Ti 2:12). In His first dealings with mankind, He provided the sacrifice to meet the needs of the fallen Adam and Eve (i.e., animal skins, see Gen 3:21). In later events, He provided the sacrifice for the needs of His people (i.e., the Lamb, see 1Pe 1:18-19).

2. Restoration: The world as we now know it is not what God intended. Rather, our world is a result of man's fall (Gen 3:1-24; Rom 5:12-21). Yet, Revelation 20-22 promises us that God's original plan for mankind will one day be fulfilled.

3. Progress: The new heavens and the new earth are actually an improvement over the garden of Eden in that there is no sea, no night, no sun, or moon, etc. (Rev 21:1; Rev 21:23-27).

4. Triumph: God's purposes are never thwarted by anyone or anything (Rom 9:6-29). Although things may have looked bleak in Genesis 3, Revelation 20-22 proves that God ultimately and forcefully triumphs over the Serpent. Eventually, the big three (sin, suffering, and death) will be forever dealt with. This is one of the reasons the book of Revelation is so crucial. Without it, we would be left hanging. But fortunately, God relieves our apprehension and shares with us His glorious future.

5. Beginning and End: In Rev 21:6, God says, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." Any comparison of these two passages corroborates that He is the controller of all things from eternity to eternity. As Jesus said, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last" (Rev 1:17). We can relax in our great God's sovereignty.

6. Unity of God's Plan: Gen 3:15 points out the plan that God has to defeat Satan through the offspring of the woman. Revelation points to the consummation of that plan in the finished work of the Lamb (5:6-14). Thus, if God has a plan from the beginning and is able to actually carry it out at the end of history, then He must be in control of human history. And He must be who He claims to be!

7. Unity of Scripture: By these extensive parallels (both similar and contrasting), we see that there is very close literary connection between two biblical books, written centuries apart, by different human authors, who were recording the words of a greater, overseeing author, God. Only God Himself could have orchestrated this unity of the Scriptures.

Chapter 9

\"Raising Cain\" (Gen 4:1-26)

Do you remember the TV show The Incredible Hulk? The main character was a scientist named Dr. David Banner. Banner was basically a very friendly man. But whenever he got angry, his eyes would turn green and he would be transformed into this big, green, hulking monster (played by former professional bodybuilder, Lou Ferrigno). If you were a person in need, he would save you. But God help you if you were the one he was mad at because he would pick you up and throw you to the other side of the room like you were a rag doll. Dr. Banner didn't like what anger did to him. In fact, the whole show is built around Dr. Banner's desire to find a cure so this won't happen to him anymore.

The lesson that I learn from The Incredible Hulk is: If you don't learn to deal with your temper, it will turn you into a monster of a person. It can change you into someone you don't want to be. This is what happened to Cain in Genesis 4. He had a bad temper to start with, but he didn't deal with it. Eventually, it turned him into this other person...an evil person. However, Cain's problem was not an anger problem; his problem was a worship problem! The expression of inappropriate anger was a sin that was symptomatic of a greater problem. In Gen 4:1-26, we will learn from the account of Cain how to worship God on His terms.

1. The birth of the two sons (4:1-2). Our account begins with these words: "Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain" (4:1a). After the fall, Adam and Eve began a family. Eve gave birth to "Cain" whose name means, "acquire, get, or possess." His Hebrew name is Cain; his English name would be "Got." Eve responded to Cain's birth by saying, "I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD" (4:1b). The literal rendering of Eve's reply is, "I have gotten a son, the Lord." Some Bible students interpret this to mean that Eve believes she has begotten the Savior (cf. 3:15). This is possible, of course. Perhaps more likely, Eve understood from the prophecy of 3:15 that one of her offspring would bring about her redemption. Regardless, in this statement there is an implicit declaration of faith and gratitude (cf. 3:20). Eve acknowledges that God has enabled her to bear a child, a child through whom her deliverance may soon come. In 4:2a, Moses records, "Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel" (4:2a). Unlike Cain's name, Abel's name is not explained by Eve. However, the Hebrew word "Abel" is the word "vanity" or "breath," appearing throughout Ecclesiastes. Traditionally understood, his name reflects on the temporary nature of his existence. It is important to notice the terms "brother" and "Abel" each appear seven times, stressing the relationship between the two men. In these opening verses, Moses is trying to prepare us for what is to come.

[After giving a brief account of the birth of the two sons, the narrative focuses on the worship of these two brothers. The primary purpose of this account is to reveal what kind of worship is pleasing to God.]

2. The worship of the two brothers (4:2b-5). In 4:2b, Moses writes, "And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground." Abel is a shepherd and Cain is a farmer. Both of these vocations are noble; one is not better than the other. This leads into an exercise in worship in 4:3-5a: "So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard." Both brothers bring offerings to the Lord suitable to their vocations (4:3). Yet, God regarded Abel and his offering and not Cain and his offering (4:4b). Some insist that the reason for this is Abel offered a blood sacrifice while Cain did not. However,

there does not appear to be anything wrong with Cain offering fruit as opposed to animal sacrifice.

Later in Israel's history, grain offerings and harvest offerings are legitimate expressions of worship that God accepts and even commands. So if it is not a failure to bring a blood sacrifice, why does God reject Cain and his offering?

The New Testament authors inform us that God regarded Abel because he had faith (Heb 11:4) while Cain did not (Jud 1:11-13 and 1Jn 3:11-12). Therefore, it seems clear that Abel was in relationship with God and Cain was separated from God. A very important principle is this: "God always inspects the giver and the worshipper before He inspects the gift, service, or worship." This means it is critical that you are in relationship with God before you seek to worship or serve Him. Otherwise, your worship is unacceptable.

There is also an interesting clue in the Genesis account that tells us about Cain and Abel and their offerings. In 4:4, Moses records that Abel offers "the firstlings of his flock" (cf. Exo 34:19; Deu 12:6; Deu 14:23) and the "fat portions" (cf. Num 18:17) for his offering. The word that is translated "fat portions" means "choicest, best part, or abundance." Abel gave what cost him most-the firstborn! On the other hand, Cain merely offers "the fruit," not the first fruit, of the ground (4:3). Abel brought the best parts of his flocks and Cain was not so particular. Abel went out of his way to worship God by giving his best. Cain merely discharged a duty. One of the key themes throughout Scripture is God seeks worship that is perfect and costly (Lev 22:20-22; 2Sa 24:24). He will not be satisfied with second best (Mal 1:6-14; Rom 12:1).

The Butterball Company set up a Thanksgiving hotline to answer questions about cooking turkeys. One woman asked if she could use a turkey that had been in the bottom of her freezer for 23 years. The Butterball expert-how's that for a job title-told her it would probably be safe if the freezer had been below zero the entire time. But the expert warned her that even if the turkey was safe to eat, the flavor would likely have deteriorated and wouldn't be worth eating. The woman said, "That's what I thought. We'll give the turkey to our church." While this is an amusing story, it does hit a bit close to home for some Christians. Sin first shows itself in what you give God.

Motives matter to God. God is not impressed with those who do the right thing for the wrong reason. This truth is taught throughout the Bible. In Mat 15:8, Jesus looks at the Pharisees and quotes Isaiah, "These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me" (see also Mic 6:7-8). Sometimes people can have very bad motives for doing good things. There is a story about a man who was riding in a New York City taxi. He noticed the cab driver slowed down to avoid hitting a pedestrian. Trying to compliment the driver's action, he said, "I noticed you slowed down for that fellow." The driver responded, "Yeah, if you hit them, you have got to fill out a report." I would stay out of the way of that cab if I were walking in New York.

What are our motives for serving the Lord? Every so often we need to do a motive checkup and ask ourselves: Why am I nice to other people? Why do I put money in the offering plate? Why do I serve in Awana on Wednesday night?

[Whatever the cause of God's rejection of Cain's offering; the narrative itself focuses our attention on Cain's response. It is there that the narrative seeks to make its point.]

3. The response of the oldest brother (4:5b-8). When Cain learned that God had "no regard" for his offering, "[he] became very angry and his countenance fell" (4:5b). Cain became angry with God! Rather than being concerned about remedying the situation and pleasing God, he became very angry. We must

stop here and ask these questions of ourselves: How do we respond when God says no?

When God convicts us and deals with the sin in our lives, how do we respond? Do we seek to make things right? Do we come before the Lord in worship and confession with a humble and contrite heart?

Or do we pout and get ticked off? The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, said it best, “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isa 66:2 b).

Do you have a problem with your temper? One lady said, “I occasionally lose my temper, but it’s over quickly.” Her pastor replied, “So is an atom bomb explosion, but think of the damage it causes. So is a cyclone, but think of the destruction it leaves. So is a bullet fired, but think of the death it can cause.” We must not assume that unrighteous anger is ever justified or appropriate.

In customary fashion, in 4:6, the Lord pursues Cain with three consecutive questions: “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?” God was not pleased with Cain or his offering. These first two questions demonstrate that He was even more displeased by Cain’s response. Yet, many of us have been told by other well-meaning Christians that it is perfectly acceptable to get mad at God. We like to justify our anger by saying, “He’s a big God. He has broad shoulders. He can handle my cussing and complaining.” Well, sure He can, but is this the appropriate response to the almighty Creator of heaven and earth? I don’t think so. He is a sovereign God that is to be feared. He wants us to trust Him, even when things don’t make sense. Unfortunately, many Christians have a small view of God that allows them to have temper tantrums with Him.

In 4:7, the Lord says, “And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” This clearly implies that Cain knew what was right. He knew the quality of offering to bring and chose not to bring it. He knew his heart was not right, but he chose not to address it. Yet, this verse also shows God’s grace, for Cain was still invited to bring the correct offering. God warned Cain and He wanted Cain to “do well,” but Cain hardened his heart. Sin is like a wild animal ready to pounce and devour its victim. What a graphic picture the Lord paints! What a reminder that we do indeed have a choice whether or not to sin. Flip Wilson was wrong when he said, “The Devil made me do it.” On the contrary, when we sin, we sin because of our refusal to rely on God’s power to “master it.”

Unfortunately, instead of heeding God’s warning, Cain ignored God’s words and allowed himself to be mastered by sin. This resulted in the very first murder. Moses writes of the tragic event in 4:8: “Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him.” In his anger, Cain took the life of another human being...and his victim was his very own brother. The use of “rise up” is most appropriate, since the “rising up” of Cain to kill his brother is a direct consequence of the “falling” of his countenance, when Abel’s offering was accepted but his was not. Under the Mosaic Law, the fact that a killing took place in a field, out of the range of help, was proof of premeditation (cf. Deu 22:25-27). We cringe at such a horrible act and think, “I could never do something like that.” But if we were honest, many of us would have to confess our own lists of people we’ve assassinated with our words or attitudes.

A lesson we learn from the murder of Abel is that anger and jealousy can be very destructive. It is certainly not Abel’s fault that Cain’s sacrifice is not pleasing to God. But when God accepts Abel’s offering and rejects Cain’s, Cain directs his anger, jealousy, and hatred toward his brother. The history of crime shows that when given the opportunity, hatred often leads to murder. That is what Jesus was pointing to in Matthew 5 where He says hating your brother is really the same as murder.

You may be angry today. It might have been something, which happened this morning. Maybe you are mad at your mom and dad because they won't let you go to a friend's house after church. Or maybe something happened years ago. Perhaps a neighbor or someone in the church cheated you out of some money or took advantage of you in some way, and you still have a bitter attitude. Whatever type the anger is, you need to get control of it and get rid of it. Eph 4:27 says if you don't control your anger, you give the Devil a foothold (lit. "a place") in your life. That is what Cain did. Uncontrolled anger and jealousy resulted in Abel's death and destroyed Cain's life too. Don't let it happen in your life. Acknowledge that the attitude is wrong, confess it to the Lord, and ask His help in overcoming this destructive attitude.

4. The pursuit of a gracious God (4:9-16). In 4:9, Cain foolishly thought he could hide his sin from God. He's following in his father's footsteps (3:8). Yet, God seeks Cain just like He sought Adam and Eve. God is a seeker. After Cain's treacherous sin, the Lord does the unthinkable-he dialogues with Cain. He speaks with grace, not wrath. The Lord says to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain responds by saying, "I do not know." Cain begins on a sinful note by lying to God. Puny old Cain tells an omniscient God that he doesn't know where his brother Abel is. Come on! The fact that Cain can dispassionately deny what he has done and show a total lack of care and concern for his brother closely parallels man's total lack of regard for woman in 3:12, where man icily refers to his companion as "the woman" and places all the blame on her, thereby revealing a complete absence of the intimacy and companionship that earlier had characterized their relationship.

To make matters worse, Cain goes on to utter the infamous old adage, "Am I my brother's keeper?" This was a tragic mistake on Cain's part. Now, if I was God, I would have smoked Cain right where he stood! But not the Lord! Instead, He asks Cain a follow-up question that is the same question He asked Eve (3:13): "What have you done?" Wouldn't you just hate to be Cain right now? The Lord then stops asking questions and says, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (4:10). This is a key sentence. The words "to me" demonstrate how seriously God takes first-degree murder. When another person kills a baby, a child, or an adult made in the image of God (1:26; 9:6), the blood of the victim cries out to God! Sin cannot be covered up from God. It can be hidden from people, but not from God. Secret sin on earth is open scandal in heaven!

As a consequence of Cain's act of deliberate sin, God curses him (4:11-12), just like He cursed the serpent (3:14) and the ground (3:17-19). Woe! Moses records these tragic words: "Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth." This is the first instance in Scripture where a human is "cursed." The ultimate penalty for a Hebrew is not death, but exile, a loss of roots.

In 4:13-14, "Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is too great to bear! Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from Your face I will be hidden, and I will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.'" Cain's complaint is peppered with the use of seven personal pronouns. All Cain cared about was himself. There was no fear or reverence for God, no regret for the loss of innocent life, no sorrow for sin, and no thought for his parents who had lost one son tragically through murder and would be losing another through rebellion. There was only a preoccupation with himself. The killer fears being killed. He who turned on one of his relatives now must watch out for any of his relatives.

In 4:15, the Lord speaks again to Cain, "'Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.' And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him." God continues to demonstrate His grace and compassion-even to Cain! The Lord gave Cain a sign before judgment was carried out. Isn't this just like the Lord?

The Lord's program always seems to be mercy before judgment. How fortunate we are that this is the case. If it weren't, we would have been snuffed out a long time ago! No matter what you've done, God wants a relationship with you. There is no sin that you have ever committed that is too big for God. He will accept you IF you accept His Son's sacrifice for your sin. We do not know what the "sign" was. Some have supposed it was a mark of some kind on Cain himself (e.g., a tattoo), others a special hairstyle. One of the ancient rabbis argued that the sign was a dog that accompanied Cain on his wanderings. The dog assured Cain of God's protection and frightened attackers. Others think it is some sign in the external world, such as an intensified fear of killing another human being. To that end, God places a mark on Cain before he expels him. This will protect Cain from recrimination. Here again is mercy before judgment.

In 4:16, we read these sad words: "Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden." One question that is asked is: Did Cain repent? Probably not. The New Testament Scriptures uniformly speak of Cain in the negative with phrases like "the way of Cain" (Jud 1:11) and one "who was of the evil one and slew his brother" (1Jn 3:12). His life is contrasted with "righteous Abel" (Mat 23:35). Nevertheless, we do not know what ultimately happened to him. He may have responded to God. Cain was not beyond God's grace and neither are you.

[It is important to note that Adam's sin (3:6-7) progresses to murder between brother and brother (4:1-16), and then to the decay of society (4:17-26).]

5. The tale of two men (4:17-26). In 4:17, we have a well-known proof text used by skeptics. The verse reads: "Cain had relations with his wife and she conceived, and gave birth to Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son." Of course, the obvious question is: Where did Cain get his wife? The answer is quite simple: Cain married his sister (or possibly a niece). The Bible says Adam "had other sons and daughters" (5:4). In fact, since Adam lived 930 years (5:5), he had plenty of time for plenty of children! Cain could have married one of his many sisters, or even a niece, if he married after his brothers or sisters had grown daughters. Regardless, one of his brothers would have married a sister. Marriages between close relatives were at first unavoidable if the whole human race came from a single pair. Marriage between siblings and close relatives was not prohibited until the Mosaic Law, instituted thousands of years later (Lev 18:6-18). There were no genetic imperfections at the beginning of the human race. God created genetically perfect Adam (1:27). Genetic defects resulted from the fall and only occurred gradually, over long periods of time.

In 4:18-19, we read about a man by the name of "Lamech" who becomes the first bigamist. Bigamy was common in the ancient Near East, but it was never God's desire (cf. 2:24; Mat 19:4-5). God permitted it, however, as He did many other customs of which He disapproved (e.g., divorce, marrying concubines, polygamy, etc.); but He was not pleased with this violation of the marriage covenant.

In 4:20-24, we see that Cain prospered even though he rebelled against God. Cain's prosperity led the way in producing cities, music, weapons, and agricultural implements-in short, civilization. Even among ungodly people God allows development and progress. It is part of His kindness to the entire human race. This is another indication of God's grace. Cain's descendants took the lead in building cities, developing

music, advancing agriculture, creating weapons, and spreading civilization.

In 4:23-24, Lamech said to his wives, '"Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me; if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'" Lamech, who is Cain's great-great-great-grandson, writes a piece of poetry, but what an ugly piece of poetry it is! It is a song.

One can easily see that its lines are parallel and poetical. Lamech is singing a song. But what is he singing about? He is singing about polygamy, murder, and revenge. This is a "sword song" in which Lamech wears violence as a badge of honor. God allows the makers of musical instruments to arise, but they misuse their very culture to promote violence. This is how men and women use their culture. God allows family life, music, and technology but how does man use His blessings? He perverts them! Music is wonderful. Yet, music can be used for wicked purposes also.

Do you realize the influence of the media on you and your children? Think about many of the songs that are popular today. They are full of violence, sex, and self. What about the impact of television? Did you know that the average American family watches 6.5 hours of TV daily? One way of making sense of this astronomical figure is to consider this: The average child spends 900 hours a year in school but 1,500 hours a year watching TV.

[Just when things seem to be beyond hope, the Lord shows forth His hand of sovereignty and promise.]

In 4:25-26, Moses writes, "Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, 'God has appointed me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him.' To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the LORD." Obviously, 4:25-26 should not be understood as a sequel to 4:17-24. Cain's genealogy does not extend six generations before Adam fathers a child again. Cain's sons prospered and founded the new world after the fall. Yet, they were not to be included in the lineage of the Messianic "seed" (cf. 3:15). The author turns another page with the birth of "another offspring in place of Abel" (4:25). This strategic birth reveals that the "seed" would continue through the line of Seth. Seth's name, from the Hebrew verb translated "granted" and meaning "to set or place," expresses Eve's faith that God would continue to provide seed despite death.

After the birth of Enosh (Seth's son), it is noted that "then men began to call upon the name of the LORD." The phrase "call upon the name of the Lord" usually refers to proclamation rather than prayer in the Pentateuch. Here it probably refers to the beginning of public worship of Yahweh. This is the inauguration of true worship (cf. 12:8; 13:4; 16:13; 21:33; 26:25). "Enosh" means "weakness" and in his weakness he turns to God with petition and praises (Psa 149:6). Man will not pray until he recognizes his human weakness and inability and is utterly dependent upon God. So Cain's firstborn and successors pioneer civilization, while Seth's firstborn and successors pioneer worship.

Will you humble yourself, acknowledge your own weakness, and turn to the Lord for His strength. As Paul writes in the New Testament, "…the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1Co 1:25).

Chapter 10

\"Man’s Family Tree\" (Gen 5:1-32)

A group of Florida senior citizens were talking about their ailments: “My arms are so weak I can hardly hold this cup of coffee.” “Yes, I know. My cataracts are so bad I can’t even see my coffee.” “I can’t turn my head because of the arthritis in my neck.” “My blood pressure pills make me dizzy.” Finally, a woman said, “I guess that’s the price we pay for getting old.” A man replied, “Well, it’s not all bad. We should be thankful we can still drive.”

Do you ever feel like you are getting old? Is your age catching up with you? Are you not the man or woman you used to be? If so, join the crowd. Most people 25 and older recognize that health and strength depart rather quickly. As my dad likes to say, “Growing old is no fun!” So let me share with you several signs that you are getting older:

• Everything hurts and what doesn't hurt doesn't work.

• The gleam in your eyes is from the sun hitting your bi-focals.

• You keep repeating yourself.

• Your children begin to look middle aged.

• You keep repeating yourself.

• You finally reach the top of the ladder and find it leaning against the wrong wall.

• Your mind makes contracts your body can't meet.

• You look forward to a dull evening.

• Your favorite part of the newspaper is "20 Years Ago Today."

• You turn out the lights for economic rather than romantic reasons.

• You sit in a rocking chair and can't get it going.

• Your knees buckle, and your belt won't.

• You keep repeating yourself.

• Your back goes out more than you do.

• You sink your teeth into a steak, and they stay there.

• You have too much room in the house and not enough in the medicine cabinet.

• You know all the answers, but nobody asks you the questions.

• You're asleep, but others worry that you're dead.

• You're proud of your lawn mower.

• You keep repeating yourself.

In Genesis 5, we come to the first of many genealogies of Scripture. These have proved to be a stumbling block to many who seek to read the Bible through. They start well, but they soon get to the desert of genealogies and give up their reading. Admittedly, these genealogies are somewhat difficult. So why don't I just skip over them? For the simple reason that, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2Ti 3:16). Think about this: Have you ever poured over fine-print stock quotations or lists of baseball players and their batting averages? Have you ever studied recipe books or interior design magazines? If so, you must confess that details can be interesting and important. This is equally true in the Scriptures.

Believe it or not, genealogies make significant theological points. First, genealogies show the world that God is at work through human history. Second, genealogies show that God has preserved His faithful promises to create and bless through the family of Adam to Abraham to David and ultimately, through His Messiah, Jesus Christ. Obviously, these are not trivial or boring matters. Our faith rests on these types of issues.

[So let's launch into this chapter of genealogy and see what the Lord has for us to learn.]

1. We were created and blessed by God (5:1-2). Moses writes, "This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created." These first two verses tell us that Moses is starting a new section ("book") that will define a significant portion of Adam's family tree. Again, Moses shares the story of God's creation of Adam and Eve. These verses reiterate that Adam and Eve were made "in the likeness of God." This is what gives us value, worth, and dignity. I've been thinking a lot about how being created in the likeness of God relates to expressions of God-given creativity. If you are artistic, musical, or creative, God wants you to use your gifts and abilities for Him. We must recognize that we have been created in the image of an Artist! So we should continually look for expressions of artistry, and be sensitive to beauty, responsive to what has been created for our appreciation.

In 5:2, Moses returns to the theme of God's "blessing" man (cf. 1:27). This point needed to be reemphasized after their sin and subsequent loss of Paradise. Much has been forfeited. But much is still possible because Adam and Eve still bear the privilege of relating to God. This is equally true for us: Even though we live in the wake of the curse, we can live a blessed life. We ought to exude joy and pleasure as we go through life. This is also a part of his overall scheme, to cast God's purposes for man in terms that will recall a father's care for his children. Throughout the remainder of the book of Genesis, a recurring theme is that of the father's blessing his children (9:26-27; 27:27; 48:15; 49:1-28). In keeping with such a theme, the author shows at each crucial turning point in the narrative that God Himself renewed His blessing to the next generation of sons (1:28; 5:2; 9:1; 12:3; 24:11). Seen as a whole, the picture that emerges is that of a loving Father insuring the future well-being of His children through the provision of an inherited blessing. In this way, the author has laid a theological foundation for the rest of Scripture. God's original plan of blessing for all humanity, though thwarted by human folly, will nevertheless be restored through the seed of the woman (3:15), the seed of Abraham (12:3), and the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (49:8- 12; cf. Rev 5:5-13).

[While we are created and blessed by God, the Bible also teaches…]

2. We will die because of Adam's sin (5:3-20, 25-32). This fifth chapter is a list of the ten descendants of Adam down to Noah (5:1-5, 6-8, 9-11, 12-14, 15-17, 18-20, 21-24, 25-27, 28-31, and 32). In the description of each generation, the same literary structure is followed: (1) the age of the father at the birth of the firstborn; (2) the name of the firstborn; (3) how many years the father lived after the birth of this son; (4) a reference to the fathering of other children; (5) the father's total lifespan. This genealogy covers at least 1,600 years. Within the time-scale of the Bible, this chapter covers the longest period in world history. Like a VCR fast-forwards a tape, genealogies move the narrative ahead rapidly. This begs the question: Why does God include this genealogy? God is more interested in people than we are. If we were writing Genesis, we would have left all of these names out. But God genuinely cares about people. The world may not pay much attention to you; in fact, the more like Christ you are, the less the world will be interested in you. This can be lonely. But know this: God knows you and He cares about you.

One of the remarkable facts that leaps out of this genealogy is that the average age of the 10 people listed in this genealogy is about 900. This longevity, plus the fact that each man "had sons and daughters," argues for a vast population by the time of Noah and the flood (cf. 6:9ff). If we assume that the sons and daughters of these men also had children and that these ten men were able to have additional children

throughout their lifetime, there would have been millions of people by the time of the flood.

The Bible does not tell us why or how men lived so long before the flood. There have been a number of suggestions. Some have argued that the long life spans may be a reflection of God's blessing upon the Sethites. Longevity, in Old Testament thought, is a sign of divine blessing upon the godly (see Deu 4:25; Deu 5:33; Deu 30:20). Others have suggested that the earth's atmosphere was different before the flood. Therefore, it is possible that the earth had never had any rainfall, and the effect of cosmic rays and environmental factors may have been drastically different from our current surroundings. Another view is that, theologically, it is possible God granted these long life spans in order for humans to "be fruitful and multiply" according to His instructions (1:28). The view I hold is that the effects of decay and disease, due to sin, took time to do their damage on the physical part of humanity. Sin's deadening power was gradual. Adam and Eve were "genetically pure and less affected by the deteriorating results of sin."

One of the most important elements of this genealogy is the phrase "and he died," which occurs eight times in this chapter (5:5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, and 31) and serves as a reminder of the consequences of Adam and Eve's fall. It reveals that God's plan also includes the death of humanity. Death is the consequence of Adam's sin (2:17; 3:19; Rom 6:23). Despite technology (4:17-24) and spirituality (4:25-26), man cannot rise above the curse of death. Rom 5:12 tells us, "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned."

Several times a week I ride a stationary bike. It is as boring an exercise as I know. I hop on and pedal nowhere. But this exercise allows me to stay awake and spend time in prayer. Human life is like a stationary bike. You pedal and get off, pedal and get off, pedal and get off. Live and die. Live and die. Live and die. The truth is the day is coming when the earth will not know us. We will be gone. This constant awareness is so important. At death, life is short for all. This is why Solomon says it's better to go to a funeral than a party (Ecc 7:1-4). This chapter teaches the great truth that no matter how long you live you are going to die. This chapter also teaches the truth that no matter how long you live you will be in eternity a lot longer than you were here in time. Only one life will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last. This ought to stir us to put first things first. Genesis 5 can be a reminder to live with the awareness of the end, and to take the calling of God seriously.

If you fear death and are not sure where you will spend eternity, it is imperative that you hear these words from Jesus.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (Joh 5:24).

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die" (Joh 11:25-26 a).

If you believe in Christ, when you close your eyes in death, your new life will begin.

[We were originally created and blessed by God. Unfortunately, as a result of Adam's sin we will die. But there is good news in 5:21-24.]

As I have already stated, the genealogy in these verses, generally speaking, follows a fairly rigid pattern. Therefore, when you encounter a structured genealogy, you need first to identify the structure, then, and perhaps more importantly, you need to observe what does not adhere to the pattern. That which does not

follow the pattern of the rest of the genealogy is probably being emphasized by the author of the text for some specific reason. Determining that reason (if possible), therefore, is vitally important in order to understand, in part, what the author of the genealogy considers particularly significant.

3. We can walk with God (5:21-24). In 5:21-24, we find a unique man named Enoch who is the one significant exception in this genealogy. With the exception of Enoch, each man's death is recorded. The phrase "and he died" is utilized to draw the reader's attention to the fact that Enoch did not die. With this in mind, we would do well to take some time to study the life of Enoch. Moses writes, "Enoch lived sixty-five years, and became the father of Methuselah. Then Enoch walked with God three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had other sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." Enoch is the bright hope in an otherwise fairly depressing account. The placement of Enoch's name could not be more intentionally dramatic. Evil Lamech, the man who worshipped his sword, was number seven in the Cainite genealogy, while here, Enoch, the man who walked with God, is number seven in the Sethite genealogy.

The phrase "walked with God" is only used of Enoch and Noah (cf. 6:9). "Walk" is a biblical figure for fellowship and obedience that results in divine blessing. The sense of "walk" (halak) in its verbal stem indicates a communion or intimacy with God. The Minor Prophets use this phrase to describe the intimate walk of priests who entered the Holy of Holies to speak directly with the Lord. It describes the closest communion with God-as if walking at His side. Enoch went through life, step by step, in fellowship with God.

I don't like walks because they're not efficient. If you're trying to get something done quickly, you don't take a walk. That is why the metaphor of a walk with God is so helpful. When you're walking with someone, you're not moving so fast that conversation is difficult. You can enjoy your companion. And then everything else becomes enjoyable. You can look together at the cloud formations, the turning of the leaves in the fall, the sound of the stream that you're walking by, or whatever else is going on. And so taking long walks with someone is a great picture of intimacy.

The phrase "walked with God" also speaks of unswerving obedience and faithfulness. Heb 11:5-6 is a divinely inspired commentary on Gen 5:22-24. The writer of Hebrews bolstered the hearts of his readers by communicating the concept that faith is the key to perseverance in the furnace of suffering (Heb 10:32-39). After giving a brief definition of faith (11:1), he cited an impressive list of people who gained God's approval (11:2) and won spiritual victories by means of faith. Faith enables believers to understand creation (11:3, referring to Gen 1-2). Abel gained a righteous standing with God by means of faith (11:4, referring to Gen 4). And next is Enoch who, by faith, "was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God" (11:5). The next verse (tucked between references to Enoch and Noah, both of whom are said in Genesis to have walked with God) is critically placed and theologically significant: "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (11:6).

A profound lesson in regard to legalism and faith can be mined from the account of Enoch. It is important to see that for the author of the Pentateuch "walking with God" could not have meant a mere "keeping" of a set of laws. Rather, it is just with those men who could not have had a set of "laws" that the author associates the theme of "walking with God." By choosing such men to exemplify "walking with God," the

author shows his desire to teach a better way to live than merely a legalistic adherence to the law….For him the way to life was exemplified best in men like Enoch ("Enoch walked with God," 5:22), Noah ("he walked with God," 6:9), and Abraham ("Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness," 15:6). It is to these patriarchs, who lived long before the giving of the law at Sinai that the author of Genesis turns for a model of faith and trust in God.

Another interesting element of Enoch's faith was that he served God (Jud 1:14-15). Enoch did not walk with God in a secluded environment; he was a spokesman for God in the ungodly marketplace of his day. The Bible doesn't tell us how long Enoch did this, but from the Genesis and Hebrews passages we can safely infer that Enoch served God right up to the day God took him.

Enoch lived this intimate and obedient life of progressive maturity for 300 years-three centuries! And so at the age of 365, while still a young man, "he was not, for God took him." We don't know how this happened. He may have been picked up in a chariot like Elijah (2Ki 2:11-12) or he may have been beamed up directly by God. Somewhere in the days of his fellowship with God, God revealed to him He did not wish Enoch to die. Amidst the endless dying that had gone on for thousands of years, God planned to give a demonstration of His power over death. And Enoch believed God! By faith Enoch was taken up (Heb 11:5).

But notice that Enoch did not always walk with God. The first 65 years of his life were quite another story. Evidently, he reflected for 65 years the same godless attitude as those around him. You ask, "Well, what started him walking with God then?" And the answer is given to us here. It was not receiving his Social Security payments when he reached 65, but it was the birth of a son, a boy whom he named Methuselah. The Bible says so. "Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years." So it was the birth of this baby that started him walking with God. Surely there is more to this than simply the fact that he became a father. I have noticed that becoming a father has a profound effect upon a young man. It makes him more thoughtful, makes him more serious, more sober in his outlook on life. It does have a very beneficial effect but there is more to it than that, and it is revealed by the name that Enoch gave to his son. Methuselah is a very interesting name. It means, literally, "His death shall bring it," or loosely translated, "When he dies, it will come." What will come? The flood!

Enoch, we are told in another passage of Scripture, was given a revelation from God. He saw the direction of the divine movement, looked on to the end of the culture, the comforts, and the mechanical marvels of his own day, to the fact there must come an inevitable judgment on the principle of evil in human life. He saw the certainty of destruction of a world living only to please itself. When he saw it his baby was born, so, in obedience, evidently to God's Word, he named the baby, "When he dies, it will come."

Even though the death motif is strong in this chapter there is even more emphasis on God's grace. We see this in the references to life, fertility (sons and daughters), Enoch's translation, and other blessings. The finality of death caused by sin, and so powerfully demonstrated in the genealogy of Genesis, is in fact not so final. Man was not born to die; he was born to live, and that life comes by walking with God. Walking with God is the key to the chains of the curse.

A helpful exercise that has encouraged me to think through this issue is to ask the question, "What will they write or say in my eulogy?" When you are gone from this planet, what will your friends and family say about your contribution to them? Writing your own eulogy is a sobering exercise. It certainly brings focus to life! Because the reality is, you will not escape death! One day you will be no more, for God will take you

to Himself.

Chapter 11

\"Divine Intervention\" (Gen 6:1-8)

Have you noticed that we have become specialists at shirking responsibility and blaming others for our actions? If I overextend myself financially, it's not my fault; it's the fault of easy credit. If I get lung cancer, it isn't my fault that I chose to begin smoking; it's the fault of the tobacco company. If a man in a rage shoots and kills his neighbor, it isn't his fault; it's the gun manufacturers. If a drunk driver goes the wrong way on the highway, hits a school bus and a number of people are killed, the Ford Motor Company is sued for making an unsafe bus. We've even got "no fault" divorces now, so that if a marriage doesn't work out, no one has to take the blame. And people aren't guilty of perverted behavior anymore; it's in their genes. We blame heredity, environment, chemical imbalance, temporary insanity, job pressures, poverty, prejudice, and abuse. Now certainly those things can contribute to who we are and can cause problems for us, but we have taken it to an extreme that says that no one is accountable for their behavior anymore.

The message of the Bible runs contrary to our societal views. The Bible states that mankind is sinful. As a result, God must judge man's sin. Yet, although God must judge sin, the Bible also teaches that He loves mankind and invites man to enter into a relationship with Him. Gen 6:1-8 shares this tension.

1. Prepare for God's Judgment (6:1-4). In 6:1-2, Moses writes, "Now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose." Theses two verses teach that there was a population explosion (cf. 1:28) and men were marrying women. For a brief moment we see a snapshot of everyday life. We would call it "business as usual." Yet, we also will see that this is the calm before the storm (Mat 24:38-39; Luk 17:26-27).

Few texts in the history of biblical interpretation have aroused more curiosity and divergence of opinion than Gen 6:1-4. It is at once tantalizing and deeply puzzling. The three most popular positions may be labeled "the cosmologically mixed races view" (angels and humans), "the religiously mixed races view" (godly Sethites and worldly Cainites), and "the sociologically mixed races view" (despotic male aristocrats and beautiful female commoners). Each of these views has its own unique problems. The key to discerning which interpretation is best is determining which has the fewest problems, and most accurately reflects the context of this passage and the whole of Scripture. If you are interested in studying these views out in detail, please see the charts at the conclusion of this sermon.

Genesis 6 begins by naming two opposing groups: "the sons of God" and "the daughters of men." It is no coincidence that Genesis 4-5 also describes two groups, the descendants of Cain and Seth. In 4:1-24, we find that Cainites lacked positive spiritual attributes. They were earthly, selfish, sensual, and an authority unto themselves. Sethites, however, had qualities of consecration, devotion, communion, service, and righteousness toward God (4:25). Knowing this context, we can identify Sethites as "the sons of God." They were His chosen people in the pre-flood era. The Cainites, however, had separated themselves from God. Sadly, this passage teaches that the descendants of Seth intermarried with the descendants of Cain. Through these spiritually mixed marriages, Sethites failed to remain pure and true to their mission. They jeopardized God's plan of salvation (3:15), leaving Noah the only righteous one among them (6:9). God preserved the Messianic line by sending a great flood to save Noah and his family, and to judge unrepentant souls (1Pe 3:20).

Let me be clear: The world became so wicked that believing men began marrying unbelieving women. The Hebrew literally reads, “saw…good…took.” Their sin repeats the pattern (“saw…good…took”) of the original sin in 3:6. They are driven by lust, not spiritual discernment.

The concern to marry well is an important theme that is repeated throughout Genesis (24:1-4; 28:1; cf. 19:14; 26:34-35; 27:46). When you look at the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, there are numerous warnings given by Moses against intermarriage of believers and unbelievers (see esp. Gen 26 and 34). What’s the unremitting command of God concerning marriage, throughout Scripture, to those who are called by His name? To marry only in the faith. Moses warned the Israelites not to marry the idolatrous inhabitants of the land, because, Exo 34:16, “when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same.” In Ezra 9, Ezra is livid with rage when he’s told that the people of Israel have intermarried with pagan women. He writes, “For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands” (Ezr 9:2 a). Paul warned the Corinthian widows, 1Co 7:39, to marry only in the Lord. Do not, he said, be yoked together with unbelievers. Why? Because, 2Co 6:14 says, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?”

Why is it so important to marry a Christian? Because of what had happened to Solomon, the king of Israel, when he married foreign women. Solomon’s sad story is recorded in 1Ki 11:1-4 : “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the sons of Israel, ‘You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.’ Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”

Please do not think you are wiser than the most brilliant man that has ever lived. You will not be the exception. Never, ever marry an unbeliever! Nothing will drag you down faster; nothing will destroy your family quicker than a wife or a husband who constantly pulls you and your children away from the Lord. And nothing will make you lonelier. And we all know this, and we all nod our heads, and yet it happens to our young people time and time again! Why? What does the text say? They saw, and then they took! Young men, make a covenant with your eyes not to fall in love with an image of beauty. Make a promise to yourself and to God, to look beyond the eyeliner, beyond the lip gloss, beyond all of the phony externals, and to fall in love instead with a gentle and quiet spirit, with an inner beauty that will last, with a woman who will faithfully love and serve the Lord alongside of you. Young women, do not say that your Non-Christian boyfriend treats you better than Christian boys do. That is not the issue. God is far more concerned with your holiness than your happiness.

In 6:3, Moses continues this narrative with these words: “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’” There are two interpretations of the phrase “nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” One possibility is that the 120 years may signify the new age limit for people. It can be argued that 6:3 should be contrasted with 3:22 where eating of the Tree of Life would produce immortality. There seems to be ample evidence that after the flood the recorded ages steadily decline. While only Joseph lived less than 120 years in Genesis (50:26), by the end of the Pentateuch, Moses dies at 120 (Deu 34:7).

Another view is that the 120 years refers to the time remaining between this announcement of judgment and the coming of the flood. Reference to the Lord's patience in 1Pe 3:20 seems to confirm this option. This verse reminds us of the truth of Exo 34:6 : "The LORD God [is] compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth." Yet, eventually it is possible for man to reach the point of no return and judgment becomes inevitable.

Another issue that needs to be resolved is: Who are the "Nephilim"? In 6:4, Moses writes, "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown." Before answering this question it is critical to understand that 6:4 is a parenthetical statement. This verse does not state the Nephilim are the offspring of the sons of God and daughters of men. Rather, they are merely contemporaries of the sons of God and daughters of men that were on earth when the sons of God sinned. Moses is careful to record that "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward." With that said, the word Nephilim occurs only here and in Num 13:33, where it refers to the sons of Anak, who were people of great stature. However, in Gen 6:4, a term is included that further defines who the Nephilim are. The Hebrew word is Gibborim. The word gibborim comes from gibbor, meaning "a mighty man of valor, strength, wealth, or power. In Gen 10:8, Nimrod was such a gibbor. He also was clearly a king in the land of Shinar. Hence, the meaning of Nephilim-Gibborim is not "giants," but something more like "princes," "aristocrats," or "great men" (i.e., fierce warriors, heroes, or mighty men). These characters are the famous men on the earth. In our society today, this would include all the hot musicians, actors, actresses, and athletes.

[The main point of these verses and the ones to come is that mankind deteriorates morally and spiritually. This incurs God's wrath, therefore, we must prepare for God's judgment. We must also…]

2. Perceive God's ways (6:5-8). How does God respond to mankind's sinfulness? In 6:5-8, Moses shares four ways. First, God notices sin. In 6:5, Moses writes, "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil." Gen 6:5 may be the most strongly worded verse in the entire Bible! The first half of the verse reveals how extensively human evil had spread around the world: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth" (6:5a). The last half emphasizes that sin had permeated intensively, deep into the heart of every single human: "…and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5b). This passage states that sin pervades every pore of the human being. The key word in this verse is the word "intent" (yeser). The noun form of this word is used in 2:7 for the formation of man-God had made human beings by design (yasar), but they had taken their God-given capacities and devised evil continually. This word comes from the verb that describes a potter in the act of forming and molding his vessel (Isa 29:16). There is an emphasis on mankind's wickedness. The words "every," "only," and "continually" point to the all-consuming depravity of man. Later, in 8:21, Moses quotes a portion of 6:5 and observes that the phrase "only evil continually" or "all the time" (NIV) means "from childhood" on. Original sin among human beings began with Adam and Eve, but each of us participates in original sin in another sense as we begin to exhibit sinful traits after we are born. David confessed that fact after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psa 51:5; see also 58:3).

Can you imagine a world where every member of a family would fight over the biggest piece of pie? Where no one would allow anyone else to merge into a line of traffic? Where abortion would be as accepted as a tooth extraction? Where the killing of the elderly and the infirm would be honored as an act

of mercy? Where lawsuits would be as common as traffic tickets? Oh, of course, you can imagine such a world…you're living in it! Our world has excluded God and is focused on self.

Second, God grieves over sin. In 6:6, Moses writes, "The LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." Note the contrast between the heart of the wicked and the heart of God. This is no heartless regret, but the reaction of someone who loves deeply. This terminology is love language; it in no way suggests that God is not immutable (Mal 3:6).

The word translated "grieved" means "indignant rage." The word is used to express the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish. Dinah's brothers felt this way after she was raped; so did Jonathan when he heard Saul planned to kill David, and David reacted similarly when he heard of Absalom's death (34:7; 1Sa 20:34; 2Sa 19:3). A deserted wife feels this way (Isa 54:6). The word is used of God's feelings in two other passages (Psa 78:40; Isa 63:10). Only here is the verb supplemented by the phrase "in His heart," underlying the strength of God's reaction to human sinfulness. Fortunately, Christ's sacrifice will pacify God's bitter indignation against sin (see 8:21).

Many are legitimately startled when they read that the Lord "was grieved" or "repented" that He had ever made man and woman upon the earth. How can both the immutability and the changeableness of God be taught in the same canon of Scripture? Scriptures frequently use the phrase "God repented." The Hebrew root (nacham) behind all the words variously translated as "relent," "repent," "be sorry," and "grieve." In its origins the root may well have reflected the idea of breathing or sighing deeply. It suggests a physical display of one's feelings-sorrow, compassion, or comfort. When the Bible says that God repented, the idea is that His feelings toward some person or group of persons changed, in response to some change on the part of the objects of His action or some mediator who intervened (often by God's own direction and plan). Often in the very same passages that announce God's repentance there is a firm denial of any alteration in God's plan, purpose, or character. From our human perspective, then, it appears that the use of this word indicates that God changed His purpose. But the expression "to repent," when used of God, is anthropopathic (i.e., a description of our Lord in human terms).

All of this is to say: Ultimately, God's sorrow means action must be taken, not that a great cosmic mistake has been made. God is a living person and, as such, He can and does change when the occasion demands it. He does not change in His character, person, or plan. But He can and does respond to our changes. Our heavenly Father's heart breaks when we disobey Him. To cause Him such grief in light of all that He has done for us in Christ is the height of ingratitude (see Eph 4:30).

Third, God judges sin. In 6:7, Moses writes, "The LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.'" As the ground must endure the consequences of its ruler's sin, so also must the animals (see 3:17). God's judgment would involve a complete erasure of man and all accompanying creatures from existence. The destruction of everything from man to animals has to do with man's given sovereignty over the earth, for the irrational creatures were created for Him and therefore were involved in the fall. There would be no half-measures in dealing with sin. Depravity requires God's judgment. God's pain over sin, especially idolatrous activities, prompts Him to blot out the wicked. The Bible tells us God watches our world with patience "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2Pe 3:9 b). But don't mistake His patience for toleration; or His love for acceptance; or His grief for weakness. There is a limit to God's patience with the world, but He never sneaks up and delivers His judgment by surprise.

If our world, like Noah's, is provoking the judgment of God, how is He warning us today? In the Old Testament, when a nation slipped so far away from God that its people no longer read His Word or heeded the prophets, He warned them of impending judgment through national or natural disasters such as an invading army or a locust plague. Today, He warns us in the same ways. When we hear of a nation invading another nation or a country self-destructing into civil war or a volcano erupting or a tidal wave sweeping villages away or an earthquake leveling entire cities or a forest fire devouring hundreds of thousands of acres of woodlands or a drought shriveling millions of acres of farmland or an epidemic threatening to wipe out a nation's entire population, are we hearing the warning of the Creator demand, "Repent! Judgment is coming! I am holding you accountable for your wicked, willful ways?"

Finally, God grants grace. The narrative concludes in 6:8 with this powerful statement: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." Often in biblical passages, the last word is one of hope. Such is the case here. The word translated "favor" (chen) is also the word translated "grace." It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word comes from a root meaning "to bend or stoop"; thus, the condescending or unmerited favor of a superior person to an inferior one is implied. So grace means, "God's unmerited favor." Grace gives us what we don't deserve and sustains us through all of life.

This is the first mention of one of the most beautiful words in the Bible-grace, though we have seen many examples of God's grace thus far. This word is likely first used here because Moses wants us to understand that Noah's righteousness is not his own but a gift of God's grace. It was God's grace that saved him. In the same way, it is only by God's grace that we can escape His judgment on the wicked.

Why are we saved? Paul tells us in Tit 3:5 : "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

Man still deteriorates. Society still runs down unless God intervenes. There will be an end to our world as there was to Noah's world. A savior was chosen then; a Savior is available now: Jesus Christ. Jesus has provided a way of salvation, as Noah provided an ark. Men and women are invited to go in. Jesus died on the cross, and paid a price for our sins. They had to trust Noah's ark. We have to trust in Jesus' cross. They had to get inside the ark. We have to get inside Jesus' cross. Jesus will be to us what Noah was to those in the ancient world. When we go in to Jesus He will keep us safe (1Pe 3:18-22). If you're looking for safety from the consequences of your sins, ask Jesus to rescue you today. When you trust Jesus as your Deliverer, you will be saved from the penalty of your sin.

Four Views Of Gen 6:1-4

Position | Fallen Angels | Ungodly Sethites

Identity

Fallen angels marry beautiful women

Ungodly Sethites marry depraved Cainites

Sin

Perversion (warped marriages)

Pollution (mixed marriages)

Offspring

Monstrous giants

Wicked tyrants

Strengths

Elsewhere in the OT, the phrase “sons of God” consistently refers to angels (Job 1:6; Job 2:1; Job 38:7). Jud 1:6-7 and 2Pe 2:4-6 refer to the angels sinning, but no other reference seems to fit except Gen 6:1-4. Jude parallels the sin of angels (Jud 1:6-7) with the sexual sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. The angels of Mat 22:30 are good angels not fallen angles. Fallen angels are not said to be incapable of sexual union. This view is the oldest known Jewish interpretation and the view of the early church (LXX; Josephus; the Book of Enoch, 200 B.C.). Such an abnormal sexual relationship would give warrant to the great flood judgment because it would corrupt the line of Christ.

The Hebrew indicates continuity from Gen 5:1-32. The thematic development of Gen 4-5. The clear emphasis on “men” in the context. The basis for human sin as the reason for the flood. The aversion in Genesis and the OT to mixed marriages (godly and ungodly). The sin of intermarriage becomes common throughout the Pentateuch. The contextual clues for the clashing of two lines (the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent) is prominent all the way through Genesis (Cain/Abel, Ham [Canaan]/Shem, Abraham/Lot’s offspring], Ishmael/Isaac, Jacob/Esau, etc. This has been the traditional Christian interpretation since the third century and is supported by both Luther and Calvin.

Weaknesses

Angels were not previously mentioned and Moses did not use the regular word for “angel,” which he later employs at least 28 times in the Pentateuch In the account, there is no mention of angelic judgment, only human judgment. A brief paragraph about angels would be an abrupt interruption in the flow of the story. When Christ speaks of the sin in Noah’s day, He does not mention angels but only men (Mat 24:37-38; Luk 17:26-27). If angels are the villains, then why is God’s anger directed against man rather than against angels? This was not an unnatural sexual union, for the phrase “took wives for themselves” refers to a marriage relationship, never to an act of illicit sexual relationship. The offspring of this union are called “Nephilim” (6:4), a term which also occurs later (Num 13:33) when no angels are involved. The NT support is questionable.

The problem is making “men” of 6:1 different from “men” in 6:2. The narrator never mentions any daughters in Cain’s line but he mentions that Seth had daughters nine times (Gen 5:4 ff.). Should we believe that only Cain’s daughters were good looking? Isn’t it also likely that godly women married ungodly men as well? The absence of the phrase “sons of God” to describe OT believers. Failure to explain the origin of the mighty men through simply religiously mixed marriages In Noah’s day, he alone was holy. God has not yet begun working through one line.

Position | Kings/Rulers | Adamic Descendants

Identity | Kings marry a plurality of wives | Adam’s children (“sons of God”) marry “daughters of men”

Sin | Polygamy | No sin associated with the union

Offspring | Dynastic rulers | Adam’s sons and daughters

Strengths | Rulers and judges are often called gods (Exo 21:6; Exo 22:8; 1Sa 2:25; Psa 82:1). Humans are also referred to in the OT as God's "sons" (Isa 43:6). "Mighty men" (6:4) is a word, which is used 20 times in the OT and always refers to human men. Cain established a city (4:17) where dynasties could naturally stem. Lamech did have two wives (4:19), which marks the initiation of polygamy. The "daughters of God" are more naturally interpreted as womankind. Like the fallen angels view, this view also has antiquity on its side (Aramaic Targums). | Parallels Jesus' Flood commentary in Mat 24:38-39. Fits well contextually (5:4-32) and understands the passage in a natural sense. Forms an epilogue to 5:1-32 "Nephilim" are understood as Adam's 10 great descendants ("men of name").

Weaknesses | Kings/Rulers are not specifically called "sons of God." There is little evidence that these kings/rulers came from the line of Cain. This view seems to disturb the flow of the passage. | This is an unfamiliar interpretation The above interpretation of "Nephilim" appears to conflict with Num 13:33.

"It's Raining, It's Pouring, and the Lord is NOT Snoring!" (Gen 6:9-8:22)

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper: "Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a very rich man." There was only one problem; Alfred Nobel had not died. Actually, it was his older brother who had died, but a newspaper reporter had somehow gotten it wrong. Regardless of how it happened, the account had a profound effect on Alfred Nobel. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing the means to kill people efficiently and for amassing a fortune in the process. So he initiated the Nobel Peace Prize, the award for scientists and writers who foster peace. Nobel said, "Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one."

How will you be remembered when your time on earth is over? When you are gone, how will others describe your faith in God? Are you preparing for God's judgment? The story of Noah will challenge us to answer these questions. Today, we will be looking at the better part of three chapters because the narrative treats these paragraphs as one long section. We will read through this section because we value learning God's Word but some portions will be given more attention.

1. Write your epitaph (6:9-12). Moses writes, "These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. Noah became the father of three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth" (6:9-10). In 6:8, Noah "found favor" or "grace" through faith. Then in 6:9-10, we learn four important things about Noah. First, Noah was a "righteous man." The word translated "righteous" (tsaddiq) connotes "conformity to the standard." In the case of Noah, he conformed to the standard set by God. He was able to do so because God granted him grace. This reminds us that God's grace always comes before anything. It's easy to think that God loves us for what we are intrinsically, for what we have done, or can become. But God does not love us because of that, nor is He gracious to us because of that. On the contrary, He loves us solely because He loves us. He is gracious to us only because He is (cf. Deu 7:7-8). This is a crucial truth for us to understand. We do not earn God's grace or favor (Eph 2:8-9); He bestows it upon us for His own good pleasure (Eph 1:4-6). Not only was Noah a righteous man but 2Pe 2:5 tells us that he was also a "preacher of righteousness." Noah preached righteousness in the same way that his great-grandfather Enoch had done before him (Jud 1:14-15). The reason he could do this is that he himself was righteous. The reason that we do not have more preaching of righteousness in our day is that those who profess Christ are often not living righteous lives. Are you living with "right-ness"? Does your life match your convictions?

Second, Noah was “blameless.” The word “blameless” (tamim) involves the idea of completeness. Noah conformed to the standard set by God and his life was “complete,” with no essential quality missing. The modifying phrase “in his time” indicates all the more clearly that Noah’s righteousness and blamelessness stood out against his contemporaries’ sinfulness. Noah was not only righteous in the sight of God; he also had a credible reputation among the people of his day. They could not pin a single wrong action on him. He was blameless. Arthur Friedman once said, “Men of genius are admired. Men of wealth are envied. Men of power are feared. But only men of character are trusted.” Does your character demand the trust of those people in your life?

Third, Noah “walked with God.” This means he had daily, step-by-step fellowship with God. He had God as his companion as he walked through life. This type of imitate fellowship does not happen by osmosis; it must be cultivated. It takes work to be godly. Is your walk with God vibrant?

Lastly, Noah walked with God before his family. Noah’s godliness was the godliness of a man who was involved in ordinary life. He did not withdraw from society. Real godliness is not like that. Noah was out and about in God’s world. He provided for his family. The linking of the names of his sons with his faithful life surely indicates that Noah influenced his family in spiritual matters. Apparently, Noah instructed his family to believe in God…and they did! More often than not, when a husband and father exert spiritual leadership in the home, the entire family responds and follows his lead.

It is interesting to note, however, that Noah’s only converts were his wife, his sons, and their wives (6:18). Apparently, not a single person outside his family paid the slightest attention to what he had to say. He preached for the better part of 120 years and won no converts other than his own family. Nevertheless, by God’s grace, Noah won those that mattered most. Sadly, I have known men and women that have been so absorbed in winning their world for Christ that they have failed to win their own home. This is a travesty! Our top priority must always be to influence our family members for Christ. This is one of the top requirements of leadership; to have children that believe and to manage one’s own household well (1Ti 3:4-5; 1Ti 3:12; Tit 1:6). Is this your conviction? Are you investing well in your family?

I need to go even further. I believe an important principle is illustrated here: Noah’s faith and obedience resulted in the salvation and obedience of his family. This principle can also bear fruit in our lives as parents and grandparents. Unfortunately, many of us wonder why our children and grandchildren aren’t turning out the way that we would like. Often, we don’t stop to immediately ask what role we have played in their lack of spiritual development. How can we expect our children to be obedient if we aren’t obedient? When Christian parents grieve over a lost child who has rebelled against God, His Word, His Son, and His church, they wonder where he learned to rebel. Quite often a child learns at home, from parents who have been rebellious is some area of life. Parents, we must live up to the standard that God has set for us if we hope our children will be fruitful disciples.

In 6:11-12, Moses goes on to write, “Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.” Three times in 6:11-12 we are told how “corrupt” the earth had become (contra 1:31). The word for “violence” is used of robbery, taking wives by force, and murder. The entire social fabric had disintegrated and human life was no longer sacred or respected (see Isa 59:6-8). The two words “corrupt” and “violence” (Psa 14:1-3) give us respectively the character and expression of the sin, the cause, and the effect. The corruption has led to violence, for badness always leads to cruelty in one form or another. A life that is wrong with God necessarily becomes wrong with its fellows.

It is critical to recognize that Noah lived in terrible days. The world around him was degraded and depraved; yet Noah lived an above reproach life. When all the people around him were immersing themselves in evil and earning the wrath and judgment of God, Noah set his heart to follow the path found in the person and character of God. He stood his ground and remained uninfluenced by all that was happening around him. If Noah was, so can you. God has given us everything "pertaining to life and godliness" (2Pe 1:3).

2. Obey God's Word (6:13-22). In 6:13, Moses writes, "Then God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.'" For the second time in three verses, the Lord mentions the "violence" of mankind (see 6:11; cf. 49:5). He then tells Noah that He is about to "destroy" these violent people "with the earth." This section demonstrates that the earth and nature suffer because of human sin (cf. 3:17-19; 4:12; Rom 8:20-21).

In 6:14-16, Noah received detailed instructions that he was to follow in building the ark. The ingredients were "gopher wood" (or "cypress wood") and "pitch." The dimensions are as follows:

Dimensions | Noah's Ark | Contemporary Equivalent

Length

450 feet

1½ American football fields

Width

75 feet

7 parking spaces

Height

45 feet

3 stories

Cubic Feet

1.5 million

800 railroad boxcars

Capacity

14,000 gross tons

Princess of the Orient

As best we can tell, the ark was shaped like a shallow rectangular box topped with a roof, with an 18 inch space under the roof, interrupted only by roof supports, so light could get into the vessel from every side. This design uses space very efficiently. The ark would have been very stable in the water. What a monster

this ark was! Noah had more than enough work to keep him occupied for a century. Remember, there were no trucks, no chain saws, and no cranes.

A question that is asked is: How could Noah's ark hold between one-half billion to over a billion species of animals? First, the modern concept of "species" is not the same as a "kind" in the Bible. There are probably only several hundred different "kinds" of land animals that would have to be taken into the ark. The sea animals stayed in the sea, and many species could have survived in egg form. Second, Noah could have taken younger varieties of some larger animals. Third, as I have already said, the ark was not small; it was a huge structure-the size of a modern ocean liner. Furthermore, it had three stories (6:16), which tripled its space to a total of over 1.5 million cubic feet! Given all these factors, there was plenty of room for all the animals, food for the trip, and the eight humans aboard.

After giving the dimensions, in 6:17, God authoritatively speaks: "Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish." This verse places significant emphasis on the personal role of God in the ensuing storm. The phrase "I, even I" reminds us that God is responsible for natural disasters. Ultimately, He is the sovereign Controller of the universe. Therefore, we can trust in Him and what He brings into our lives and the lives of others.

Yet, in the midst of the flood's promise, there is good news. In 6:18, God says to Noah, "But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark-you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you." This is the first occurrence of the word "covenant" (berith) in the Old Testament. Here, in the midst of judgment, the Lord stooped down to meet the needs of His servant (Psa 40:1; Psa 113:6). In the wake of our tragedies and trials, God wants to do the same for us. He longs to speak to us through His Word. He wants to draw us close to Him. Are you running to Him or away from Him? This verse also illustrates another important biblical principle. While God bestows His saving grace and love on individuals, He is concerned about their families as well. Act 16:31 summarizes this principle: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." God loves to save families.

Chapter 6 concludes with these words: '"And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds after their kind, and of the animals after their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of every kind will come to you to keep them alive. As for you, take for yourself some of all food which is edible, and gather it to yourself; and it shall be for food for you and for them.' Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did" (6:19-22).

Apparently, all of the animals would "come to" Noah voluntarily (6:20). It would seem that he would not have to hunt them down or look for them in remote places. Their natural instinct for self-preservation, energized by a special act of God, would bring them unerringly to Noah's ark.

The key to understanding biblical narratives is what is repeated in the context. In 6:22, Moses records this very important statement: "Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did." In chapter 7, he then repeats this phrase three more times (7:5, 9, 16). This informs us that God must be obeyed in all His instructions if His people expect to enjoy the fruit of life and blessing (e.g., Deu 26:16-19; Deu 28:1-14).

Before we move into chapter 7, we must quickly put ourselves in Noah's sandals. Though he was thrust onto the front pages of his day's newspaper as a "preacher of righteousness" (2Pe 2:5), he did not flinch

when the criticism came. No doubt he was called a fool and worse. Just imagine how many Noah jokes people came up with over a century! But he went on believing and working. Noah remained obedient, doing exactly what God said for 25, 50, 75, 100 years…until the ark lay like a huge coffin on the land. What a powerful reminder that God sometimes calls His servants to obey Him even when it seems nonsensical. In these situations, all that we can do is trust in the promises of God's Word.

This section also reminds us that it is possible to be right with God, even amidst surrounding iniquity. God is the same today as He was to Noah, and if only we are willing to fulfill the conditions we too shall walk with God and please Him.

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4. Remember God's power (7:17-24). Moses writes, "Then the flood came upon the earth for forty days, and the water increased and lifted up the ark, so that it rose above the earth. The water prevailed and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. The water prevailed more and more upon the earth, so that all the high mountains everywhere under the heavens were covered. The water prevailed fifteen cubits higher, and the mountains were covered. All flesh that moved on the earth perished, birds and cattle and beasts and every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth, and all mankind; of all that was on the dry land, all in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, died. Thus He blotted out every living thing that was upon the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky, and they were blotted out from the earth; and only Noah was left, together with those that were with him in the ark. The water prevailed upon the earth one hundred and fifty days." The flood is to be a reminder to us of the reality of final judgment (Mat 24:38-39; Luk 17:27; 2Pe 2:5; 2Pe 3:5-6). God holds the world accountable for its behavior. It tells us that God is grieved over our sin and the harm it does to others. He will not put up with it forever. We live in a moral universe, and to go against the moral laws which God has built into the world invites disaster. Sin affects our personal lives, our families, our church, our community, our nation, and ultimately, our world. The Bible says that every mouth will be silenced and that the whole world will be held accountable to God (Rom 3:19). We cannot escape the fact that we are responsible to God for our behavior and that a future judgment is coming when we will answer for the way in which we have lived. That simple fact should dramatically affect our perspective in life and make us desire to be faithful to the God who has been faithful to us.

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In the third place, God's promises of never allowing another such flood favor a universal one, for there have been many devastating local floods since then (cf. 8:21; 9:11, 15; 2Pe 3:6). The New Testament authors seem to favor this view also.

5. Rejoice in God's grace (8:1-22). In 8:1-5, Moses writes, "But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided. Also the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained; and the water receded steadily from the earth, and at the end of one hundred and fifty days the water decreased. In the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat. The water decreased steadily until the tenth month; in the tenth

month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible." The word "remember" (8:1) is the high point of this story. It refers to God acting toward someone because of a previous commitment. God remembers His children.

During the eleventh to twelfth centuries A.D., Mt. Ararat became the traditional site known as the place of Noah's landing. Verse 4, however, does not specify a peak and refers generally to its location as the "mountains of Ararat." The search for the ark's artifacts has been both a medieval and a modern occupation; but to the skeptic, such evidence is not convincing, and to the believer, while not irrelevant, it is not necessary to faith. Modern Mt. Ararat lies on the border between Turkey and Armenia and encompasses Turkey, Russia, and Iran-the center of the ancient world. Sadly, the Armenian people worship Mt. Ararat today. The creature worships the creation instead of the Creator (Rom 1:21-23). From this region Noah's descendants spread out over the earth.

In 8:6-17, Moses writes, "Then it came about at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made; and he sent out a raven, and it flew here and there until the water was dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove from him, to see if the water was abated from the face of the land; but the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, so she returned to him into the ark, for the water was on the surface of all the earth. Then he put out his hand and took her, and brought her into the ark to himself. So he waited yet another seven days; and again he sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came to him toward evening, and behold, in her beak was a freshly picked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the water was abated from the earth. Then he waited yet another seven days, and sent out the dove; but she did not return to him again. Now it came about in the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first of the month, the water was dried up from the earth. Then Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the surface of the ground was dried up. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God spoke to Noah, saying, 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you, birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.'" We can almost hear the "Hallelujah Chorus" playing in the background! What a day of rejoicing that must have been! God had been faithful to see Noah through.

In 8:18-19, Moses writes, "So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by their families from the ark." Verses 18 and 19 may seem like needless repetition to the modern reader, but they document Noah's obedience to God's words, which Moses stressed in the entire flood narrative.

Our section closes in 8:20-22 with these words: "Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, 'I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.'" What is the first thing that Noah does when he gets off the ark? Does he tend for food, find water, and create shelter? The first thing that Noah did when he left the ark was to build an altar and offer God a sacrifice (8:20). This demonstrates his dedication and gratitude to God. Noah's "altar" is the first mentioned in the Bible. His "burnt offerings" were for worship. As the head of the new humanity, Noah's sacrifice represented all mankind. God may judge the wicked catastrophically and begin a new era of existence with faithful believers.

Chapter 12

\"It’s Raining, It’s Pouring, and the Lord is NOT Snoring!\" (Gen 6:9-8:22)

Study By: Keith Krell

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper: “Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a very rich man.”1 There was only one problem; Alfred Nobel had not died. Actually, it was his older brother who had died, but a newspaper reporter had somehow gotten it wrong. Regardless of how it happened, the account had a profound effect on Alfred Nobel. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing the means to kill people efficiently and for amassing a fortune in the process. So he initiated the Nobel Peace Prize, the award for scientists and writers who foster peace. Nobel said, “Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one.”2

How will you be remembered when your time on earth is over? When you are gone, how will others describe your faith in God? Are you preparing for God’s judgment? The story of Noah will challenge us to answer these questions. Today, we will be looking at the better part of three chapters because the narrative treats these paragraphs as one long section. We will read through this section because we value learning God’s Word but some portions will be given more attention.

1. Write your epitaph (6:9-12). Moses writes, “These are the records of the generations of Noah.3 Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. Noah became the father of three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth” (6:9-10). In 6:8, Noah “found favor” or “grace” through faith.4 Then in 6:9-10, we learn four important things about Noah. First, Noah was a “righteous man.”5 The word translated “righteous” (tsaddiq) connotes “conformity to the standard.”6 In the case of Noah, he conformed to the standard set by God. He was able to do so because God granted him grace. This reminds us that God’s grace always comes before anything. It’s easy to think that God loves us for what we are intrinsically, for what we have done, or can become. But God does not love us because of that, nor is He gracious to us because of that. On the contrary, He loves us solely because He loves us. He is gracious to us only because He is (cf. Deu 7:7-8). This is a crucial truth for us to understand. We do not earn God’s grace or favor (Eph 2:8-9); He bestows it upon us for His own good pleasure (Eph 1:4-6). Not only was Noah a righteous man but 2Pe 2:5 tells us that he was also a “preacher of righteousness.” Noah preached righteousness in the same way that his great-grandfather Enoch had done before him (Jud 1:14-15). The reason he could do this is that he himself was righteous. The reason that we do not have more preaching of righteousness in our day is that those who profess Christ are often not living righteous lives. 7 Are you living with “right-ness”? Does your life match your convictions?

Second, Noah was “blameless.”8 The word “blameless” (tamim) involves the idea of completeness. Noah conformed to the standard set by God and his life was “complete,” with no essential quality missing. The modifying phrase “in his time” indicates all the more clearly that Noah’s righteousness and blamelessness stood out against his contemporaries’ sinfulness. Noah was not only righteous in the sight of God; he also had a credible reputation among the people of his day. They could not pin a single wrong action on him. He was blameless. Arthur Friedman once said, “Men of genius are admired. Men of wealth are envied.

Men of power are feared. But only men of character are trusted."9 Does your character demand the trust of those people in your life?

Third, Noah "walked with God."10 This means he had daily, step-by-step fellowship with God. He had God as his companion as he walked through life.11 This type of imitate fellowship does not happen by osmosis; it must be cultivated. It takes work to be godly. Is your walk with God vibrant?

Lastly, Noah walked with God before his family.12 Noah's godliness was the godliness of a man who was involved in ordinary life. He did not withdraw from society. Real godliness is not like that. Noah was out and about in God's world. He provided for his family.13 The linking of the names of his sons with his faithful life surely indicates that Noah influenced his family in spiritual matters. Apparently, Noah instructed his family to believe in God…and they did! More often than not, when a husband and father exert spiritual leadership in the home, the entire family responds and follows his lead.

It is interesting to note, however, that Noah's only converts were his wife, his sons, and their wives (6:18). Apparently, not a single person outside his family paid the slightest attention to what he had to say. He preached for the better part of 120 years and won no converts other than his own family. Nevertheless, by God's grace, Noah won those that mattered most. Sadly, I have known men and women that have been so absorbed in winning their world for Christ that they have failed to win their own home. This is a travesty! Our top priority must always be to influence our family members for Christ. This is one of the top requirements of leadership; to have children that believe and to manage one's own household well (1Ti 3:4-5; 1Ti 3:12; Tit 1:6). Is this your conviction? Are you investing well in your family?

I need to go even further. I believe an important principle is illustrated here: Noah's faith and obedience resulted in the salvation and obedience of his family. This principle can also bear fruit in our lives as parents and grandparents. Unfortunately, many of us wonder why our children and grandchildren aren't turning out the way that we would like. Often, we don't stop to immediately ask what role we have played in their lack of spiritual development. How can we expect our children to be obedient if we aren't obedient? When Christian parents grieve over a lost child who has rebelled against God, His Word, His Son, and His church, they wonder where he learned to rebel. Quite often a child learns at home, from parents who have been rebellious is some area of life.14 Parents, we must live up to the standard that God has set for us if we hope our children will be fruitful disciples.

In 6:11-12, Moses goes on to write, "Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth." Three times in 6:11-12 we are told how "corrupt"15 the earth had become (contra 1:31). The word for "violence" is used of robbery, taking wives by force, and murder. The entire social fabric had disintegrated and human life was no longer sacred or respected (see Isa 59:6-8). The two words "corrupt" and "violence" (Psa 14:1-3) give us respectively the character and expression of the sin, the cause, and the effect. The corruption has led to violence, for badness always leads to cruelty in one form or another. A life that is wrong with God necessarily becomes wrong with its fellows.16

It is critical to recognize that Noah lived in terrible days. The world around him was degraded and depraved; yet Noah lived an above reproach life. When all the people around him were immersing themselves in evil and earning the wrath and judgment of God, Noah set his heart to follow the path found in the person and character of God. He stood his ground and remained uninfluenced by all that was happening around him. If Noah was, so can you. God has given us everything "pertaining to life and

godliness" (2Pe 1:3).

2. Obey God's Word (6:13-22).17 In 6:13, Moses writes, "Then God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.'" For the second time in three verses, the Lord mentions the "violence" of mankind (see 6:11; cf. 49:5). He then tells Noah that He is about to "destroy"18 these violent people "with the earth."19 This section demonstrates that the earth and nature suffer because of human sin (cf. 3:17-19; 4:12; Rom 8:20-21).

In 6:14-16, Noah received detailed instructions that he was to follow in building the ark.20 The ingredients were "gopher wood" (or "cypress wood") and "pitch." The dimensions are as follows21:

Dimensions | Noah's Ark22 | Contemporary Equivalent23

Length | 450 feet | 1½ American football fields

Width | 75 feet | 7 parking spaces

Height | 45 feet | 3 stories

Cubic Feet | 1.5 million | 800 railroad boxcars

Capacity | 14,000 gross tons | Princess of the Orient

As best we can tell, the ark was shaped like a shallow rectangular box topped with a roof, with an 18 inch space under the roof, interrupted only by roof supports, so light could get into the vessel from every side. This design uses space very efficiently. The ark would have been very stable in the water. What a monster this ark was! Noah had more than enough work to keep him occupied for a century.24 Remember, there were no trucks, no chain saws, and no cranes.25

A question that is asked is: How could Noah's ark hold between one-half billion to over a billion species of animals? First, the modern concept of "species" is not the same as a "kind" in the Bible. There are probably only several hundred different "kinds" of land animals that would have to be taken into the ark. The sea animals stayed in the sea, and many species could have survived in egg form. Second, Noah could have taken younger varieties of some larger animals. Third, as I have already said, the ark was not small; it was a huge structure-the size of a modern ocean liner. Furthermore, it had three stories (6:16), which tripled its space to a total of over 1.5 million cubic feet! Given all these factors, there was plenty of room for all the animals, food for the trip, and the eight humans aboard.26

After giving the dimensions, in 6:17, God authoritatively speaks: "Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish." This verse places significant emphasis on the personal role of God in the ensuing storm. The phrase "I, even I" reminds us that God is responsible for natural disasters. Ultimately, He is the sovereign Controller of the universe. Therefore, we can trust in Him and what He brings into our lives and the lives of others.

Yet, in the midst of the flood's promise, there is good news. In 6:18, God says to Noah, "But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark-you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you." This is the first occurrence of the word "covenant" (berith) in the Old Testament.27 Here, in the midst of judgment, the Lord stooped down to meet the needs of His servant (Psa 40:1; Psa 113:6).28 In the wake of our tragedies and trials, God wants to do the same for us. He longs to speak to us through His Word. He wants to draw us close to Him. Are you running to Him or away from Him? This verse also

illustrates another important biblical principle. While God bestows His saving grace and love on individuals, He is concerned about their families as well.29 Act 16:31 summarizes this principle: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”30 God loves to save families.

Chapter 6 concludes with these words: “‘And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds after their kind, and of the animals after their kind, of every creeping thing of the ground after its kind, two of every kind will come to you to keep them alive. As for you, take for yourself some of all food which is edible, and gather it to yourself; and it shall be for food for you and for them.’ Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did” (6:19-22).

Apparently, all of the animals would “come to” Noah voluntarily (6:20). It would seem that he would not have to hunt them down or look for them in remote places. Their natural instinct for self-preservation, energized by a special act of God, would bring them unerringly to Noah’s ark.31

The key to understanding biblical narratives is what is repeated in the context. In 6:22, Moses records this very important statement: “Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did.” In chapter 7, he then repeats this phrase three more times (7:5, 9, 16). This informs us that God must be obeyed in all His instructions if His people expect to enjoy the fruit of life and blessing (e.g., Deu 26:16-19; Deu 28:1-14).32

Before we move into chapter 7, we must quickly put ourselves in Noah’s sandals. Though he was thrust onto the front pages of his day’s newspaper as a “preacher of righteousness” (2Pe 2:5), he did not flinch when the criticism came. No doubt he was called a fool and worse.33 Just imagine how many Noah jokes people came up with over a century! But he went on believing and working. Noah remained obedient, doing exactly what God said for 25, 50, 75, 100 years…until the ark lay like a huge coffin on the land.34 What a powerful reminder that God sometimes calls His servants to obey Him even when it seems nonsensical. In these situations, all that we can do is trust in the promises of God’s Word.

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In the third place, God’s promises of never allowing another such flood favor a universal one, for there have been many devastating local floods since then (cf. 8:21; 9:11, 15; 2Pe 3:6). The New Testament authors seem to favor this view also.

5. Rejoice in God’s grace (8:1-22). In 8:1-5, Moses writes, “But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided. Also the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained; and the water receded steadily from the earth, and at the end of one hundred and fifty days the water decreased. In the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat. The water decreased steadily until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible.” The word “remember” (8:1) is the high point of this story. It refers to God acting toward someone because of a previous commitment.41 God remembers His children.

During the eleventh to twelfth centuries A.D., Mt. Ararat became the traditional site known as the place of Noah’s landing. Verse 4, however, does not specify a peak and refers generally to its location as the “mountains of Ararat.” The search for the ark’s artifacts has been both a medieval and a modern occupation; but to the skeptic, such evidence is not convincing, and to the believer, while not irrelevant, it is not necessary to faith. Modern Mt. Ararat lies on the border between Turkey and Armenia and encompasses Turkey, Russia, and Iran-the center of the ancient world. Sadly, the Armenian people worship Mt. Ararat today. The creature worships the creation instead of the Creator (Rom 1:21-23). From this region Noah’s descendants spread out over the earth.

In 8:6-17, Moses writes, “Then it came about at the end of forty days,42 that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made; and he sent out a raven,43 and it flew here and there until the water was dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove from him, to see if the water was abated from the face of the land; but the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, so she returned to him into the ark, for the water was on the surface of all the earth. Then he put out his hand and took her, and brought her into the ark to himself. So he waited yet another seven days; and again he sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came to him toward evening, and behold, in her beak was a freshly picked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the water was abated from the earth. Then he waited yet another seven days, and sent out the dove; but she did not return to him again. Now it came about in the six hundred and first year, in the first month,

on the first of the month, the water was dried up from the earth. Then Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the surface of the ground was dried up. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God spoke to Noah, saying, 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you, birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.'" We can almost hear the "Hallelujah Chorus" playing in the background! What a day of rejoicing that must have been! God had been faithful to see Noah through.44

In 8:18-19, Moses writes, "So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by their families from the ark."45 Verses 18 and 19 may seem like needless repetition to the modern reader, but they document Noah's obedience to God's words, which Moses stressed in the entire flood narrative.

Our section closes in 8:20-22 with these words: "Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, 'I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.'" What is the first thing that Noah does when he gets off the ark? Does he tend for food, find water, and create shelter? The first thing that Noah did when he left the ark was to build an altar and offer God a sacrifice (8:20). This demonstrates his dedication and gratitude to God. Noah's "altar" is the first mentioned in the Bible. His "burnt offerings" were for worship. As the head of the new humanity, Noah's sacrifice represented all mankind.46 God may judge the wicked catastrophically and begin a new era of existence with faithful believers.

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2 Rodney J. Buchanan, Flood Insurance (Gen 6:1-13) Preached at Mulberry Street United Methodist Church on January 9, 2000: http://www.mulberryumc.org/Sermons/Jan09_00.htm.

3 This is the longest of the ten toledot ("These are the records of the generations") sections in Genesis (6:9-9:29).

4 Heb 11:7 says, "By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith."

5 See also John the Baptist (Mar 6:20) and Simeon (Luk 2:25).

6 Kaiser writes, “The original idea may well have been “to be straight.” From this came the idea of a “norm” and of being “in the right. “The bureau of standards for what was morally and ethically right was to be found only in God himself (Psa 145:17). Therefore, the standards and judgments set out in His Word are righteous (Psa 119:144; Psa 119:160; Psa 119:172).” The word righteous simply meant that he accepted and used the righteous standard for his living and acting. It does not imply perfection. The term does not in itself establish total approbation of his actions, any more than it does in connection with Tamar in Gen 38:26. The text expresses an estimate of the comparative rightness of Tamar and Judah. When Judah was exposed as the adulterer by whom Tamar had become pregnant, he said, ‘She is more righteous than I’-that is, she was more within her rights to act as she did than Judah was in what he did. This can hardly be a complete endorsement of Tamar or her actions. Neither is the use of the same term a total endorsement of Noah.” (Author’s italics) Walter C. Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic ed.

7 James Montgomery Boice, Genesis 1-11: Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982 [1998]), 323.

8 See also Abraham (Gen 17:1) and Job (Job 1:1). Kaiser writes, “Scripture has one preeminent example of the ‘perfect’ man: Job. It is said that he was ‘blameless’ (Job 1:1). He too claimed that he was ‘blameless’ or ‘perfect’ in Job 9:21-22; Job 12:4; Job 31:6. Even under heavy assault to the contrary, he held fast to his ‘integrity’ (same root- Job 27:5). And he was not alone in this opinion, for his wife ascribed ‘integrity’ to him (Job 2:9). Even Yahweh in heaven agreed that Job was indeed ‘blameless’ or ‘perfect’ (Job 1:8; Job 2:3). In spite of all these high accolades for Job, he knew that he was a sinner, for he queried, ‘How can a mortal be righteous before God?’ (Job 9:2). He further acknowledged his sin (Job 10:6; Job 14:16-17). Accordingly, the use of the word blameless or perfect does not imply that one has attained perfection or a state in which one no longer sins. Even the creature in Eden (probably Lucifer) that was created ‘perfect’ was found to be capable of sin” (Eze 28:13-15). (Author’s italics) Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Bible, Electronic ed.

9 Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath, The Ascent of a Leader (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 73.

10 The Hebrew text lays a little bit of emphasis on the fact that it was God with whom he walked. It reads literally, “with God Noah walked” (cf. Enoch in Gen 5:22; Gen 5:24). Sailhamer writes, “The same explanation for Enoch’s rescue from death (‘he walked with God’) is made the basis for Noah’s rescue from death in the Flood: ‘he walked with God.’ Thus in the story of Noah and the Flood, the author is able to repeat the lesson of Enoch: life comes through ‘walking with God.’” John H. Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 119.

11 Michael Eaton, Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 1-11 (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1997), 126.

12 Matthews observes, “Noah is depicted as Adam redivivus (revived). He is the sole survivor and successor to Adam; both ‘walk’ with God; both are the recipients of the promissory blessing; both are caretakers of the lower creatures; both father three sons; both are workers of the soil; both sin through the fruit of a tree; and both father a wicked son who is under a curse.” Kenneth A. Matthews, Gen 1:1-11:2, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 351, cf. 359. See also Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 127-130.

13 Eaton, Genesis 1-11, 127.

14 John Phillips, Introducing People of the Bible: Volume Four (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux, 1999), 12.

15 The word translated “corrupt” is a word rich in its meanings. It was used to describe a shirt that was stained too badly to be used or a clay pot that was marred in the production process making it unusable.

16 Whereas God has blessed the human family with the power of procreation to fill the earth (1:28; 9:1), these culprits have “filled the earth” by procreating “violence” (cf. 6:13; Eze 8:17; Eze 28:16). Matthews, Gen 1:1-11:2; Gen 11:359.

17 Youngblood comments, “The Hebrew word translated ‘ark’ in the flood story is used in the OT almost exclusively to refer to Noah’s ship. It appears elsewhere only in Exodus 2, where it is translated ‘basket’ (2:3, 5). As the ark saved Noah and seven others from a watery grave, so the basket saved the baby Moses from a similar fate.” Ronald F. Youngblood, The Book of Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 89.

18 The word rendered “destroy” (shachath) in the clause, “I am about to destroy them with the earth,” is the same word that is rendered by “corrupt” and “corrupted” (shachath) in 6:12. Men had corrupted their way, and so God will corrupt, that is, destroy them.

19 Later God tells Abraham that He intends to destroy Sodom (Gen 18:17-21).

20 Later Moses received detailed instructions that he was to follow in building the tabernacle. Both men followed their respective instructions and received praise (6:22; Exo 39:42-43; Lev 8:36; Num 27:22; Deu 34:9). Both men inaugurated a new epoch. In this respect Moses was another Noah. Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Genesis (http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdfhttp://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf, 2004), 77.

21 Sailhamer writes, “The author’s purpose in drawing out the list of specifications for the ark in chapter 6, as with the details of the building of the tabernacle, is not that readers might be able to see what the ark or the tabernacle looked like, but rather that readers might appreciate the meticulous care with which these godly and exemplary individuals went about their tasks of obedience to God’s will. They obeyed God with ‘all their hearts.’” Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative, 125.

22 The NIV and the NLT are helpful because they translate the cubic dimensions into feet.

23 Some of these contemporary equivalents come from Constable, Notes on Genesis, 77.

24 The text does not explicitly state whether Noah’s sons helped with the ark or if he hired laborers or if both occurred.

25 R. Kent Hughes, Genesis: Beginning & Blessing (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 135.

26 Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, When Critics Ask (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1992), 42-43.

27 In Genesis, the word “covenant” appears 27 times. On 22 occasions it is connected with divine generosity to the world through Noah (6:18; 9:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17) or to Abraham’s seed through Abraham (15:18; 17:2, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 19, 21). In five references (14:13; 21:27, 32; 26:28; 31:44) people make equal oaths to each other. Eaton, Genesis 1-11, 131.

28 Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, eds. New Illustrated Bible Commentary (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 19.

29 E.g., Gen 17:7-27; Deu 30:19; Psa 78:1-7; Psa 102:28; Psa 103:17-18; Psa 112:1-2 l Act 2:38-39; 1Co 7:14.

30 Youngblood, The Book of Genesis, 91.

31 Youngblood, The Book of Genesis, 92.

32 Matthews, Gen 1:1-11:2; Gen 11:363.

33 Erwin W. Lutzer, When a Good Man Falls (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 35.

34 Hughes, Genesis: Beginning & Blessing, 137.

35 God did not reveal the basis for His distinction between clean and unclean animals here (7:2). Israel's pagan neighbors also observed clean and unclean distinctions between animals though they varied from country to country. In the Mosaic Law, God further distinguished between foods. Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul taught that now these distinctions no longer need affect people as far as our relationship to God goes (Mar 7:15; Mar 7:19; cf. Act 10:15; Act 11:9; Rom 14:14).

36 Kaiser writes, "The simplest and most adequate explanation is that chapter 6 of Genesis contains general summary directions-take two of each. After Noah had understood these general instructions, God spoke more specifically about the role the clean beasts and birds were to play. Scripture does not indicate how the distinction between "clean" and "unclean" arose. Later on the Mosaic Law would sanction this distinction and formally define it. But we are left without any indication of the origin of the distinction, just as we are left in the dark regarding how and when the whole idea of sacrifices started. Cain and Abel both sacrificed, but a formal declaration inaugurating this ritual is not recorded." Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Bible, Electronic ed.

37 Eaton, Genesis 1-11, 128.

38 Paul Wright, ed., Genesis: Shepherd's Notes (Nashville: Broadman, 1997), 30.

39 The flood narrative points ahead to Moses and the escape of the Hebrews through the Red Sea. This is evidenced again by the term 'dry land' (haraba) in our passage (7:22) rather than the customary 'dry ground' (yabasa). This infrequent term occurs eight times, only once more in the Pentateuch at Exo 14:21, where it describes the transformation of the sea into 'dry land' by a 'strong east wind.' This exodus parallel is confirmed by 8:1b, which speaks of God's sending a 'wind' upon the waters. Later Israel identified itself with Noah and the tiny group of survivors who escaped the wicked by the awesome deeds of God. Matthews, Gen 1:1-11:2; Gen 11:381-82.

40 John H. Walton, Genesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 333.

41 There are 73 instances in the OT where God is said to "remember." Hamilton comments, "When Moses wrote that God remembered someone, he meant God extended mercy to him or her by delivering that person from death (see also 19:29) or from barrenness (30:22)." Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 299. Sailhamer writes, "God's rescue of Noah foreshadows His deliverance of Israel in the Exodus" (cf. 8:13-14 and Exo 2:24; Exo 14:21). Sailhamer,

The Pentateuch as Narrative, 127.

42 There are many interesting thematic parallels between God's calling Noah out of the ark and God's calling Abraham out of Ur (cf. 8:15 and 12:1; 8:16 and 12:1; 8:18 and 12:4; 8:20 and 12:7; 9:1 and 12:2; 9:9 and 12:7). Both Noah and Abraham represent new beginnings in the course of events recorded in Genesis. Both are marked by God's promise of blessing and his gift of the covenant. See John H. Sailhamer, Genesis: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), Electronic ed.

43 The raven in seeking food settles upon every carcass it sees, whereas the dove will only settle on what is dry and clean. Doves (8:8), white, clean animals (Lev 1:14; Lev 12:6; et al.) in contrast to black, unclean animals (Lev 11:15; Deu 14:14), return to their home when they find no place to land. The olive tree will put out leaves even under water.

44 Anne Graham Lotz, God's Story (Nashville: Word, 1999 [1997]), 204.

45 Sailhamer observes, "There is a striking thematic parallel between the picture of God's calling Noah out of the ark (8:15-20) and the call of Abraham (12:1-7).

Gen 8:15-20 Gen 12:1-7

a. Then God said to Noah (8:15) a. The Lord had said to Abram (12:1)

b. Come out from the ark (8:16) b. Leave your country (12:1)

c. So Noah came out (8:18) c. So Abram left (12:4)

d. Then Noah built an altar to the LORD (8:20) d. So [Abram] built an altar there to the LORD (12:7)

e. Then God blessed Noah (9:1) e. 'And I [God] will bless you' (12:2)

f. 'Be fruitful and increase' (9:1) f. 'I will make you into a great nation' (12:2)

g. 'I now establish my covenant with you…' (9:9) g. 'To your offspring, I will give this land' (12:7)

Both Noah and Abraham represent new beginnings in the course of events recorded in Genesis. Both are marked by God's promise of blessing and his gift of the covenant." Sailhamer, Genesis, Electronic ed.

46 Some of the burnt offerings in the Mosaic system of worship were for the same purpose. Specifically, a burnt offering made atonement and expressed the offerer's complete personal devotion to God (cf. Lev 1; Rom 12:1-2).

Chapter 13

\"A Fresh Start\" (Gen 9:1-17)

In a Peanuts cartoon strip Lucy and Linus are staring out the window, watching it rain. The conversation goes like this: Lucy: “Boy! Look at it pour. What if it floods the whole world?” Linus: “It won’t. In Genesis 9, God promised Noah that would never happen again. The sign of that promise is the rainbow.” Lucy, turning back to the window with a big smile: “You’ve taken a great load off my mind.” Linus: “Sound theology has a way of doing that.”

We laugh at that cartoon but my man Linus was on to something. Sound theology not only takes a load off our minds; it also teaches us what God is like and what He expects of us. Theology is not dry, dull, and boring. Nor is it just for biblical scholars who sit in ivory tower libraries. Theology is meant to alter the way we live life. As we look at Gen 9:1-17, we are going to learn how a strong theology guides us through this life.

[In the first seven verses, we learn that a strong theology helps us to…]

1. Appreciate the value of life (9:1-7). Moses begins with these words: “And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’” (9:1). This verse is a renewal of God’s first blessing and commission to Adam (1:28). Like Adam, Noah and his sons were blessed and commanded to reproduce and fill the earth. The word “blessed” is the key word in Genesis. It is a reminder that the God of the Bible has always been a God that blesses His people (cf. Jam 1:17). This is such a good word for us to hear. It is so easy to be restless and discontent. We always want more. We are never satisfied. Yet, God’s will for us is to express gratitude for His every blessing. A strong theology appreciates God’s many blessings.

Additional blessings are found in 9:2-4: “The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.” Why did God put this fear and terror of man in all creatures? For two reasons: (1) For the protection of animals who will no longer be at peace with man, and (2) for the protection of man who will no longer be at peace with animals. Moses writes that God gave the animals into Noah’s hands (Jer 27:5). This means humans have been given authority over animals. The Lord then informs Noah and his boys that meat is to be a normal part of the human diet. The only restriction is that they must not eat meat with the blood in it. Humans are not to devour animals the way animals devour one another, while the blood is pulsating in the flesh. The reason for this is respect for life and the giver of life. In Lev 17:11, Moses teaches that life is in the blood and God is the giver of life. Disregard for the gift of life is an affront to the giver of life.

Moses continues to record the Lord’s words in 9:5: “Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man.” God will demand an accounting of any animal that sheds man’s blood (see Exo 21:28). So valuable is human life that a compensation of life will even be exacted from animals. The last phrase of 9:5 is a bit confusing. The literal translation is “from the hand of a man, his brother.” The point is that God will require the blood of someone who kills, since the person killed is a relative (“brother”) of the killer. The language reflects Noah’s situation (after the flood everyone would be part of Noah’s extended family), but also supports the

concept of the brotherhood of mankind. According to the Genesis account the entire human race descended from Noah.

In 9:6, the Lord puts His law in a compelling poetic stanza, which declares: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.” As we look at this controversial verse, it is important to note two things.

First, it is clear that this verse is giving us a command and not just a suggestion or permission. Verse 5 states that God demands a punishment: “from every man, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man.” Three times in 9:5, the Lord Himself says, “I will require” blood for blood. This is what I would call putting emphasis on a command with an exclamation point! It is also important to note that God has never countermanded this command. Consequently, it is still in force.

Second, the reason given for this action is one that remains in force for as long as men and women are made in the image of God. In 1:26, when God created man, He created him in the image of God. Until human history ends, all men and women will be created in the image of God. Into the eternal realm, man will continue to bear the image of God.

These two observations help us to conclude that God instituted capital punishment. Of course, the natural question is: why? The Bible provides four very important reasons:

1. Human life is so precious and sacred to God that when murder is committed, the death penalty is in order (Lev 24:17-18). When a person murders another human being, he or she extinguishes a revelation of God. God takes this very seriously.

2. The person who murders another being made in God’s image shows contempt for God as well. To kill another person usurps God’s sovereign authority over life and death. When a man or woman murders another person he or she assumes the role of God.

3. Capital punishment provides appropriate justice. The Scriptures teach there is a divine validity to punishment for crime. Before the flood, the lack of capital punishment led to blood vendettas.

4. Capital punishment is intended to serve as a deterrent. Any society that loses its reverence for life cannot long endure. For this reason, God instituted capital punishment as a gracious restraint upon man’s sinful tendency toward violence. Some people raise the issue of Christian love and forgiveness. Undoubtedly, these expressions are very important but they do not necessarily negate the consequences of one’s actions.

Although the Bible teaches the death penalty for deliberate and premeditated murder, it is important to remember that this responsibility is the sole prerogative of human government; because government is a “minister” of God (Rom 13:1-4). Of course, the death penalty must be applied with such reluctance that where “reasonable doubt” exists, we err on the side of mercy and waive the death penalty. In an imperfect judicial system not all defendants will be treated equally or fairly because economic status, social standing, race, or political and legal connections will place some “above the law.” However, we will warn that such cheating does not escape God’s notice, nor does it change His laws. It only becomes another divine indictment on that society that dares to exercise unevenly the divinely ordained demand for justice. That nation is going to be judged for such a cavalier attitude toward God’s mission.

The Lord closes this section in 9:7 with a strong contrast by reiterating what he said in 9:1: “As for you, be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it.” Against the backdrop of the warnings about taking life, God now again reminds His people to produce life.

[Sound theology helps us to appreciate the value of life. It also enables us to…]

2. Celebrate God’s Covenant (9:8-17). In 9:8-17, God told Noah and his sons that He would preserve life by not flooding the entire earth ever again (see 9:11, 15). Moses writes, “Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth. This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.’”

This passage reveals three important aspects to God’s covenant. This “covenant” is unconditional (9:9), universal (9:9-10, 17), and eternal (9:12, 16). Several clues bear this out:

> 1. The recurrence of “I,” “Myself,” and “My” demonstrates the unconditional nature of this covenant. God Himself will ensure that this covenant is carried out. It is not dependent upon man’s work or faithfulness. This is how God typically works. There is nothing man can do to earn His favor.
>
> 2. The replication of the phrase “every living creature” (9:10a, 10b; 12b) and its equivalents, “all flesh” (9:11b; 15b; 17b), and “every living creature of all flesh” (9:15a; 16b)-a total of eight times, affirms God’s passionate concern for, and certain commitment to, the preservation and care of all living species on the earth. Since God appreciates both animal and human life, so should we.
>
> 3. God clearly states that this is an “eternal covenant” (9:16), “for all successive generations” (9:12). Since God is the eternal God who dwells outside of space and time, He can maintain His covenants as long as He sovereignly chooses. The Bible teaches that God fulfills His covenants and promises. If He failed to fulfill even one covenant or promise, He would cease to be God. Furthermore, if He failed, or fails sometime in the future, how could we know with any degree of confidence that the Gospel is trustworthy? Those that suggest the Scripture has errors often overlook this point. Yet, God’s Word must be free of inaccuracies or God is not God and the rest of His Word is suspect, at best.

A biblical covenant usually involved three things: parties, terms, and promises. Suppose that you were a painter and I wanted my house painted. We could make a covenant together. You and I would be the two parties involved and the terms would include what areas were to be painted, what color, and when the job should be completed. The promise I made to you would be in the amount of money I was going to pay you when the job was finished. Your promise to me would be that the job would be completed as originally agreed. The agreement that we make concerning these elements: parties, terms, and promises, would be the covenant that we made with each other.

When God makes a covenant with us, it normally involves these three elements. The difference is that God alone determines the terms of the agreement, and that God always comes through on His end of the deal.

If God is willing to make a covenant with us, and He is willing to bind Himself to that covenant no matter what, what does that say about the relationship God wants to have with us? It says that we can be hopeful about the future, because we worship a God that not only desires our companionship, but who is willing to take the steps necessary to obligate Himself to that relationship.

In 9:12-17, God also attaches significance to the rainbow as a “sign” of His covenant. The Hebrew word for rainbow (qeset) is also the word for a battle bow. The point seems to be that the bow is now “put away,” hung in place by the clouds, suggesting that the “battle,” the storm, is over. Thus the rainbow speaks of peace. As a result, whenever clouds appear over the earth and a rainbow appears, God will “remember” His covenant with man. God said that the rainbow would cause Him to remember His unconditional covenant with man. God is a faithful God!

I hope you have seen that a sound theology helps us to appreciate the value of life and celebrate God’s covenant. My prayer for you today is that you are living with gratitude to God for His gift of life and that you are enjoying your relationship with God who is a covenant keeper.

Chapter 14

\"The Rest of the Story\" (Gen 9:18-29)

Do you like to read biographies or autobiographies? Many people do. You can learn a lot about people this way. However, maybe you've had this experience: You're reading a biography when all of a sudden you turn the page and discover a grinning skeleton lurking in the closet of someone you admire. American columnist Russell Baker said, "The biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows too much." But when God writes a story, He knows everything about everybody and always tells the truth. He does this for our own good (Rom 15:4).

In Gen 9:18-29, the history of Noah and his family moves from rainbows (9:12-17) to shadows. Paul Harvey would say, "Here, we learn 'the rest of the story.'" Yet, one of many reasons I am convinced the Bible is God's Word is because its authors never covers up the sins of the saints. They refuse to pull punches; instead, they flat-out tell it like it is! This reality should encourage you and me. If great men and women of God committed sin and God still used them, He can use you and me as well. We need to be honest and acknowledge that Christians are far from perfect but God always uses us in spite of ourselves. In the verses that follow, God gives us three warnings. If we heed these warnings, we will be grateful that we listened. But if we ignore these warnings, we will live to regret our negligence.

[The first warning is found in 9:18-21…]

1. Beware of failure after great victory (9:18-21). In 9:18a, Moses again (cf. 5:32; 6:10; 7:13) lists Noah's three sons ("Shem and Ham and Japheth") because the narrative is now especially concerned with them. Then we come to a parenthetical clause in 9:18b. Moses writes, "…and Ham was the father of Canaan." This phrase was not haphazardly thrown in. On the contrary, it has great relevance because it anticipates the rest of the story. Verse 19 states that the whole earth was populated from Noah's three sons. [They are carrying out God's commission to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth," 9:1.]

Everything seems to be going along just fine when all of a sudden in 9:20-21, we read these tragic words: "Then Noah began farming and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent." Sometime after leaving the ark, Noah took up farming like his father Lamech (5:28-29). He then planted a vineyard and made some fine wine. Now as you may know, this process does not occur overnight. After planting his vineyard, Noah had to wait until the grapes were ready for fruit bearing, which usually takes three to five years. He then had to harvest a crop, gather it, and extract the juice from the grapes. Finally, he had to allow the grape juice time to ferment into wine. This reminds me of an unforgettable commercial I used to see when I was a little boy. The legendary Orson Welles is endorsing Paul Masson's Emerald Dry. On this particular commercial, he turns down a stereo, and then compares a good wine to a Beethoven symphony. At the end, he intones, "We shall sell no wine before its time." Whenever I think of this episode, I imagine Noah as an Orson Welles like character knocking back his own fine wine. The point that I'm trying to make is this: There were quite a few steps that led to Noah's drunken stupor.

Some scholars make a gracious but desperate attempt to excuse Noah's behavior. It is argued that Noah did not really know what would happen to him by drinking all this wine. This is special pleading. Noah was a wise and discerning man. Undoubtedly, before the flood, plenty of people got drunk (cf. 6:5). Noah was far from naïve. On the contrary, this great man of God sinned with his eyes wide open.

This leads to an important excurse on the subject of alcohol. Before I begin to discuss this topic, it is important to acknowledge that most people have strong opinions on the use of alcohol. But the real issue is not what you think or what I think. The issue is what does God think? Ultimately, His opinion is the only one that matters. So I will limit our discussion to, what does the Bible have to say about alcohol?

Surprisingly, the Bible speaks a whole lot about alcohol. The word “wine” occurs over 200 times in our English translations. Even more surprisingly to some of you is the fact that the Bible holds alcohol in high regard. The following list provides the biblical basis for alcohol.

• Wine is viewed as one of God’s gifts to humankind (Psa 104:15).

• Every burnt offering and peace offering was accompanied by a libation of wine (Num 15:5-10).

• Moses implies that it is a good thing to drink wine and strong drink to the Lord (Deu 14:26).

• Joy in the Lord is compared to the abundance of wine (Psa 4:7).

• Honoring the Lord with one’s wealth is rewarded with the blessings of abundant stores of wine (Pro 3:9-10).

• Love is compared to wine repeatedly in the Song of Songs, as though good wine were similarly sweet (1:2, 4; 4:10; 7:9).

• One of the symbols for Israel was the vine (Isa 5:1-7; Mar 12:1-11).

• Wine is symbolic of great blessing (Isa 25:6).

• The lack of wine is viewed as a judgment from God (Jer 48:33; Lam 2:12; Hos 2:9; Joe 1:10; Hag 2:16); and, conversely, its provision is viewed as a blessing from the Lord (cf. Gen 27:28; Deu 7:13; Deu 11:14; Joe 2:19; Joe 2:24; Joe 3:18; Amo 9:13-14).

• Jesus’ first miracle was turning water into wine (Joh 2:9-10).

• Jesus drank wine (Mat 11:18-19; Mat 15:11; Luk 7:33-35).

• Jesus used wine in the Lord’s Supper (Mat 26:29; Mar 14:25; Luk 22:18).

• Paul tells Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach’s sake (1Ti 5:23; cf. Pro 31:6).

But the Bible also warns about the dangers of wine. The following list demonstrates this.

• Nazirites were to abstain from all alcohol and wine (Num 6:3-4).

• Priests were forbidden to drink prior to officiating in the sanctuary, lest they die (Lev 10:9).

• In Pro 20:1 we are told that “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.”

• Drinking too much wine was dangerous to people and offensive to God (Pro 21:17; Pro 23:20-21; Pro 23:29-35; Isa 5:22).

• Drunkenness was especially reprehensible when it led to self-exposure (Hab 2:15; Lam 4:21). The exposure of one's nakedness was not only publicly demeaning but also incompatible with the presence of the living God (Exo 20:26; Deu 23:12-14).

• The Bible does speak very harshly about becoming enslaved to alcohol or allowing it to control a person, especially to the point of drunkenness (Eph 5:18; cf. Deu 21:20; Ecc 10:17; Luk 12:45; Luk 21:34; Rom 13:13; 1Co 5:11; 1Pe 4:3).

We must understand that alcohol is a problem in our culture but we must understand what the Bible teaches. The Christian faith is about tension. Most of us would like for the world to be black and white. Clear-cut. No gray. But gray is a biblical color. Let me ask you a few questions: Is money evil? Is food evil? Is travel evil? Is exercise evil? Of course, the answer to all of these questions is, "NO!" It's all a matter of how these gifts from God are used. With alcohol and all of these other areas, the Bible calls for moderation. As my dad used to tell me, "Moderation in all things, Keith." If we do not use moderation, it is too easy for any good thing to gain control over us, which will be detrimental to our life, our family, and our ministry.

So what is the conclusion in this matter? Three important principles should suffice.

• Everything is a gift of God (1Ti 4:4).

• Obey government (Rom 13:1-7).

• Allow differing opinions (Rom 14:1-23).

Now back to our story. After Noah became drunk he "uncovered himself inside his tent." The Hebrew word translated "uncovered" (galah) means "to be disgracefully exposed." Now this certainly complicates matters. Noah evidently felt warm because of the effect of the alcohol, took off his clothes, and then passed out in his tent. Alcohol is a depressant. It "loosens" people up because it depresses their self-control, their wisdom, their balance, and judgment. Noah became drunk and careless. He did the normal pass-out routine for drunkenness and in the process discarded his robe. So he is lying in his own room sprawled out naked on the floor or possibly on his sleeping area.

Moses is drawing our attention back to the first few chapters of Genesis. In 2:8, God planted a garden for man to enjoy. Here, Noah plants a vineyard (9:20). Moses also establishes parallels between Noah's disgrace (he took of the fruit of his orchard and became naked) and that of Adam and Eve (who took of the fruit of the garden and saw that they were naked). In pointing out the similarities of Noah and Adam, Moses wants to show us that even after being saved from the flood, man's enjoyment of God's good gifts could not be sustained. Noah, like Adam, sinned, and the effects of that sin were to be felt in the generations of sons and daughters to follow. As in Genesis 3, the effect of Noah's sin is seen in his "nakedness" (9:22; cf. 2:25; 3:7).

When Noah and his family were introduced for the first time, Moses wrote, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9). In the New Testament, Noah was called a "preacher of righteousness" (2Pe 2:5). He is also included in the hall of faith of Hebrews 11. Noah was a great man of God. If Noah can sin, anyone can sin. This includes you and me. But the point of this story and the whole of Genesis is not merely that anyone can fall but that everybody does (Rom 3:10-12).

The time when most Christians fall is on the heels of a great victory. Man's tendency is to ease up when the conflict lessens. If it happened to Noah, it could happen to you. Whenever you feel like things are going especially well, beware. Stay humble. The apostle Paul says, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1Co 10:12). We are very vulnerable people. Every Christian is capable of committing even the most heinous of sins. This is why we so desperately require the accountability of a local church and a small group of believers.

This account also serves as a reminder that it is possible for seasoned saints to stumble in the sunset years of their lives. Moses sinned late in his life by striking a rock and taking some of God's glory to Himself; as a result, he was not permitted to enter to Promised Land. David sinned with Bathsheeba when he was in his fifties. Solomon departed from the will of God when he was old. Past successes do not provide power for future victory. The Bible teaches again and again that godly people can be tripped up before the finish line. The former president of Multnomah Bible College, Dr. Joe Aldrich, has said, "The enemy will wait forty years, if necessary, to set a trap for you." I confess this scares the daylights out of me!

This means we must recognize that the greatest of all believers have weaknesses. The Christian is not a super saint. He is an ordinary person saved by grace. The people of God are upheld by God's grace. If we are different it is because of the powerful support of God. If we are not upheld we can fall away at any moment. The only thing that makes us different is that we are sustained by God's mercy. If God should let us go we could slip badly. Who can say what we would do if God lets us go?

Noah's sin reminds us that anyone can stumble into sin. But it also illustrates that when we fall, we usually take someone else with us. Remember those three-legged races at picnics? When you fall down, your partner does too-there's no such thing as sinning alone. No man lives unto himself and no man dies unto himself-and no man sins unto himself.

[God warns us to beware of failure after great victory. Now he warns us to…]

2. Beware of gloating over the misfortune of others (9:22-23). In 9:22, we read that "Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside." Apparently Ham's gaze was not a mere harmless notice or an accidental glance. The verb "saw" has such force that some say it means "he gazed with satisfaction." After observing his father's nakedness, Ham told his brothers outside. The word "told" means "to boldly announce with delight." Ham gloated over his father's shame. Ham's heart was intent on mocking his father and undermining his authority as a man of God. He did nothing to preserve his father's dignity. To the contrary, Ham probably encouraged Shem and Japheth to go into the tent to see this spectacle for themselves.

How do you respond to the sins and failings of others? With delight? With a sense of superiority? By spreading the story (see Pro 17:9; Gal 6:1-2)? Sadly, most people are far-sighted when it comes to sin-they see others', not their own! Many of us love to hear about the demise of others. Now we would never be so brazen to admit it, but it's true. The flesh loves to hear about the latest scandal (e.g., a marriage on the rocks, an affair, a fallen Christian). Yet, the Lord wants us to grieve when other believers fall into sin. How people respond to the sin and embarrassment of others is an indication of their own character.

In 9:23, we read of a contrast: "But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were turned away, so

that they did not see their father's nakedness." Contrary to Ham, Shem and Japheth covered Noah's nakedness. They laid "a garment" across their shoulders. They walked in backward and covered Noah. They turned their faces from his nakedness. They honored their father and won the approval and blessing of God. The significance of the contrast between the actions of the sons is seen from the author's account of the fall in Genesis 3. In covering their father's nakedness, Shem and Japheth were like Adam and Eve (3:7) and God (3:21) who did not look on man's nakedness but covered it with coats of skin (cf. 2:25). They are a living illustration of 1Pe 4:8, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (cf. Pro 10:12; Pro 12:16; Pro 17:9).

How did Noah feel when he awoke from his drunken stupor and realized what he had done? Did he sit on the edge of his bed, head in his hands, retching with nausea and guilt? As his mind raced back over the last few hours and how he could have gotten into such a condition, did the words of God's covenant come back to his mind (9:9)? What else could he do but just trust in the compassion of a gracious and merciful God?

[We are warned by God to beware of failure after great victory and gloating over the misfortune of others. We are also warned to…]

3. Beware of the long-term consequences of sin (9:24-29). In 9:24, Moses writes: "When Noah awoke from his wine, he knew what his youngest son had done to him." Noah was no doubt ashamed of what he had done. He was also likely surprised to find himself covered with a garment. Naturally, he must have wondered what happened in the tent while he was asleep. The logical thing would be to speak to Japheth, his firstborn; and he and Shem must have told him what Ham had done.

In response to what he learned, Noah said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants He shall be to his brothers." Now this is bizarre. Who is "Canaan"? Canaan is the son of Ham, Noah's grandson (9:18b). Why does the curse fall on Canaan? It seems that Noah is prophesying that Canaan is already cursed because he is Ham's son. He is saying, Canaan, you are cursed because Ham is your dad. It is also a warning to Ham that his son is going to treat him like he treated his father. Ham dishonored Noah, and fatherhood in general, so Canaan is cursed by having Ham as his father. The story of history is pretty stunning: One day one son dishonored his dad; as a result, our society has been obliterated with rebellion.

Many are cursed because of their fathers and many men turn out like their fathers. Yet, a little boy wants more than anything to be just like his dad. In our day and age, that's either a good thing or a bad thing. Men love your children and esteem fatherhood. Be a godly example they can look to.

As the youngest son wrongs his father, so the curse will fall on his youngest son, who presumably inherits his moral decadence (Lev 18:3; Deu 9:3). In addition to the Canaanites, Ham's descendants include some if Israel's most bitter enemies: Egypt, Philistia, Assyria, and Babylon (see 10:6-13). Ham's indiscretion towards his father may easily be seen as a type of the later behavior of the Egyptians and Canaanites. Noah's curse on Canaan thus represents God's sentence on the sins of the Canaanites, which their forefather Ham had exemplified.

When God says that He "visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exo 20:5 b), He means it! For example, Abraham lied to Pharaoh about Sarah. Isaac ended up in the same circumstances and told a lie about his wife, Rebecca; Jacob ended up being a liar and had twelve sons, ten of whom deceived him with lies. There you have it: four generations are affected because of the sin of one of the parents.

In 9:26-27, Noah says, “He also said, ‘Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.’” Noah is given a conviction that salvation and blessing will come through the line of Shem. In due course, Jesus would be a Jew, a Semite, and a descendant in the line of Shem through whom the entire human race will be blessed. Japheth is to have extended territory. His line will not lead to the Messiah but there is a blessing in store for him. He had protected Noah and will find protection himself. The language is picturesque. Japheth lives in the tents of Shem. One person is pictured as taking shelter with another. In the course of history salvation would come through a Semite-Jesus. Then an abundance of Gentiles would come to salvation through a Jewish Savior. The people of Japheth were enlarged in their population and in their territory, but there was more involved here than territorial expansion. The Gospel would come through a Semitic Savior, and when He came salvation would be for all people everywhere. Many of the people of Japheth around the Mediterranean area would “take shelter” in this Semitic Savior. The Semitic people will be the channel-the cradle, as it were-the conduit out of which the whole of mankind will have a blessing.

Genesis 9 ends with a summary of Noah’s subsequent life. Like his forebears in chapter 5, Noah lived to an advanced age (950). Like Enoch, he had “walked with God” (5:21, 23; 6:9) earlier in his life. If Noah had not fallen away after the flood, perhaps God would have taken him away as he did Enoch (5:24). But in Noah’s case that was not to be. Like his other ancestors in Genesis 5, Noah died (9:29). And though the sin was never repeated, the memory must have cast a cloud to the end.

As I close I want to talk to those that may feel like Noah or Ham. If Satan has won a battle in your life, don’t let him win a second battle. Don’t buy into the lie that it’s too late for you to repent. Satan has three lies that he pawns off on gullible believers. The first is that sin doesn’t really matter. “Just do it once, and God will forgive you, and you can control the consequences.” Then, when we have fallen, he comes up with a second lie, “You’ve blown it so badly there’s no use standing up. In fact, if you receive forgiveness today you might commit the same sin tomorrow, so why bother?” And once he has you there, he has a third lie too: “Now look what you’ve done. You’ve gone too far. You’ve committed too many sins and hurt too many people. Just learn to cope with your sins because God doesn’t want to hear from you anymore; you’re too wretched to be forgiven.” And when the Devil has convinced you that there is no way back, you are stuck with the curse, and so are your children. But God wants to bring you back today so that He can minimize the consequences of sin you have already committed. He says to you, “I want to put My arms around you again. I will blot out your sin. You can walk before Me in purity and holiness.”

Chapter 15

\"The Spread of the Nations\" (Gen 10:1-32; Gen 11:1-26)

An airline flight attendant shared the story of a passenger from Bombay, India, on the way to his first visit to the United States. As the man was served, he nodded his head and replied, “From the heart of my bottom, I am thanking you.” The flight attendant learned that this was one of the only English expressions he knew, and was quite proud to say it with every gesture: “From the heart of my bottom, I am thanking you.” The attendant said, “Now, if I were to thank people from the heart of my bottom, I am sure they would be offended. I think what he was trying to say was, ‘from the bottom of my heart,’ but there was no way we could convey to this man that this sentence was wrong. Although we had a fun time trying, I am sure he spent his American tour thanking people from the heart of his bottom.”

I love this story…probably because I can relate. In my foreign travels, I’m sure I have said some strange things as well. In Gen 10:1-32; Gen 11:1-26, God is going to explain how different languages and nations came into existence. In these 58 verses, we will see our tendency to sin and God’s propensity to provide for His people. Since we have a lot to cover we will be doing an overview of most of this section without focusing on the specific details. As you look at some of these verses, you will thank me for not getting bogged down in the mire of names and details. For example, in 10:17, the descendants of Canaan sound like an entomologist’s list of something for the pest controller-“the Hivite and the Arkite and the Sinite,” and the termite. Seriously, since all Scripture is inspired by God (2Ti 3:16), I believe that these verses will be of great help to us.

[The first truth that we need to see in this passage is…]

1. God made the world one big family (10:1-32). For many, this chapter may seem like a bore that should be skipped. But this chapter provides us much important information:

• It provides us authoritative evidence that the post-flood world descended from one pair of human beings (i.e., Noah and his wife).

• It provides us with a historical accounting of the origins of the nations of the world and how they spread over the face of the earth.

• It provides us with an understanding of the relationship between the people of Israel and all other nations and peoples of the world.

• It provides us with the knowledge of who we are and where we came from.

• It provides us the primitive branches of the genealogical tree of mankind that will eventually culminate in the objective of every biblical genealogy-the person of Jesus Christ.

This chapter is not technically a genealogy (so and so, begat so and so). It has been called a table of nations because it traces the connected origins of various nations. What is striking is that the nations of the world all came from the same place…from one of the three sons of Noah (10:1, 32). In other words, God made us one big family. Though we are of different languages, cultures, and geographical locations, we are still imprinted with the image of God and share in the dignity of human existence. An emphasis on our racial and cultural differences undermines this unity and runs counter to God’s will for us. He basks in

our rich cultural diversity and variety, which He has created. We need to learn to do the same.

The descendants of Japheth (10:2-5). This division of the chapter, centering on Japheth, is the shortest and highlights 14 of Japheth's descendants. The Japhethites split into two groups: one group settled in India and the other group in Europe. Together they form what is known as the "Indo-European" family of nations. They became the coastline peoples, the peoples of the Gentiles (10:5). It was primarily into this area of the world that the New Testament church spread, under the apostle Paul. Verse 5 also teaches that the occupation of the lands followed the confusion of tongues at Babel.

The descendants of Ham (10:6-20). Here we have the account of the descants of Ham. The nations connected to Ham inhabited northwestern Africa, the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula, and the Fertile Crescent from Egypt to Mesopotamia. Some of these nations figured prominently in the biblical story as enemies of Israel, particularly "Babel" (Babylon, 10:10), "Mizraim" (Egypt, 10:13), and "Canaan" (10:15). But, once again, all these scattered nations were the descendants of Ham, who was one of three brothers, descendants of the one Noah. There is no escaping it: God made the world one big family!

The descendants of Shem (10:21-32). The descendants of Shem (lit. "name") are the Semitic peoples who inhabited the eastern lands: modern-day Iraq, Iran, and eastern Saudi Arabia. The genealogy of Shem split at the sons of "Eber" (10:25). From Eber we get the word "Hebrew." The descendants of Eber's son "Joktan" are given in 10:26-32, while the descendants of his other son, "Peleg" are found in Genesis 11. It was Peleg's line which led to Abraham and eventually to the Israelites (11:18-26). This is the family that God will be dealing with throughout the entire Old Testament. These are the Hebrews, the nation Israel. This section reveals that it was God's plan to bless the human race by dividing the family of man by languages, locations, and leaders. Remember that God formerly blessed the earth by dividing the light from the darkness, the earth from the heavens, and the land from the seas (Gen 1).

So why is this important? What difference does this unity of the human race make? Well, we do not have the luxury of caring nothing about the rest of the world. They are all our cousins! Their needs, their hopes, their dreams, their problems, their family struggles, their successes, and their failures are really not that much different than ours! All human people, even of different national and cultural identities are of the same origin, have the same dignity, and belong in the same world. This is one of the reasons we are committed to praying for the persecuted church. The church abroad is made up of our distant cousins, our spiritual brothers and sisters. This principle is also why we must continue to pray that the 10/40 window is opened up. Since God has a heart for the world, so must we. This biblical mentality undercuts all human divisiveness based on nationality, culture, and race. However good, however rich national and cultural diversity can be, it should never be allowed to cloud the more fundamental fact that all human people share the same nature, breathe the same air, live on the same earth, and owe their life to the same God (cf. Act 17:26).

[Although God made the world one big family…]

2. The world will never enjoy unity apart from Christ (11:1-26). If chapter 10 paints a picture of such a unified world-all the nations descended from a single family-what happened? How did the world become so divided? That's the point of Gen 11:1-9. It explains what caused the nations to scatter. This section describes the disunity among Noah's offspring that resulted from the tower event but did not prevent the blessing God had envisioned for humanity. The actual outworking of the genealogies of Genesis 10 occurs after the events at the Tower of Babel (cf. 11:1 with 10:5, 20, 31). This interspersal of narrative

(11:1-9) separates the two genealogies of Shem (10:21-31; 11:10-26), paving the way for the particular linkage between the Terah (Abraham) clan and the Shemite lineage (11:27). The story of the tower also looks ahead by anticipating the role that Abram (12:1-3) will play in restoring the blessing to the dispersed nations. By placing the Tower of Babel incident just prior to the stories of Abram and his descendants, the biblical writer is suggesting, in the first place, that post-flood humanity is as wicked as pre-flood humanity. Rather than sending something as devastating as a flood to annihilate mankind, however, God now places His hope in a covenant with Abraham as a powerful solution to humanity's sinfulness. This problem (Gen 11) and solution (Gen 12) are brought into immediate juxtaposition, and the forcefulness of this structural move would have been lost had Genesis 10 intervened between the two.

This leads right into the Tower of Babel account in 11:1-9. In 11:1, Moses writes, "Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words." After the flood, the whole earth spoke the same language. But man's habitual sin brought about the language barrier.

In 11:2, we read these fateful words: "It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there." The word "east" is intentionally alluded to in the Scriptures, to let us know that a person or group is moving contrary to God's will. In the Genesis narratives, when man goes "east," he leaves the land of blessing (Eden and the Promised Land) and goes to a land where the greatest of his hopes will turn to ruin (Babylon and Sodom). Please also notice that they "settled" in Shinar. In 9:1, God clearly commanded Noah and his sons to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (cf. 8:17). There is no reason to suspect that Noah's descendants did not understand what God wanted. God wanted them to move throughout all the earth but they banded together in order to defy God's command. They selected the best land that they could find; they staked their claim in the land of Shinar, a place that becomes associated with evil.

Now don't you find it amazing that the people have such short memories? How soon they forget the most horrendous judgments of God (Gen 6-8); they go back to their former ways. They try to defy God. They exert their own will. Now think about this, how must the world still have looked at this time? The worldwide flood had completely destroyed everything. Now it's only a few generations later, with the ground still displaying the desolations of the deluge and these people want to test God's hand again. Nothing but the grace of God and work of the Holy Spirit can remove the depravity of the human heart.

In 11:3-4, "They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.' And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. They said, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.'" The motivation for building a city was to make the builders a name (cf. Psa 14:1). The object of this endeavor was to establish a center by which they might maintain their unity. Now God desired unity for humankind, but one that He created, not one founded on a social state. They wanted to "empower" themselves. Both motive and object were ungodly. God had instructed man to fill the earth (1:28), to spread over the whole planet. The builders of the "tower" seem to have intended that it serve as a memorial or landmark among other things.

Verse 4 makes what might be called the first public declaration of humanism: "They said, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.'" This verse reveals three problems. First, man wanted to build a tower that would reach up to the top of the heavens; they wanted to reach God, really to be God themselves. Every generation seems to builds towers. Whether they are

actual skyscrapers (e.g., the Sears Tower and Tribune Tower in Chicago, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Trump Tower in New York City) or mega corporations that circle the globe, the idea is the same-to be strong and powerful! In the 21st century, people continue to do that. The university professor who dismisses God without a second thought has placed his intellect on the throne instead of God. But human intelligence is woefully inadequate to be our god. Paul asked, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1Co 1:20) Over and over again the intelligence of man has been supplanted by later intelligence; later proof that other intelligence, more educated, more sophisticated people have destroyed the theories of intelligence of those before them. And if man’s intelligence can be supplanted by other men’s intelligence, how inadequate is it to try to displace God’s intelligence? You cannot build your own tower in your heart or in your head and replace God by doing it. God will not be subject to our folly. The people of the land of Shinar failed in achieving their first goal.

Secondly, they wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be remembered. Isn’t that true of all of us? Don’t you want to be remembered for something good? Not long ago, Reader’s Digest carried an article on Dr. Henry Heimlich. It’s been more than 30 years since the famous “Heimlich Maneuver” has been instituted in saving lives and probably 50,000 choking victims have been saved through Henry Heimlich’s maneuver. Well, to this day Heimlich kind of gets a kick out of being a household word. He never anticipated that would be the case. In fact, he said that when his name went into the dictionary, it was quite a big deal for him. He remembers that he immediately looked at the entry for Abraham Lincoln; and Lincoln had only an inch of copy in the dictionary while Henry Heimlich had two inches, because there was a drawing depicting how to perform the maneuver. Interesting isn’t it, that with mankind we measure fame in inches in the dictionary? But God measures fame by obedience. What is it you want to be remembered for? What do you want people to remember about you when they think about you after you are gone? What kind of legacy will you leave?

Well the people of Shinar didn’t want to be forgotten so they made a tower that we would never forget their names, and by the way, can you name any of them? Do you know a single name of a person who joined this rebel group? Of course you don’t! Defiance of God is a quick route to obscurity. You remember Noah, but you don’t remember any of these guys. They failed in their second goal.

The third problem revealed in this verse was that they wanted to keep themselves from being scattered over the earth. Now you can read between the lines, obviously, and see that all three of these motivations are designed to defy the will of God. Building a tower, building a city-that’s no crime in itself. But the purpose of this tower was to replace the God of the heavens. They wanted to climb into heaven and dethrone God and enthrone themselves instead.

In 11:5-6, the Lord responded: “The LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. The LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.’” The people of the land of Shinar tried to defy God. They did not want to be scattered all over the face of the earth. Of course, they failed. And when they failed, judgment had to come. Now notice, the Lord says, “I’m going to come down and see.” That’s an anthropomorphism. It simply means that God did not want to stay in heaven. He wanted to have a good look at what people were doing on earth. God doesn’t need to leave heaven to see us here on earth, but He chose to.

In 11:6, God seems worried. This verse, however, is not speaking of technology but of morality. The Lord concludes, “If I let them get away with this, they will stop at nothing.” And so, He initiates a judgment to

counter their rebellion. The introduction of languages makes this rebellious unity of mankind a practical impossibility. God is not threatened by what man might do. On the contrary, God is protecting man from himself! You see, it is in grace that God will not allow the world to enjoy unity on its own terms!

In 11:7, a Trinitarian meeting took place and the Lord said, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So what was God’s plan?

His plan was to foil man’s sin. Language is a unique tool to communicate; God said, “I want to confuse their language so they have to obey me.” This verse is dripping with irony: The descendants of Noah were attempting to elevate themselves to God, but so pathetic are their attempts that God has to come down to see it (see Isa 40:22; Psa 2:4). Had God allowed this project to continue the results would have been even worse than they were at this time. The sin of the builders was their refusal to live within God-given boundaries (Act 17:24-26). All of the divisions of the whole world are a result of sin and the righteous judgment of God.

In 11:8-9, Moses writes, “So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.” The confusion led to a scattering of the people over the “whole earth.” God did not allow human rebellion to reach the level that it had before the flood. God forced people to do what they refused to do voluntarily, namely, scatter over the face of the earth. And as soon as God confused the language, the engineers could not speak to the laborers. The masons could not speak to the city planners. All the work had to stop. By the way, it’s only from the Scriptures that we learn the true origins of the different languages in different nations in the world. By one miracle of tongues man was dispersed and gradually fell from his true religion; and by another, the national barriers were broken down so that men might be brought back to the family of God. What a unique thing language is. But as a result of the confusion of the language, the city’s name became Babel. The city is none other than Babylon.

“Babel” means “confusion” in Hebrew, and “the gate of gods” in Babylonian. This was the original Babylon that forever after was the city most consistently rebellious against God’s government in human history. It stands as a symbol of organized rebellion against God elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Rev 17-18). Babylon has always been a city set in opposition to the true God, whether run by a committee of these rebels or a ruthless dictator like Saddam Hussein. Babel means confusion and the final result of the language being confused was that people were scattered over all the earth. These people forfeited the blessing of God because they decided they could make a better future for themselves than God could make for them.

What we do today is no less foolish than what these nameless rebels did. Somehow we have forgotten that every time we attempt to defy God, we not only see His judgment as a result, but we rob ourselves of God’s blessing. Hey, learn this today. Learn it from the people of Babel. Obedience means blessing. Disobedience means judgment and a loss of blessing. How much clearer can that truth be than is illustrated by these events at the Tower of Babel?

The story of Babel is important for several reasons:

• It explains the beginning of and reason for the various languages of mankind.

• It probably explains the origin of the “races” within humankind. The separate language groups no longer could intermarry freely with the rest of mankind. As inbreeding and lack of access to the larger pool of genes occurred, ethnic characteristics developed. Furthermore, each local environment tended to favor selection of certain traits, and eliminate others.

• Ethnic characteristics, such as skin color, arose from loss of genetic variability, not from origin of new genes through mutation, as suggested by evolution. The concept of race is an evolutionary idea (Act 17:26). All humans possess the same color, just different amounts of it. We all descended from Noah and Adam. The Bible doesn’t tell us what skin color our first parents had but from a design point of view, the “middle color” makes a great beginning. Starting with medium-skinned parents, it would take only one generation to produce all the variation we see in human skin color today. In fact, this is the normal situation in India at present. Some Indians are as dark as the darkest Africans, and some-perhaps a brother or sister in the same family-as light as the lightest Europeans. There are families from India that included members with every major skin color you could see anywhere in the world.

• It demonstrates the inclination of fallen man to rebel against God and to try to provide for his needs in his own way rather than by trusting and obeying God. It illustrates that rebellion against God results in (a) broken fellowship between God and man, and (b) failure to realize God’s intention for man in His creation, namely, that man rule the earth effectively.

• It provides the historical background for what follows in Genesis. Abraham came from this area.

• God is jealous. He wants to be worshipped. Yet, all too often, we would rather build a name for ourselves.

• God is wise. He is able to thwart man’s attempts to dethrone Him and worship false gods.

• God is righteous. He judges man by separating him. Irony is seen in the beginning and the ending of this passage. The group at Babel began as the whole earth (11:1), but now they were spread over the whole earth (11:9). By this time the lesson is clarified: God’s purpose will be accomplished in spite of the arrogance and defiance of man’s own purposes. He brings down the proud, but exalts the faithful.

• In the building of the tower we see man’s desire to reach God in his own way. Man’s desire was a return to Adam and Eve’s effort to become like God (3:5).

• In the effort to build a city, we see our lust for the power that comes through corporate control.

We live in dangerous times. The lessons of Babel have been forgotten. Arrogant leaders dare to do anything in the world today. And people excitedly jump on the bandwagon. And it seems that nothing whips up enthusiasm as much as some grandiose plan to unify all mankind into some great, worldwide empire. Think of the organizations that work to such an end: The United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and NATO. And, there are so many others with similar agendas. But here, God makes very clear that the world will never enjoy real unity, except when they know it in Christ Jesus.

[Now, I know, you don’t see anything about Jesus here. But please consider the last section of the text.]

In 11:10-26, we find a more thorough genealogy of Shem. This list of names isn't riveting reading, but it moves you from Noah's son Shem through the events of Babel and the scattering of the nations to Abram (Abraham), the "father" of the chosen people. The great former pastor, Ray Stedman, calls this passage "God's Funnel" because it leads us right to Abram.

Now we are told almost nothing along the way! But that is no accident! For the hope that we seek, the unity which man cannot find on his own, will only be revealed when we get to God's covenant promises made to Abram. ("...all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you!") So why waste any time on lesser things? The text just puts us on the genealogical escalator and takes us right to the top floor!

Moses promises ultimate unity-blessing on the whole world through Abram and his seed! It is a promise that is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah! Jesus comes as the only Mediator between God and man and brings us peace with God, through His death and resurrection. He also breaks down the dividing walls between us, making us brothers and sisters in Christ! Through faith in Jesus we become the true sons and daughters of God, part of the new race that will populate the earth for all eternity!

One of America's favorite pastimes is baseball. When a player takes his turn at bat, he steps up to home plate gripping his bat firmly in hand. The pitcher throws the ball toward him, and he swings at the ball. If he misses, that's strike one. The pitcher then throws the ball again, and the batter takes another swing. If he misses a second time, that's strike two. When the ball is thrown the third time and the batter swings and misses, that's strike three, and he's out. He has lost the opportunity to score for his team.

In some ways, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are like a baseball game. The world of humanity represented by Adam and Eve is the batter who stepped up to home plate for the first time in the garden of Eden. The ball-the opportunity to live forever in a right, loving relationship with the Creator and so possess the fullness of His blessing-was thrown. But through man's choice to disobey God, the world of humanity missed, and that was strike one.

In Noah's day, humanity was back up to bat. The same ball-the opportunity to live in a right relationship with the Creator and receive His full, personal blessing-was thrown. This time the world chose to disregard God, and that was strike two.

Chapter 11 of Genesis describes the third time the world of humanity came up to bat. The same ball was thrown at the world. Again, the world swung and missed. To use baseball terminology, we struck out. But this time, God responds differently…He sends Abram whose seed would eventually bring the Messiah. Truly, God is a God of grace. Instead of sending us to the dugout, He grants us grace. God is certainly a God of justice and judgment, but in His economy, grace always prevails. Will you trust in His grace today? Will you become a son or daughter of Abraham (Gal 3:6-7)?

Chapter 16

\"The Great Adventure\" (Gen 11:27-32; Gen 12:1-9)

Gen 11:27 begins a new division in the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis can be structured by tracing four great events and four great people. The four great events are laid out in chapters 1-11: Creation, Fall, Flood, and Nations. The four great people complete the book in chapters 12-50: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The point being: God's first concern is all the people of the world (Gen 1-11), but the focus of Genesis (and the rest of the Pentateuch) is on God's choice and care of His chosen people, Israel (Gen 12-50). This sovereign choice begins with the call of Abram. The book of Genesis covers more than 2,000 years and more than 20 generations; yet, it spends almost a third of its text on the life of this one man (11:27-25:18). What a reminder that God truly cares about people and considers individuals valuable. This passage is going to challenge us to live a life of faith.

1. Faith grows gradually (11:27-32): In these six verses, the genealogy of chapter 11 becomes quite specific and focused. Moses begins with the familiar phrase, "Now these are the records of the generations of…" (11:27a). This "formula" serves as an outline throughout Genesis. The last major occurrence of this phrase was in 6:8, in reference to Noah, where God began a new thing in Noah and his sons. This is one hint that what is coming in 11:27-32 concerning the life of Abram will be something new on a grand scale. Moses goes on to say that "Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran" (11:27b). Again, this doesn't seem to be terribly significant until we realize that the mention of Terah having three named sons alerts us to a previous pattern. Adam and Noah both had three named sons and both of them obviously point out high water marks in God's dealings with people. So we should not be totally surprised when God calls Abram and embarks on a new path in the fulfillment of His promises and plan of redemption. God is preparing His way for His man.

In 11:27c, Moses also informs us, "Haran became the father of Lot." Lot is introduced quickly because he is a major character who serves as a contrast to Abram. In 11:28, Moses records that "Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans." This is an important comment because it tells us that Abram, the son of Terah, was born in Ur of the Chaldeans (11:28). This will become important in just a moment. Verse 29 states that Abram and his brother Nahor "took wives for themselves" (cf. 6:2). Abram married his half-sister, Sarai (see 20:12), which was not contrary to God's will at this early date in history. The marriage of Abram's brother Nahor is mentioned because he became the grandfather of Laban and Rebekah, both of whom would figure largely in the history of Abram's grandson Jacob. Many of the names in 11:29 come right out of the cult of moon worship. Jos 24:2; Jos 24:14-15, make it clear that Terah (and quite possibly his family) worshipped many gods. In 11:30, Moses makes an emphatic remark that Abram's wife, Sarai, "was barren; she had no child." Sarai's infertility tests Abram's faith and drives the whole story. Verses 31-32 then inform us that Terah took Abram and his family from Ur of the Chaldeans "in order to enter the land of Canaan." The family, though, only went "as far as Haran, and settled there." Sometime after settling in Haran, Terah died at the age of 205.

At the core of this story is the principle of God's sovereign choice of an individual. God's call to Abram was pure grace. There is no evidence in the text that God chose Abram because he merited favor. On the contrary, God chose Abram from a family steeped in idolatry. He did this so that He might receive all the glory for what became of Abram. The great thing about God is that when He is forming His family and choosing servants, He selects the most unlikely people! After all, He chose you and me. He did so not

because of whom we would become; He did so because He chose to love us and He then made us into whom He wanted us to be (Rom 8:29). Today, may we express gratitude to God for choosing us to have a relationship with Him. May we also thank Him for calling us into service. It is a privilege to both know and serve God.

Before we move into chapter 12, it is important to observe some interesting clues in this section and the rest of Scripture. An important point of interest is that God first called Abram to leave his home when he still lived in Ur of the Chaldeans (12:1-3; cf. 15:7; Neh 9:7; Act 7:2-4). Evidently, God's initial revelation of Himself to Abram was of such a powerful and convincing nature that his father Terah was not only persuaded to join the pilgrimage but actually took the lead. (Abram, Sarai, and Lot followed Terah to Haran.) Unfortunately, the caravan stopped in Haran instead of going all the way into Canaan. There the pilgrimage bogged down and, it would seem, remained inert and inactive for many years until the death of Terah. Likewise, there are many people today who respond to God's call to be followers of Christ, but only partially obey. Yes, they have left the gross idolatry and rebellion of "Ur", but instead of pursuing the abundant life in the Promised Land of Canaan, they settle for something in between. They settle down in Haran, which means "barren." And like Abram, they have wasted many years of their lives living in the comfortable and familiar land of "Haran," a land of spiritual compromise.

When Abram received his first call from God, he was only partially obedient. Fortunately, God is patient. Abram was very young in the faith. He had much to learn, and God could afford to wait. So the wasted years slipped by and then upon Terah's death, Abram began to make the progress God desired. This should encourage us. Abram, the great father of our faith, started his Christian pilgrimage slowly. He also wasted some years along the way. If that's true of Abram, and God used him powerfully, how much more can that be true of you? If you started your Christian faith slowly or if you have found yourself squandering precious time, you can get back into the race. Don't wait another minute.

[While faith grows gradually, we learn in 12:1 that…]

2. Faith steps out (12:1). Moses writes, "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you.'" The famous call of Abram in 12:1 was a command to go away from three things and unto one thing. The three things that God called Abram to forsake were natural sources of security for any ancient, Near Eastern nomad. God lists the three in rapid succession, each succeeding item narrowing the base of personal support and security: (1) His country (or "land") was his nationality and was the largest group in which Abram moved. (2) His people (or "clan") was smaller than his tribe, but larger than his immediate family. Such groups in ancient tribal societies provide personal identity and security. (3) His father's household referred probably to a call to give up his right of inheritance in his extended family. To abandon his father's house would certainly involve giving up his economic security. In a sense, God was calling Abram to go backpacking. God removed anything that might weigh him down or prove to be unnecessary for a trek through the woods. This illustrates Christian discipleship in several ways. God's claim on our lives always beckons us to leave certain things behind at the same time we are taking up a new journey and following Him (Mar 1:18).

The term "go" is literally "go by yourself" and can emphasize loneliness, isolation; ideas of parting and seclusion are often implied. Abram needs to find his own place and his own identity by disassociating himself from the familiar and the group. Put yourself in Abram's sandals. I'm sure there was a good part of Abraham that would have just liked to stay in Haran or perhaps move back to the home he knew in Ur,

where he married his wife and where all the family could be together. Why would he leave his home, a progressive metropolis equivalent to Seattle or New York, to journey to a new land, following the command of a God who was not even locally acknowledged? After all, there was no AAA “Trip Tik” or MapQuest directions. The only promise from God was that He would reveal the path to Abram. There was no visible certainty of his future. Abram was to follow the command of the Lord to leave Haran and go to a land he had never seen before. He is to step out in blind faith…a land God would show him.

Would you have gone? Are you willing to obey the voice of the Lord when He goes against all that makes sense and feels? When everything screams in you against it, are you willing to leave your job for the uncertainties of a higher calling? Faith steps out in obedience. Abraham made the choice to trust God and God blessed him exceedingly.

In these three verses, we see the inauguration of God’s covenant with Abraham. This covenant is everlasting (13:15; 17:7-8, 13, 19), unconditional (15:9-12; 17-18), and literal. It involves a land (12:7; 13:14-15, 17; 17:8), a seed (12:2; 13:16; 15:4-5; 15:18; 17:4-6), and a blessing (12:3; 17:2, 6; 18:18). In these verses, God gave Abram a seven-fold promise. The call had two imperatives, each with subsequent promises. The first imperative was to go (“Go forth from your country…to the land which I will show you”), and the second imperative was to be (“and so you shall be a blessing”). Abraham’s obedience would bring great blessing. Also notice that five times in these verses you will see the phrase,

“I will…” Everything is from God Himself.

1. “I will make you a great nation” (12:2). This promise is connected to the “seed” promise of 3:15. Since the fall of man, God chose certain lines of human descent to carry forward the promise that He would send a deliverer to crush Satan. That line now flowed through Abram to the Hebrew people (13:16; Joh 8:37), to the descendants of Ishmael (17:18-20), and eventually to all believers (Joh 8:39; Rom 4:16; Gal 3:6-7; Gal 3:29). When God called Abram to separate from his family and his country, He did so with the purpose of producing from Abram a great nation. As the founder of the Jewish nation, Abram was appointed by God to be a witness to the rest of mankind concerning God (Isa 44:8). Further, that race was to be a storehouse of divine revelation (Rom 3:2) and a channel of blessing to the world (15:8-12). The ultimate objective in God’s choice of Abram was to prepare the world for the coming Messiah and Savior of that world (Isa 53). Do you see how God carefully unfolds His program through individuals? Have you asked Him to reveal His plan for your life?

2. “I will bless you” (12:2). The word “bless,” which occurred five times in chapters 1-11, now occurs five times in 12:1-3. God wants to bless his people. In fact, if you remember, this goes right back to creation where God blessed Adam and Eve (1:28) and then, later, that original blessing was repeated in 5:2. God also blessed Noah and restated the mandate in creation, namely, that man rule (9:1-2). God’s plan is to bless the world. Indeed, the term “blessing” (barak) includes God’s gracious provisions of personal well-being, long life, wealth, peace, abundance of food and crops, children, and personal knowledge of Himself and His ways. Yes, God’s plan is to bless the world. When God blesses someone, He intervenes in their life to do good things. God’s blessing to Abram caused him to prosper in all that he did. He was blessed both temporally (13:14-18; 15:18) and spiritually (15:6; Joh 8:56). Are you seeing God’s blessings in your life?

3. “I will make your name great” (12:2). To be given a great name is to have a good reputation and a secure identity. The builders of the Tower of BAbraml tried to make a name for themselves (11:4) and

thereby gain power and prestige before the world and in the face of God. On the other hand, Abram's power and prestige was to come directly from God. In time, God did make Abram's name great when he became known as the "friend of God" (2Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jam 2:23). Do you rely upon God to make your name great, or are you making a name for yourself? How can you submit more of your plans and goals to Him? Today, God wants you to believe that He has designed mankind to desire and pursue greatness.

But rather than finding that greatness the world's way, Christ taught that true greatness is found in: being the least and the servant of all (Mat 20:26), losing your life for the sake of Christ and others (Luk 9:24), and being last now so that you might be first in His kingdom (Mar 9:35).

4. "You shall be a blessing" (12:2). The Hebrew text says, "Be a blessing," not "you shall be a blessing." This was a command rather than a prediction. However as Abram blessed others he would become a blessing. God chose the family of Abram through which He would channel His blessings to the nations of the world, thereby drawing all nations to Himself (cf. Gen 10). We never experience God's best for us until we are used to touch the life of someone else. Who can you bless today? Remember the words of 1Pe 3:9 : "Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but instead bless others because you were called to inherit a blessing" (NET).

5. "I will bless those who bless you" (12:3). Now God moves from personal blessing to global blessings. Those who honor Abram and his God will be blessed.

6. "The one who curses you I will curse" (12:3). Unfortunately, not everyone in the world wants God's blessing, or the way He has chosen to carry it out. There will be people who will curse or level insults and accusations against Abram and in so doing bring a curse from God on their heads. They will be cut off from the hope of blessing.

7. "And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (12:3). This is the great messianic promise fulfilled in Abram's descendant, Christ (Joh 8:56-58; Gal 3:16).

3. Faith experiences obstacles (12:4-6). Abram demonstrated phenomenal faith in light of God's call and was thoroughly blessed for it. So it is with us as well when we trust in Christ. But that does not mean everything in our lives will run smoothly. Quite the opposite actually. Moses writes, "So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him" (12:4a). This time around, Abram immediately and completely obeyed God. Did Abram know he was headed to Canaan (12:5)? Apparently not. Heb 11:8 states that "he went out, not knowing where he was going." Verse 4 even says, "Lot went with him." Since Lot voluntarily chose to accompany Abram, he probably believed the promises as well. Abram's call had been to separate from his pagan relatives, so he was not disobedient by allowing Lot to accompany him. Moses goes on to inform us that "Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran." Though he lived to 175 years old, Abram was no spring chicken when he decided to follow the Lord to Canaan. Age is no hindrance to faith and taking bold steps for the Lord. It's never too late. Despite Abram's age, responsibilities, and various commitments, he stepped forward in a venture of faith, in obedience to God. Fortunately, this principle remains true today. If you are getting up there in age, God still wants to use you. He wants you to finish your race well (2Ti 4:7-8).

Verse 5 says that "Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan." The text says that Abram took his wife Sarai with him. Now the

struggle comes to the forefront. In 11:30, the text goes out of its way to point out that Sarai was barren, that she didn't even have a single child. Then, in 12:2, God says He's going to make a great nation out of Abram. Well, it's obvious that it won't be through Sarai-she's barren. So it must be through someone else. But here in 12:5 we learn that there isn't a "someone else." We are told that Abram took his wife Sarai. In spite of the obvious tensions, Abram must have believed God's promise.

Sometimes we forget what childlessness meant in the ancient Near East. It involved shame, social ridicule, and implied that the woman/couple were not in the favor of the gods. Why then should they trust the Lord when He makes "high-flutin'" promises about a nation; they don't even have a single child. Sometimes, some of our greatest struggles believing God and His good promises center in one way or another around our kids. So it was with Abram and Sarai. Certainly they made mistakes along the way, but overall they trusted the God who loves to do the impossible. What are you trusting God for that only He can do? In order for faith to grow it must see beyond the obstacles and pain to the God of our circumstances.

Verse 5 also informs us that Abram's entourage included "the persons which they had acquired in Haran." While this could be a reference to slaves, it is more likely referring to converts that Abram won during his sojourn in Haran. So while Abram was in a challenging and irreligious land (Haran), he shared his faith with many people. Consequently, he won converts. By God's grace, you and I can do the same here in Olympia. The city we live in is certainly no worse than Haran. If God can use Abram to win converts in Haran, He can use you to do the same in Olympia (Joh 14:12).

In 12:6, Moses records that "Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land." Abram's first settlement was in Shechem. This was God's second major revelation to Abram. Shechem was near the geographic center of Canaan (cf. Jos 20:7). It lay in the heart of the land God now promised to Abram. The Hebrew term "Moreh" means "teacher" and may indicate an ancient shrine or a place where Canaanite priests declared oracles. Thus, living among idolatrous people-people steeped in genuine unbelief-was going to test Abram's faith. He himself was steeped in idolatry, and the tendency to lapse into pagan religion would remain a very real and present danger to him and his family. To further complicate matters, Abram could not take possession of the Promised Land immediately because the Canaanites occupied it. Some five centuries would pass before the descendants of Abram would, under Joshua, conquer the Canaanites and take the land God had given them. The presence of the Canaanites was yet another test of Abram's faith. God had promised to give his descendants an already-possessed land. The presence of the Canaanites indicated opposition that was going to be a reality as Abram continued his life of faith. A godly life must always be lived out in the middle of misunderstanding and even persecution.

Faith is not just believing God for great things and responding to His promises, it also involves a commitment to live as He desires in light of the circumstances He permits in our lives. Faith builds character; so also Abram. He knew that God had called him to go to this new land, even though he didn't know where he was going. His faith gave him the courage and determination to live for God in a pagan land. By faith he overcame the struggles and trials of leaving family, the barrenness of his wife, and the hostilities of living in a foreign land. By faith he gained an exemplary character and did not succumb to the unbelievers around him…His life matched his words, so to speak (cf. Heb 11:8-12). Does ours?

4. Faith leads to reassurance (12:7a). In 12:7, the Lord speaks to Abram. This is none other than the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. The key to growing a strong faith in the midst of trials is hearing and

heeding the voice of the Lord, experiencing the presence of the One who made the promises. So God, knowing we are but dust, and are among those who consistently need encouragement, appears to Abram-the one who is a stranger in a foreign land, with a foreign language, customs, faith, and way of life-and reaffirms to him the promise of offspring and ownership of the land. While God speaks to us primarily through the Scripture, as the indwelling Spirit marries the very words thereof to our hearts, God appeared to Abram and spoke to him. In the midst of trials, nothing is more assuring and nothing is clearer, than the voice, yes, the very presence, of our heavenly Father.

As we make our way through life, strangers in a foreign country, as it were (1Pe 2:11), we need to know the presence of the One who will carry us safely to our appointed destination. We need to hear the voice of God in His Word and in prayer. So God appeared to Abram and restated the essential promise to him: “to your offspring I will give this land.” This, we know from Gen 15:1 ff was the besetting question uppermost in Abram’s mind. God comes to us in our time of need and encourages us with His voice: “So do not fear for I am with you. Do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa 41:10). What a breath of fresh air!

[A faith like Abram’s steps out in obedience, hopes in the fulfillment of God’s promises of blessings, and grows through trials. But also…]

5. Faith proclaims God (12:7b-9). Abram’s response, in 12:7b to God’s appearing and to His reassuring word in 12:7a, was to worship. The text says that God appeared to Abram and said…“So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.” First God speaks (12:1-3), then Abram journeys (12:4-6). Next God appears (12:7a), then Abram worships (12:7). Though the passage does not explicitly say that he sacrificed, we can be sure from Noah’s example in chapter 9-as well as Abraham’s in 22:13-that Abram offered sacrifice to the Lord. Worship is the first and foremost response to the voice of God. Obedience and the proclamation of God’s grace and greatness inexorably follow like the rainbow after spring showers.

Thus, worship has consequences. Verse 8 says that Abraham pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai, which probably indicates that he stayed there for some time. Abram “pitched his tent.” In 1Pe 2:11 we are exhorted to live “as aliens and strangers in the world.” We are to live as people who have their permanent dwelling place in heaven, not on earth. Unfortunately, too many Christians want to build mansions on earth and are happy with tents in heaven!

During his time on the mountain, Abram continued to worship by building an altar. But then notice that the text also says that Abram called on the name of the Lord. This phrase “called on the name of the Lord” (cf. 4:26; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25, etc.) means much more than simple worship. It carries the idea of proclaiming the name of the Lord (cf. Zep 3:9). Isn’t it interesting that God promised Abram to make his name great and here Abram is making the Lord’s name great in Canaan? In the midst of a foreign and thoroughly pagan land Abram erected an altar and there proclaimed the name of the Lord. What amazing faith! He truly shone like a star in the universe by holding out the Word of Life in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (cf. Php 2:16).

My prayer for you today is that you become a man or woman of faith that transforms your culture. As you step out in obedience, overcome obstacles, and proclaim God, you will accomplish His will for your life and for the generations to come.

The Significance of Abraham (Gen 11:27-25:18)
Fast Facts:

• Apart from Jesus Christ, Abraham is in many respects the greatest man in Scripture.

• Jesus Christ, the Messiah, came from the lineage of Abraham (Gen 12:3; Mat 1:1).

• Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation (Isa 51:2; Eze 33:24).

• The three covenant promises God makes to Abraham (i.e., land, descendants, and blessing) are foundational to His program of bringing salvation upon the earth.

• The promises to Abraham became assurance for future generations (Exo 32:13; Exo 33:1).

• The three great world religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism identify Abraham with the coveted title, “friend of God” (2Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jam 2:23).

• Islam holds Abraham second in importance to Mohammed. (The Koran refers to Abraham 188 times.)

• One■fourth of the book of Genesis is devoted to Abraham’s life (Gen 11:27-25:18).

• Abraham’s name occurs 234 times in the Old Testament and 74 times in the New Testament.

• Apart from Moses, no other Old Testament character is identified by name as many times. (Keep in mind, many of the references to Moses are found in citations of the Old Testament Law.)

• Abraham is identified as the father of: Israel (Act 13:26), the Levitical priesthood (Heb 7:5), the Messiah (Mat 1:1), and all believers (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:16; Gal 3:29). Abraham’s life is used as an Old Testament illustration (“type”) of justification by faith (Rom 4:1-3; Rom 4:16-24), justification by works (Jam 2:21-23), and living by faith (Heb 11:8-19). In the “Hall of Faith,” (Heb 11) the author devoted more space to Abraham than any other individual.

• Abraham was the reason the Southern Kingdom of Israel was spared as long as it was (2Ki 13:23).

• When the apostles preached to the Jews, they frequently appealed to Abraham (Act 3:13; Act 3:25; Act 7:2-32; Act 13:26).

• Abram means, “father is exalted”; Abraham means, “father of a multitude” (Gen 17:5).

• God Himself was subsequently known as “the God of Abraham” (Exo 3:6).

Chapter 17

\"From Faith to Fear\" (Gen 12:10-20; Gen 13:1-4)

What are the highpoints of your life? A family memory? A special award? Graduating from high school or college? Securing your first job? Getting married? Having your first child? Landing a sought-after promotion? Buying your dream home? Becoming a Christian? After experiencing such a great moment, what do you expect? If you're like most people, you expect celebration, satisfaction, joy, rest, and peace. Unfortunately, in life things don't always work out that way. After a high point you must assume that Satan will attack you or the Lord will test you, or both. This is the only way you can grow in your faith. God uses the tough circumstances of life to build the muscles of your faith and keep you from trusting something other than His Word. In Gen 12:10-20; Gen 13:1-4, we find that Abram, the man of faith (12:1-9), was also, at times, a man of failure (12:10-20). In these verses, we will learn that any man or woman, regardless of his or her spirituality, is capable of faltering in the faith. Nevertheless, we will also find hope that God loves to restore people to Himself (13:1-4). When our faith fails, God doesn't. Look with me at three principles that will help you live a life of extraordinary faith.

1. Expect your faith to be tested (12:10). The Bible teaches that the life of faith is full of obstacles. This is confirmed in the life of Abram. Already, in his spiritual pilgrimage, Abram has experienced several tests: He was called to leave his hometown (11:31-32); his wife was barren (11:30); and the land that God promised to him is occupied (12:6). Now there comes another challenge. Verse 10 reads, "Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land." As soon as Abram arrives in Canaan he experiences his most severe test to date-famine. Imagine what must have gone through Abram's mind: "I came all the way out here for this! I thought Canaan was to be a land of blessings!" Imagine the complaining of those closest to him: "Abram, I told you that you were crazy to come here! So you obeyed your God! For what reason? So He could bring us all out here in the wilderness to destroy us!" Does this sound familiar? How many times have you said, "God, I deserve better than this. I've tried to serve you and live for you and this is the thanks I get for my efforts? Thanks a lot!"

Abram was overwhelmed with the circumstances that God dealt him. Now he was not wrong for being concerned about the famine or feeding his family, but he was wrong for failing to trust God to provide for his needs (Isa 31:1). Abram acted prematurely. In alarm, he felt like he must do something and it seems he will have to go to Egypt where there is likely to be more food. Abram's going down to Egypt was not so much an intentional sin as it was a reflexive turn to his own devices. He did not deny God; he simply forgot Him. He forgot how great God is. We are so much like Abram! Trials come and we automatically go into survival mode. We scheme, we prognosticate, we run through the "what ifs," we shore up our position, and we pile sandbags. And God? Oh yes…we ask Him to bless our ways.

Let's stop and think about this for a moment. Almost as quickly as Abram enters into Canaan, he leaves. Isn't this strange? Abram trusted God for over 1,000 miles from Ur to Canaan. He followed. He left behind his culture, his friends, and his possessions. He traveled to a country where he had never been. Why? Because he believed that God was going to make him into a great nation. But when Abram arrived in Canaan and a famine hit the land he does not think he will be alive for more than a few weeks. What does he do? He goes to Egypt and tries to solve his problems. The man who trusted God for the ultimate-his future-was unwilling to trust God for the immediate-food. It doesn't make sense! Abram trusted God for the

big things of life, but messed up when it came to smaller things. Yet faith means trusting God for the big things as well as for the little things. This is where we often fail. We trust God with our eternal salvation, and then we worry about the struggles we're going through and the decisions we have to make. Can you relate to this? Do you trust the Lord for your eternity and panic over the trivial issues of your today? Abram lost faith in God's protection and took matters into his own hands. Abram is motivated by fear for his life. But there are options open to God that Abram does not see.

When circumstances become difficult and you are in the furnace of testing, remain where God has put you until He tells you to move. Faith moves in the direction of peace and hope, but unbelief moves in the direction of restlessness and fear (Isa 28:16). In times of testing, the important question is not, "How can I get out of this?" but "What can I get out of this?" (Jam 1:1-12). God is at work to build your faith and He alone is in control of circumstances. You are safer in a famine, in His will, than in a palace, out of His will. It has well been said, "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you."

But if we are to live this type of life we must become little children in the kingdom of God (Mat 18:1-4). If Abram had been a little child, he never would have left Canaan. The famine would not have deterred a little child from listening to his father. But Abram did not play the part of a child, and the result was all the complex actions that followed his decision to leave the land and make for Egypt. When you and I encounter trials and tests, God wants us to immediately exercise child-like faith and cry out to Him. "Father, I'm scared. What would you have me do? Help me hear from you."

If you're like me, you find this very difficult. It's natural to want to take matters into our own hands. Many of us solve problems for a living. We rarely sense a need to rely upon God. We do quite well by ourselves…thank you! Yet, God will often bring tests into our lives that only He can solve. He does this so that we are forced to look to Him as our Father. When your child has a life-threatening disease, you have no choice but to turn to God. When you have a financial crisis that you can't charge on your credit card, you have to turn to God. When you lose your job or your marriage, you have to turn to God. When you have an addiction that you can't overcome, you have to turn to God. This is when God teaches us the most about faith. This is when He breaks us of our selfish pride. Abram lost faith in God's protection and took matters into his own hands. Abram is motivated by fear for his life. But there are options open to God that Abram does not see.

Do not be surprised if a famine meets you. Tests are a part of the Christian life. They are necessary to build you up in the Lord. Paul tells us that "tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope" (Rom 5:3-4). James echoes these sentiments and says, "the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jam 1:3-4). You can't grow in Christ apart from tests.

[Expect your faith to be attacked. Then learn to…]

2. Face your fears with faith (12:11-20). When you and I fail to pass faith tests, God takes us to school once again and gives us additional pop quizzes. In 12:11-13, Abram was faced with another test. Moses records: "It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he [Abram] said to Sarai his wife, 'See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.'" Amazing! Even at age 65, Sarai is such a beautiful woman that just being seen with her was a life-threatening experience. WOW! You've got to love that!

Abram knew that the Egyptians would not honor his civil rights, for they were noted for cruelty and immorality. Among these descendants of Ham polygamy and sexual promiscuity were common. Beautiful women who found themselves in a foreign land were sought out by the natives. Further, the marriage bond was respected enough so that if a woman was desired as a wife, it was thought necessary to dispose of her husband before taking her. Thus, to save his own skin, Abram devised this little ploy, which he offers as they approach Egypt. Interestingly, Abram's request is really a half-truth, for Sarai was Abram's half-sister (20:12). However, Abram's intent here was clearly to deceive, and he was trusting in his deception to protect him instead of trusting in the Lord. Abram failed to fear God. He was more afraid of the Egyptians than he was of God. Fear of man is incompatible with faith in God (Pro 29:25).

Can you relate to this struggle? Are you afraid to talk to your friends about Christ because they may laugh at you or even worse, reject you? Are you constantly seeking to please people and win their approval? Do you live in fear of your boss firing you? All of these thoughts are natural, in our flesh, but God is not calling us to a natural life but to a supernatural life. He has given us the power to live above our circumstances (2Pe 1:4).

Why does Abram succumb to such sinful behavior? Verse 13 reveals Abram's two motivations: Abram is seeking to protect himself ("that I may live on account of you") and to benefit himself ("that it may go well with me"). There are a few choice titles that come to mind to describe a man like this: self-serving jerk, insensitive brute, chauvinistic pig. In addition to being a jerk, he was also an opportunistic bum. He profited from his wife's moral and spiritual endangerment. He put others around him at risk. He put his wife at risk. He put Pharaoh and his household at risk.

But before we jump down Abram's throat, let's put ourselves in his sandals. Abram is married to a hottie! What's Abe to do? It's not his fault that he's been blessed by God and married up. So now it becomes a matter of self-preservation. Abram's motives may not be as selfish as they appear. It is likely that Abram asked Sarai to pose as his (eligible) sister so that when the men of the land asked for her hand, he could stall for sufficient time for them to leave the land. It really was an ingenious plan. One of the local men would come to Abram to ask for his sister's hand in marriage. Abram would consent but insist upon a long engagement (long enough for the famine to end). During this time Sarai would remain at Abram's home where their marriage could secretly continue and the safety of Abram was assured. It seemed that the benefits were great and the liabilities of such a scheme were minimal.

However, such a plan was evil for several reasons. First of all, it tended to ignore the presence and power of God in Abram's life. God had promised the ends, but seemingly He was unable to provide the means. He promised a land, a seed, and a blessing. Now it seemed as though Abram was left to his own devices to procure them. Second, Abram's plan was wrong because it jeopardized the purity of his wife and the promise of God. God had promised to make of Abram a great nation. From Abram a great blessing to all nations, the Messiah, would come. Now Abram was willing to run the risk of another man taking Sarai as his wife. How, then, could she be the mother of Abram's seed?

There are additional problems with Abram's lying, and lessons we can learn:

1. After lying once it becomes easier to do the next time. Abram later tried to pull the same stunt with Abimelech in 20:12.

2. Lying influences others around us. In 26:7, we discover Abraham's son, Isaac, pulling this exact same stunt with his wife Rebekah and Abimelech.

3. Lying brings a reproach to the name of God. Sadly, a pagan king must rebuke Abram for his deception and lack of faith in God (12:18-19).

George Burns was joking when he said that the key to his success was first learning honesty; once he could fake that, he could achieve anything. We laugh at this but we all can acknowledge the truth that seems to be resident in this remark. Yet, God says lying is not an appropriate response for the believer. Are you careful to tell the truth to the best of your ability?

Now back to our story. In 12:14, Moses writes, “It came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.” Sure enough, the Egyptians fell for Sarai. The impersonal identification of “woman” signifies Sarai’s treatment as an object. The men found her “very beautiful.” One of the questions posed in the commentaries is: “How could this 65-year-old woman have been such a head-turner?” There are several points worth making: First, there are beautiful ladies that have aged well, into their 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s. A famous modern day example is Sophia Loren.

Second, we must also remember the distortions our culture brings to our perspective. Our culture has persuaded us that beauty is closely connected with sensuality, youth, and certain facial and bodily features. Yet, not every culture is as superficial in their assessments of beauty as is ours. Biblically speaking, the phrase used here is also used to describe a fine specimen of a cow, in Gen 41:2. Therefore, we need not assume that Sarai has miraculously retrained her stunning beauty of youth. Her dignity, her bearing, her countenance, her outfitting may well contribute to the impression that she is a striking woman. Finally, some scholars suggest that, since Sarai lived to be 127 years old (23:1), her 60’s would be equivalent to our 30-40’s. I think this is the least likely view.

In 12:15, Abram’s worst nightmare occurred: “Pharaoh’s officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh [The word “Pharaoh” is not a personal name; it is a title meaning “Great House.” It is the equivalent of “Crown” for the British monarch.]; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.” Great! Abrams’s plan backfires because Pharaoh does not take the time to negotiate. Sarai became a part of Pharaoh’s harem. What was going on in those chambers? Was she now in Pharaoh’s arms? Abram began to write his own rendition of Pharaoh, Pharaoh: “Pharaoh, Pharaoh…oh baby, let my Sarai go! Yeah, yeah!” On account of her beauty, Sarai would surely become one of Pharaoh’s favorite wives. And from then on, life would have taken its natural course. She well could have lived and died in Egypt, and had her place in a royal tomb.

In 12:16, we read these tragic words: “Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels.” All of these gifts were provisions of wealth in Abram’s day. The last two gifts, the female donkeys and the camels, tell all. Female donkeys were far more controllable and dependable for riding and, therefore, the ride of choice for the rich (the Lexus’s and BMW’s of the Nile). To have a domesticated camel in Abrams’s day and age was the equivalent to owning a Ferrari Testarosa.

So you would think Abram would be happy, right? Wrong! He would have been better off to suffer hunger in the Promised Land than to be rich in Egypt. Everything that Abram received in Egypt later caused him trouble. Because of the great wealth he acquired from Pharaoh, Abram and Lot could not live together and had to separate (13:5-6). Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant that Pharaoh gave to Abram brought division and sorrow into the home (16:1-16). Abram attempts to build a family through Hagar. This was not God’s plan. Hagar becomes the mother of the Arab nations. Sarai becomes the mother of the Jewish nation. Today, we live with the international tensions between these two countries, and the origin of the struggle

goes back to Egypt. Abram failed to trust God. Abram failed to obey God. Abram failed to fear God. Today we feel the consequences of that terrible decision.

When we fail to trust, obey, or fear God, there are serious consequences. The wealth that Abram accumulated would be a perpetual reminder that Sarai was no longer in his household but in Pharaoh's. God blessed Abram even when he wasn't doing what he should; and God continued to protect Abram, even when Abram was being a liar. God did not call back His promise to Abram, because the promise depended on God, not on Abram. Some contemporary Christians have the mistaken idea that God always blesses obedience with abundance and judges sin with hardships. This is not always the case. Abram could have used that kind of erroneous logic to justify his spirituality during this lapse of faith. In reality, he experienced famine-in the will of God, and an abundance of material wealth-out of the will of God. The problems we run from in one place are usually greater at the next place.

How do you respond when the pressure is on? When the finances are low? When you're having conflict with your spouse or a co-worker? When you have no idea what to do next? When you are discouraged or angry? Whether you realize it or not, your life, character, and choices are influencing people around you: your spouse, your children, your family, and friends. You may be the only "Bible" they'll ever read!

In 12:17-20, our story heats up with intensity: "But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go.' Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him." In 12:17, we find one of the greatest words in the Bible-the word "but." Significantly, God had not yet been mentioned in this passage until here. Despite Abram's lack of faith and unethical behavior, God intervenes on behalf of Sarai and the promises He has made to Abram. No matter what circumstance we may be in, God is greater than any famine or any Pharaoh. The Lord intervenes by sending "great plagues" on Pharaoh and his house. Any misfortune in the ancient world was looked upon as an indication of divine displeasure. So when God sent great plagues, Pharaoh and his advisers may have tried to pinpoint when the troubles started. When they traced the troubles back to the time of Sarai's arrival, they may have figured out what probably happened. Though the nature of the plagues is unexplained, it is possible that Pharaoh was inflicted with sexual ailments that prevented the consummation of physical union with Sarai. God was protecting the ancestress of Israel from the desecration of the body, from which the sacred nation was to come (cf. Psa 105:13-15).

How sad! Instead of bringing blessing and life (12:3), Abram brings cursing upon Egypt. What a turn of events! To make matters worse, a bizarre scene then unfolds before us: a man of God telling a "white" lie to a pagan ruler. Evidently, either from some innate sense of the fear of God, or from knowledge gained from Sarai herself. Pharaoh became convinced that the plagues came from God because of the intentions that he had concerning Sarai. When the Pharaoh later confronted Abram with that lie and its implications, Abram must have felt very small indeed. (Unfortunately, Abram did not learn the lesson from it that he should have, as we will see in Genesis 20.)

It is interesting to note that the Pharaoh's inquisition of Abram is similar to the Lord's words to Adam and Eve: "What is this you have done?" (3:13). He then follows this up with another question, "Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?" Ouch! Pharaoh assumed the moral high ground. Abram appeared the sinner, Pharaoh the saint.Abram remained silent under Pharaoh's reproach, uttering not a word. What

could he say? Abram was exposed and disgraced. He was thrown out! After being commanded by Pharaoh to leave, Abram does that, in company with an escort provided by the Egyptian ruler, perhaps to protect Abram and Sarai from the possibility of the defilement of Sarai, just as Abram had originally feared (12:20). Abram and his entourage must have humbly crept out of Egypt with their tails tucked between their legs.

Three very important principles can be found in these verses:

1. The Christian's conduct does greatly affect his credibility. How many non-Christians have been appalled by the behavior of a Christian? Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required" (Luk 12:48). What kind of person are you at work or at school? Do other people know what you believe and where you stand? Or, are you a Christian chameleon that just blends into your environment? If I were to show up at your work or school and go through the day with you, would you behave differently than you normally do?

2. God would prefer for us to repent on our own, but if we are unwilling He will intervene. He does so for our own good and for His own glory. He is a loving Father who disciplines His children (Heb 12:5-11).

3. If God is able to make out of this deceitful man one whom He shall call "my friend" (cf. Isa 41:8), He can do the same for you and me. Though Abram fails the tests of faith and ethics, God proves faithful. Though we are unfaithful, He is faithful (2Ti 2:13). God takes pity on His children (Psa 103:13). He supernaturally intervenes to protect His own, though this is not always so (1Ki 18:13; Heb 11:35-38).

[When you have succumbed to fear, there is only one solution…]

3. Return to a life of faith (13:1-4). The great news of the Bible is that there is life after failure. Now that God has delivered Abram from this mess, how does he respond? In 13:1-4, Moses tells us: "So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD." We have no clue as to how long Abram remained in Egypt. No altars were built in Egypt, to our knowledge, nor are we told that Abram ever called on the name of the Lord there. But finally he does right before God. Abram goes back to Canaan. He goes back to Bethel, "the house of God" (cf. 12:8). He goes back to the altar! Hallelujah-there is life after the mess. Like Abram, when we lapse in faith we must return to the point of our departure from God if we desire once again to restore the joy of communion we once knew. Abram is today remembered as the man of faith-in part because he returned "to the place where his tent had been at the beginning" (13:3). If you have disobeyed and God is disciplining you, go back to the place you left Him and make things right. The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. This is not an excuse for sin, but it is an encouragement for repentance.

If Abram had stayed in Canaan when the famine came, his faith would have grown. He would have seen the Lord provide for him. Since he did not stay in Canaan, the same famine that could have been a means of spiritual growth actually took him away from God, led to sin, and eventually brought great humiliation. What an important step it would be if we would learn that lesson about life. Instead of complaining, we would trust God. Instead of saying, "Why has God let this happen to me? Doesn't He care? Why has God abandoned me?" we would say, "Here is another opportunity for me to trust God. I wonder what wonderful

things He is going to do for me this time." It is not always easy to do that. It sometimes takes more grace to stay in Canaan than to get there. But that is what God wants. He does not want our way to be easy, because if it is easy we will not grow. He arranges the steps of faith in an upward direction so that our spiritual muscles will grow strong and we can eventually scale the heights of great blessing.

Chapter 18

\"A Tale of Two Men\" (Gen 13:5-18)

Nearly 200 years ago there were two Scottish brothers named John and David Livingstone. John had set his mind on making money and becoming wealthy, and he did. But under his name in an old edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica John Livingstone is listed simply as “the brother of David Livingstone” (1813-1873). While John had dedicated himself to making money, David had invested his life as a missionary to Africa. He resolved, “I will place no value on anything I have or possess unless it is in relationship to the kingdom of God.” The inscription over his burial place in Westminster Abbey reads, “For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize.” Two men…two brothers, yet, both lived very different lives.

In Gen 13:5-18, we will look at the lives of two men, Abram and Lot, two family members that lived very different lives. Thirteen chapters in Genesis are devoted to the life and times of Abram; of these, five tell the story of Lot, his nephew. Unlike Abram’s story, Lot’s describes complete failure. Why is so much space devoted to telling us about Lot’s tragedy? His life offers a sharp contrast to Abram’s. Lot represents the walk of sight, while Abram’s represents the walk of faith. Lot looks for a city built with human hands; Abram looks for a city whose builder is God (Heb 11:10). Lot fails. Abram succeeds. In both lives we see critical lessons that relate to our struggles today. This section brings out three principles that will help us walk by faith, and not by sight (2Co 5:7). The first principle is…

1. Handle your conflicts wisely and graciously (13:5-9). In 13:5-7a, Moses writes, “Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock.” Like Abram, Lot became rich in Egypt (cf. 13:2, 5). No doubt, Uncle Abe blessed Lot with some of the gifts he received from Pharaoh (cf. 12:16). Maybe this act of generosity alleviated some of his guilt for giving away his wife, Sarai, to Pharaoh (12:10-15). Regardless, both Abram and Lot were “living large.” In fact, their “possessions” had become so large that they could no longer dwell together. This point is repeated twice in 13:6-7 for emphasis. The wealth of Abram and Lot consisted of flocks and herds. As nomadic tribesmen they had to travel about looking continually for pasture for their sheep and cattle. Since the land was already inherited, there wasn’t a lot of pasture to choose from. Consequently, each man’s herdsmen sought water and the best pasture for the animals of their master. This competition inevitably led to conflict (cf. Jam 4:1-3). The result was a range war-the kind of western-movie scenario with which we’re so familiar. The only thing missing is Gene Autry’s background music-“Oh, give me a home where my shepherds can roam.”

In these three verses, two biblical truths are apparent. First, we may have riches if riches do not have us. I know many wealthy Christians that live far below their means and use their wealth to help others and serve God’s kingdom. There is nothing wrong with being rich, as long as you do not horde that which God has given you. Second, wealth can be a blessing and a curse in a man’s life. We can understand and appreciate the blessing of wealth but we often forget that more money equals more problems. One of the many reasons is money can divide families.

In 13:7b, there is a significant parenthetical phrase: “Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.” This brief commentary suggests that the conflict between Abram and Lot was on full display before the unbelieving Canaanites and Perizzites. Whether you realize it or not, unbelievers are watching your life: how you treat your spouse and kids, how you conduct yourself-at work, on the road, when you’re under stress, when you think no one is watching. And what they see will either draw them to Jesus Christ or repel them. Sadly, many people will never listen to what any believer says because of what some believers are (see 1Pe 2:12; Php 2:14-16).

Two Christian ladies had to share the same office. They fought like cats and dogs. One always wanted the window open; the other wanted it closed. “I feel I am going to suffocate in here!” said the one. “I’m going to die of a cold!” retorted the other. Finally, a co-worker came up with a suggestion. “Why don’t you keep the window closed until one of you dies of suffocation and then keep it open until the other dies of pneumonia. Then we’ll have some peace around here!”

We laugh at this story, but it’s true to life. When Christians have disputes, it hurts the testimony of the Lord. On the eve of His death, Jesus prayed that His people might be one that the world might believe (Joh 17:20-23). When we exhibit unity in the body of Christ, the world is bound to be attracted to Christ and the church (Joh 13:34-35). When we don’t, the world is repelled.

In the face of this family feud, Abram speaks to Lot in 13:8-9: “Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left.” In these two verses, we learn a great deal about how to appropriately handle conflict.

First, believers should seek to resolve conflict (see Mat 5:23-24). Abram took the initiative to resolve the conflict with Lot. Abram could have said, “Now, look here, Lot, this land belongs to me. God has promised it to me, not to you. You’ll simply have to move on.” Instead, he surrendered his personal rights and sacrificed his interests (Php 2:1-11). Likewise, it is our responsibility to surrender our personal rights. The lazy, unbelieving way is to let the conflict drift and become steadily worse. Yet, the Bible is clear; when there is a conflict with a brother or sister we should take the initiative. The life of faith involves learning to live with brothers and sisters.

With that said, there are times when brothers and sisters must separate for the sake of peace (see Act 15:39). This side of heaven, believers will not always see eye-to-eye. Therefore, there are occasions where a parting of ways is appropriate. For example, in a local church, if there are strong preferences or opinions that cannot be resolved, it can be appropriate for a member to depart for the sake of harmony. We must be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

Second, believers should exhibit tenderness. Abram’s words to Lot were explicitly tender. Twice Abram says, “Please” (lit. “I pray you.”). He then appealed to their kinship-“for we are brothers.” Unlike Cain, Abram believed he was his brother’s keeper (cf. 4:9). He diffused any anger or defensiveness that Lot may have had and he refused to argue. Now you cannot have a fight if one person refuses to be party to it. It takes two to tangle. I have always loved boxing and action movies. Thus, when I was growing up, I always wanted to box or wrestle with my younger brother, Tim. Unfortunately for me…and fortunately for him, he typically refused. I hated this! There is nothing more frustrating than wanting to have a good fight, only to discover that the other person is unwilling to fight. May we follow in the footsteps of Abram and Tim and refuse to fight or argue. Instead, may we exhibit tenderness with the goal of unity.

Third, believers should wait on God. When confronted with worrying circumstances that seemed to be clamoring for his immediate action, Abram's first reaction was to do nothing. He simply waited. He was confident that God would soon make His way clear. On this occasion, Abram refused to take matters into his own hands (cf. 12:10-20). Instead, he left his circumstances in God's capable hands.

I sense that Abram had a great deal of confidence because he knew, by faith, that no matter what Lot chose, God would fulfill His covenant promises in his own life. I like that! Abram didn't get ahead in life by looking out for number one. No! It was God who exalted him because he placed the interests of others ahead of his own (see Php 2:3-11). The world's way of getting ahead is to look out for number one. But God's way is to look up to number one and to be a blessing to others.

People who truly believe God's promises of provision can be generous with their possessions. You don't have to be worried about "losing" if others are blessed. So be generous! Help others succeed! God will see that kind of Christlike faith and you will be rewarded! When you face troubling circumstances like Abram, don't do anything rash. Just wait. Do nothing. Ride it out. In time, God will reveal the way to you.

[You and I are to handle our conflicts wisely and graciously. We are also to…]

2. View life from an eternal perspective (13:10-13). In the next four verses, we have a deliberate contrast between Abram and Lot. Moses writes, "Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere-this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah-like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. [Every movement away from God thus far in Genesis has been designated as toward the east, 3:24; 4:16; 11:2.] Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD." As the father of three small children, I can appreciate what went into the look of Lot as he surveyed the land about them. Any of my children could work for the Bureau of Standards. Yesterday, my wife was cutting up homemade banana bread when one of my children (who will remain unnamed) said, "I want the biggest piece." Of course, another child echoed the same sentiment. No matter how small the differences, with a mere look my children know what slice, scoop, or cup is the largest. That same kind of look was evident in the eyes of Lot. He saw that the valley of the Jordan was lush, green, growing, and well watered…just like the garden of the Lord and the land of Egypt. It was a modern real estate developer's dream! It was a place where Lot could add to his considerable wealth and status.

As Lot went his way, I believe he patted himself on the back for putting one over on old Abe. Abe must have been soft in the head to give such an advantage to Lot, and Lot was just sharp enough to cash in on it. Perhaps Lot thought, "Uncle Abe has more than I have anyway, this will just balance everything out." Or, "Old Uncle Abe is kind of naïve-he doesn't really care. After all, he gave me my choice." Or, regarding Sodom, Lot might have said to himself, "That wicked city really needs a strong witness for the Lord. After all, who's going to tell them about God?" Or perhaps he felt his family needed a little "broader exposure" to the world. After all, Uncle Abe was getting pretty religious, building altars all over the place and calling on the name of the Lord. Whatever his rationalizations or excuses, Lot's decision was based on his own selfish desires.

Lot saw, he chose, and he acted. This reveals the downward spiral of sin (Jam 1:14-15). We can see this in Lot's three choices. First, Lot chose himself ahead of others. The text records these words: "So Lot

chose for himself the whole plain of Jordan" (13:11a). What a revealing statement! Lot's primary concern wasn't the glory of God, the benefit of his family or Abram's, or even his own spiritual welfare. His primary concern was, "What's in it for me?" The simplest and fairest separation would have been to make the Jordan River the boundary between the two men. What would have been fairer than to have chosen one side of the river to dwell in and to leave the other to Abram? But Lot chose all of the land for himself. Pro 14:12 : "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

Lot "settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom." At first, Lot simply pitched his tent near Sodom. But in 14:12, we discover that he had traded in his tent for a townhouse in Sodom. Then in 19:1, we find that he was sitting in the gate as a leader of these wicked and godless people! I'm sure Lot did not intend to actually live in the cities of the valley. At first, he simply set off in that general direction (cf. 13:11). But once our direction is set, our destination is also determined, for it is now only a matter of time. While Lot lived in his tents at first (13:2), before long he has traded in his tent for a townhouse in Sodom (19:2, 4, 6). He may have lived in the suburbs initially, but at last he lived in the city (19:1ff). Some decisions may not seem very significant, but they set a particular course for our lives. The decision may not seem very important, but its final outcome can be terrifying and tragic. Material prosperity should never be sought at the cost of spiritual peril.

Second, Lot chose his occupation over his family. Lot had "flocks and herds and tents" (13:5) but he did not have an altar (cf. 13:4). As a result, he did not ask, "Is this a good place to raise children? He asked, "Is this a good place to raise cattle?" He did not ask what God had chosen for him. He did not consider the impact that living in sin city would have on his wife, his children, and himself. His choice was entirely determined by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1Jn 2:16). When you are contemplating a move, one of the first questions you should ask is: Will this move draw me and my family closer to Christ? Unless God explicitly calls, do not move until you are confident that there is a strong Bible-believing church where you and your family will be able to worship and fellowship. You owe it to yourself and your children to prioritize your relationship with the Lord.

Third, Lot chose the immediate over the future. Lot's eyes became the windows of his soul. He chose the path of least resistance. It is not that Lot was evil; he simply seemed to be adrift without an anchor. He lived life on the edge, and like so many of us, he eventually lost his way. When faced with a hard decision, he acted selfishly. Yet, as we will see in chapter 19, this would prove to be the biggest mistake of Lot's life. As a result of this careless choice, his wife would turn to a pillar of salt, his girls would commit incest with him, and Lot, a righteous man (2Pe 2:7-8), would live an unrighteous life.

There are two questions that come to a human soul: The first question is, "Heaven or hell?" Lot answered this question when he left Mesopotamia and followed Abram to Canaan (cf. 12:4). The second question is, "Heaven or earth?" Lot answered this second question when he chose Sodom. What about you? If you have trusted in Christ, you have heaven instead of hell, but the question for you today may be: Do you have heaven or earth (Mat 6:19-20)?

[You and I are to handle our conflicts wisely and graciously and view life from an eternal perspective. Lastly, we are to…]

3. Express confidence in God's promises (13:14-18). In 13:14-16, Moses writes, "The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you

and to your descendants forever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.'" It is interesting to note that God did not speak to Abram until after Abram had made his decision to finally obey God's initial command to separate from his father's household (cf. 12:1). Humanly speaking, the only thing that stood in the way of divine blessing was human disobedience. God eventually removed that barrier by forcibly separating Abram and Lot. At that point, God once again speaks to Abram and reaffirms His promises. I believe that many of us have missed tremendous blessings in life and the opportunity to be used of the Lord simply because we have refused to obey His Word. In most cases, we trade away the bounty of God for the scraps of the world.

Previously, Lot "lifted up his eyes" (13:10) and had seen the land before him with the eyes of one weighing financial promise. Here, Abram "lifted up his eyes" (cf. Deu 34:1-4) also and he saw the whole land as far as he could see in every direction. Abram was without an heir. However, the Lord appeared to Abram at this crucial time and reconfirmed the promise of land that He said He would give to Abram's offspring (13:15). God repeated His promise to give him and his descendants all the land he saw. This promise was more specific than God's previous promises regarding the seed and the land (12:2, 7). This was God's third revelation to Abram. It contained three specifics.

First, God would give the land to Abram and his descendants forever (13:15). Second, Abram's heir would be his own seed (offspring; 13:15-16). Third, Abram's descendants would be innumerable (13:16). The figure of "dust" suggests physical seed (13:16; cf. 2:7). The reference to the dust of the earth is a figurative expression for a number too large to be counted, since it would be impossible for the earth's population to be as numerous as there are grains of dust in the earth.

These blessings are good news for Abram but far from the reality he saw. The land was under the control of the Canaanites and the Perizzites (cf. 13:7). The leftover grazing land belonging to Lot (cf. 13:11). He had no kid. Sarai, his wife, is beyond the age of bearing children. If I had been Abram, I would have negotiated the promise. "Lord. I know you're going to give me the whole land but do you think that you could inform the Canaanites and Perizzites? In fact, I'd be happy with a couple of acres. Offspring like the dust of the earth? Lord, just one kid will do." Yet, unlike me, Abram expressed confidence in God's promises. Even though he could not see anything with his natural eyes, he chose to walk by faith and not by sight (2Co 5:7).

After reaffirming these great promises, God said to Abram, "Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you" (13:17). The practice of walking through the land appears to have been a symbolic, legal practice related to the idea of staking a claim on a piece of real estate (cf. Jos 1:3; Jos 24:3). Abram would not take possession of the land (Heb 11:13-16); his descendants would (12:7; 15:17-21). For now he was not to possess it, but was simply to inspect it with the eye of faith (see Rom 4:20-22). Have you walked through the land that God has given you? We all live somewhere, whether it is a house or an apartment. Have you ever walked through your home and prayed? This is one way you can say, "Lord, all that You have given me, belongs to You."

Genesis 13 closes with these telling words: "Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD" (13:18). Despite occasional failures, Abram was a man of faith. In the face of unbelievable odds, he builds an altar to the Lord. Do you know what he is saying by building that altar? "Lord, I don't know how it is going to happen. I don't know how You are going to do it. It sounds impossible. But if You said it, I'm going to build an altar and trust You

for the impossible." Interestingly, this is the third altar that Abram has built: one in the north (Shechem, 12:7-8), one in the central (13:4), and now one in the south, Hebron. Abram was claiming the whole land of Canaan for God. The word "Hebron" means "communion." It was in the region of Hebron that Abram made his home base (18:1) and was eventually buried (25:9). How appropriate, for Abraham's life was characterized by "communion" and friendship with God (2Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jam 2:23).

In the end, Lot who sought this world lost it, and Abram who was willing to give up anything for the honor of God found it. Providentially, Abram had not lost a thing. The rolling grasslands greedily seized by Lot were still his, every stick and stone. The promises of God were not thwarted by the unselfishness of Abram and the materialism of Lot. God's arithmetic is not like ours. According to us if we subtract one from one we have nothing. But, according to God, if we subtract one from one we still have everything. Jesus said, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life" (Mat 19:29). That is God's arithmetic. Have faith in the sovereignty of God. He will be faithful to every one of His promises. In the meantime, look for every opportunity to humble yourself before God and others, and God Himself will exalt you in due time (Jam 4:6; 1Pe 5:5 b-6)!

Chapter 19

\"The Original Braveheart\" (Gen 14:1-24)

Too much comfort is dangerous...literally. Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley did an experiment some time ago that involved introducing an amoeba into a perfectly stress-free environment: ideal temperature, optimal concentration of moisture, and constant food supply. The amoeba had an environment to which it had to make no adjustment whatsoever. So you would guess this was one happy, little amoeba. Whatever it is that gives amoebas ulcers and high blood pressure was gone. Yet, oddly enough, it died.

Apparently there is something about all living creatures, even amoebas that demand challenge. We require change, adaptation, and challenge the way we require food and air. Comfort alone will kill us. The reason is simple. God created man something on the order of a rubber band. A rubber band is made to stretch. When it is not being stretched it is small and relaxed, but as long as it remains in that shape it is not doing what it was made to do. When it stretches, it is enlarged; it becomes tense and dynamic, and it does what it was made to do. God created you to stretch as you face challenges.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) once said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” What kind of man or woman are you in the midst of challenge and controversy? Are you dependent upon the Lord or are you consumed with worry and doubt? Today, God is calling you and me to rise up in His strength and be people of courage and conviction. In Gen 14:1-24, we will learn how Abram demonstrated courage and conviction and we will be challenged to follow his example.

The first twelve verses serve as an introduction to this chapter. We are introduced to the first war ever recorded in Scripture-a war between four eastern kings and five southern kings. It is interesting to note that “Shinar” (i.e., Babylon, modern-day Iraq) initiated this first war mentioned in the Bible (14:1-2). Verse 4 tells us that the southern kings had been subjugated for twelve years. In the thirteenth year, they attempted to throw off their shackles and establish independence. On the surface, this war is merely an international power struggle to control a strategic commercial land bridge between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Whoever controlled this land bridge maintained a monopoly on international trade.

In response, the eastern kings launched a punishing assault that nipped this rebellion in the bud (14:5-7). The eastern kings defeated everyone who opposed them. They were an enemy that seemed invincible, relentless, unstoppable, striking fear into every heart as they steamrolled over every opposing military force. In 14:8-9, the southern kings drew up battle lines. In spite of the overwhelming odds, the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, with their allies, decided that possible defeat was better than guaranteed slavery. So they dug in for all-out battle in the valley of Siddim, which was full of tar pits. The five southern kings felt that these pits would be a natural defense. However, the outcome was not what they had hoped-the southern kings were routed and many fell into the tar pits (14:10). Those that didn’t fall into them fled to the hills.

In 14:11-12, we come to the point of the suspenseful plot of this narrative. Moses writes, “Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply, and departed. They also took Lot, Abram’s nephew, and his possessions and departed, for he was living in Sodom.” What a commentary on the poor decision of Lot in Genesis 13. Lot had chosen to act on the basis of economic self-interest and

had disregarded the covenant God had made with Abram (12:1-3). He separated from his uncle and moved into Sodom (14:12).

About the time that he made this move, he and his whole family were taken captive by the four eastern kings. But all that Lot had gained by taking advantage of Abram and rejecting the promises of God was lost in an instant.

What painful irony. Lot had greedily chosen the best part of the land, and his choice had proven disastrous. Lot, and everything he owned, was carried off to who knows where. Turkey? Read between the lines. Lot had seen agonizing deaths and rapes, the traditional wake of ancient victory. Perhaps he had lost children and loved ones. Perhaps a daughter was now the prize of some Hittite. As he trudged across the Transjordan toward Canaan's border, all hopes were dead.

There is very little security in this world, outside of God. There are two ways to learn this lesson: the easy way and the hard way. The easy way is to believe God! God constantly warns us that there is no security in earthly treasures. They can be lost overnight. War may smash our expectations. Everything deteriorates; "moth and rust" can destroy; thieves can break in and steal (Mat 6:19). But if we refuse to listen to God's warnings, then the Lord will teach us the hard way. Amidst this historical account, we see an important truth that we must not forget: God disciplines His children because He loves them and wants the best for them (Pro 3:11-12; Heb 12:5-11). For Lot, it meant the loss of his family and everything he owned, not to mention his Christian maturity. Yet, even in this, we must remember that God's discipline is always based upon His love. He longs to give us what we need most and that is fellowship with Him.

[Now we come to the first of two principles that will enable us to be people of courage and conviction.]

1. Pursue your sinning brother (14:13-16). In 14:13, Moses writes, "Then a fugitive came and told Abram the Hebrew. Now he was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner, and these were allies with Abram." In this section and many others the Bible teaches, "There is no rest for the righteous." Here we come upon another challenge to God's faithfulness and Abram's faith. So far Abram had to contend with several barriers to God's fulfilling His promises to him. His wife was barren; he had to leave the land; his life was in danger; and his anticipated heir, Lot, showed no interest in the Promised Land. Now he finds himself on the verge of becoming involved in a war with four powerful kings in order to save his nephew Lot.

Think about this for a moment. Abram could have chosen to do nothing. He could have given at least four good reasons to ignore Lot's dilemma:

1. "Lot got himself into this mess, let him get himself out."

2. "Lot took advantage of me! He dishonored me! This is God's discipline!"

3. "Even if I wanted to save Lot, it would be a suicide mission against such an army! People would get hurt if I got involved."

4. “What if something happens to me?” Lot is expendable but I am the one indispensable man.

Abram could have also used excuses like: “I’m a farmer, not a fighter” or “God has not called me to be a solider but a saint.” In spite of all of these seemingly legitimate responses, Abram chose to take action. In our day and age, this is rare. We live in a culture that hesitates getting involved with others. We complain about the problems of AIDS, pornography, drugs and alcohol, and so on, but we seldom get involved to make a difference. The same is true in the church. We walk away from our own wounded. We ignore those who fail. We let brothers and sisters struggle alone in the darkness.

In 14:14-16, Abram shows generosity and grace to a believer that has badly mistreated him. “When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. He brought back all the goods, and also brought back his relative Lot with his possessions, and also the women, and the people.”

These three verses demonstrate that Abram didn’t live in a monastery or an ivory tower. He had 318 men that he had trained for war. Abram is anything but a nomadic shepherd who passes time counting sheep and stars. He is a powerful individual with a substantial number of troops on call. And for Lot’s sake, Abram was willing to go to war, but only at the right time and in the right way. There are times when war is sanctioned and blessed by God (cf. 14:19-20).

This serves as a great reminder that the Christian life is not a bed of roses. Truly, “there is no rest for the righteous.” Jesus Himself said that a relationship with Him often brings a sword…not the peace and tranquility we would like. We may have peace within, peace with God, but there is no promise of soft or easy living. The Christian life is not a cushy life.

Abram faced a vast, unstoppable military force of four kings with only 318 men. But with God, that was all he needed! God is able to give a trusting and obedient minority victory over ungodly forces that are overwhelmingly superior in numbers. Here’s the lesson: Zec 4:6, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.” It’s a lesson that God taught Moses when God used him to deliver His people from Egypt. It’s a lesson that God taught Joshua and the people of Israel when they advanced into the Promised Land-a land filled with giants! It’s a lesson that God taught Gideon when he faced the armies of the Midianites and Amalakites with only 300 men (Jdg 7:6; Jdg 8:10). And David, taking 400 men and chasing the Amalekites who had taken his two wives among their prisoners (1Sa 30:10). Your problems are always smaller than God! He is able to be victorious in your life over any obstacle you face.

In 14:14, Moses writes that Abram “went in pursuit as far as Dan.” Abram is dwelling in the hill country south of Jerusalem. Lot is dwelling in the cities of the plain, south of the Dead Sea. Now remember, Dan is in the distant north of Jerusalem. That means they’ve gone as far north as you can go in Israel today. Remember the expression, “from Dan to Beersheba” (Jdg 20:1; 2Sa 24:2; 2Sa 24:15)? Well that expression tells us how far north and how far south Israel extended in those days. Beersheba is close to where Abram is dwelling. Dan is as distant as it can get, but Abraham is off to the rescue. He traveled over 240 miles, one-way, to rescue Lot. He chases Chedorlaomer and the others all the way to Dan in the north. This is what I call “kicking tail and taking names.”

Abram was a man of faith but he was also a prudent man. He divided his men and attacked at night (14:15). The march of Abram and his tiny band is one of the most remarkable forced marches in history. They traveled the whole length of the Jordan River and launched a counter attack as the enemy indulged in a time of carousing and reveling in celebration of their victory. He routed them and pursued them as far as Hobah (250 miles north of Damascus). Amazing!

How did Abram defeat these armies? It was his faith. He believed God's Word-that the land would go to His descendants-and therefore knew that God was with him. Even if he met defeat, he knew that God would keep His promise. Do you have this kind of faith?

In this moment, Abram reflected Christ. Jesus did not sit idly by in heaven waiting for us to deserve redemption. Neither was our redemption painless. Christ left the glories of heaven to come after us.

Abram recovered what had been lost (14:16): Lot and his possessions, the women, and the other people. Everything was recovered: the possessions, the people, and the prodigal Lot. Unfortunately, Lot fails to respond to this spiritual crisis in his life. Instead of turning from the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and returning to God, he heads home to the city of Sodom. In Genesis 19, we find that Lot, for a second time, will lose everything he has as God judges the wickedness of these sinful cities.

When is it appropriate to rescue foolish relatives like Abram did? Ask yourself three questions:

1. Will the foolishness my relatives have gotten themselves into permanently damage or destroy them? If the answer is yes, then it is appropriate to bail them out. Nothing of value is ever achieved if people are destroyed.

2. Will my foolish relatives likely learn from their folly? If the answer is "yes," as long as the answer is "no" to question one, then perhaps they're best served by retracing their steps, the steps that led them to their foolishness, and working themselves out of a jam.

3. Would God rescue me from my foolishness? God responds to us much the same way we should respond to these questions. If Abram had not rescued Lot, Lot would have died. If God had not rescued us, we would have died in our trespasses and sins. So if you are thankful to God today for rescuing you, undeserving as you were, shouldn't thankful people rescue others, even if they are not deserving?

As a result of his victory, Abram became a household name from the Euphrates to the Nile. An authentic hero! But here lay a further testing-the test of success. So often those who have been stellar in adversity are derailed by success. Their behavior changes in order to take advantage of their fame. Faith in God reverts to faith in self. They begin to believe the good press. And so weakened, they succumb to temptation they had easily resisted before. How would Abram fare?

[In 14:17-24, we find a second principle that will enable us to be people of courage and conviction.]

2. Trust the Lord to meet your needs (14:17-24). Moses writes, "Then after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley)." The king of Sodom came out to meet Abram. Abram had fought his great battle, not on behalf of the king of Sodom, but for the sake of Lot and his family. Nevertheless, his victory also benefited the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So a special welcoming committee was appointed, headed by the king himself, to confer upon Abram the usual reward for a conquering hero. His

reception must have been the ancient version of a New York City ticker tape parade! There are few temptations as powerful, yet subtle, as praise! Pro 27:21 : “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives.” How do you handle praise from men?

At the close of chapter 13, Lot anticipates future prosperity in Sodom, while Abram was content to worship and live in Hebron (13:18). But Lot’s selfish decision gains him a prize soon lost; while Abram’s response places him in a position of honor among the kings of the plain (14:17-24). How the tables can turn! When we are faithful to God, He always finds a way to bless us. It may not seem that you are a recipient for blessing, but God is no man’s debtor.

In 14:18, yet another king appears: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High.” Who was Melchizedek? “Melchizedek” was probably a title rather than a proper name. It means “King of Righteousness.” Melchizedek was a Canaanite, but he is called a “priest of God Most High.” In addition to his office of priest, he also is described as the king of Salem, apparently a reference to the shortened name for Jerusalem (Psa 76:2), which at that time was occupied by the Canaanites. This Gentile comes forward to pay homage to Abram. He brings with him bread and wine as he goes out to meet Abram on his return from the amazing victory.

In 14:19, Melchizedek blessed Abram and said, “‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’” Melchizedek did not credit General Abram with a strategic battle plan. He acknowledges God’s work. He made it clear that we may pursue and we may fight, but God gives the victory (cf. Psa 33:16-19; Psa 44:3). This is a most unexpected turn of events, for out of the grossly pagan world of the Canaanites emerges not only one who shares belief and worship in the same God as the Semitic Abram but one who pronounces the blessing on the patriarch whom God had already blessed. Abram also acknowledges the priestly dignity of this Canaanite priest-king by giving him a tithe.

This is a perfect picture of how Jesus comes to our aid and rescue when we need Him. After periods of conflict and testing, Jesus Himself has a habit of coming to visit us. He brings encouragement. Jesus is our sympathetic High Priest in a unique order; there is no one like Him.

After Melchizedek spoke these words, Abram gave him a tenth of all his bounty. What made Abram tithe? It was not the Mosaic law. It did not yet exist. The Spirit was leading Abram. When the Spirit leads us we shall fulfill the law even if it does not exist! The Christian will tithe, and more than tithe, if he is led by the Spirit. This is an emphasis upon “firstfruits.” Abram gave his best-first to the Lord. The tithe is not a debt paid to God. Rather, it is a tangible acknowledgment that everything we have belongs to God. In the Old Testament, the tithe was an obligation before God. In the New Testament, the obligation of tithing has been swallowed up in the privilege and joy of being a faithful steward of God’s resources (2Co 9:7-8). My understanding of the Bible, when it comes to tithing, is that 10% is the bare bones minimum.

The conquering of the four kings and their armies was only the first of two battles Abram would have to fight in this chapter. His next enemy, the king of Sodom, would be much more subtle in his attack on the authority of God. Often, the most dangerous time in the Christian life is right after some great victory of faith. Understanding the potential weakness of Abram’s strength, God arranged for Melchizedek to meet Abram and prepare him for his encounter with the king of Sodom.

The story concludes with Abram conversing with the king of Sodom (14:22-24) who insists that Abram take the war spoils. One king already enriched him (12:10-20). He does not want that to happen again. He

doesn't want any man to be able to say, "I made Abram rich." So he responds with these powerful words: "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, 'I have made Abram rich.' I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share.'" This passage concludes with Abram confessing God before men. He says, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth…" (14:22). This is the first example of what we now see in the sports world today, on national TV. Abe "gives it up" for the Lord in a pubic venue. He believes that God is capable of meeting his needs. He bases this on the fact that God is the "possessor of heaven and earth."

And since God owns "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psa 50:10), Abram at that moment was able to trust God for his future needs.

Our ultimate source of blessing is God. Confidence that God will preserve and provide for His own, as He has promised, should encourage believers to decline worldly benefits and wait for God's blessings. That's easy to say, but difficult to live. I tend to rely on my own abilities as my source. I tend to turn to others for help when life is tough. But living the life of faith is trusting God alone as our source.

Although God led Abram to refuse any reward for his efforts, Abram did not force his personal convictions on his allies. They were entitled to the spoil. Do not judge others when it comes to disputable matters (cf. Rom 14:5-6). Abram doesn't impose morality on his men. Again, he trusts the Lord to work as He sees fit in the lives of these men.

My family and I recently became the proud owners of a dog. His name is Jerome and he is a basset hound mix. Jerome absolutely loves us. Whenever he sees any of us he wags his tail and jumps up all over us. He follows us wherever we go. It seems that his affection is true and deep. However, Jerome has this little problem: he loves to break his leash and run away from us. Several times now we have had an "all points bulletin" (APB) throughout our neighborhood trying to coral Jerome.

Here's what we have learned: The true test of real love takes place when Jerome has the opportunity to go out on his own and yet remains happily within earshot of us. The goal is for our family to become the be-all and end-all of Jerome's life.

The real test of our Christianity isn't seen in our work or words. It's found in this: When we have an opportunity to wander away, to disobey, to leave God's presence, do we choose instead to stay close to Him, to abide in Christ, and to obey? Is your love for Christ seen in your obedience and utter loyalty to Him and to Him alone?

Chapter 20

\"Fear Factor\" (Gen 15:1-21)

One tribe of Native Americans had a unique practice for training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until then he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. But on this night he was blindfolded and taken miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods…by himself…all night long. Every time a twig snapped, he probably visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what more sinister sound it masked. No doubt it was a terrifying night for many.

After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long.

Can you think of any better way for a child to learn how God allows us to face the tests of life? God is always present with us. While His presence is unseen, it is more real than life itself. In Gen 15:1-21, we will learn that our Father helps us overcome the fear factor. He helps us, as we trust Him. Two principles stand out in this section: Trust in God's promises and rest in God's covenant. First…

1. Trust in God's promises (15:1-6). In 15:1, Moses writes, "After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.'" This is a puzzling verse. Why would Abram be afraid? He had just won a great victory over four powerful eastern kings. The battle was over. He was a war hero. He had saved his nephew Lot from slavery or death (14:13-16). Yet, despite these victories, Abram is fearful for he knows that the four eastern kings won't take this defeat sitting down. A vicious counterattack is inevitable! These kings had been undefeated champions and they will want to quickly avenge their first and only loss. No doubt, poor old Abe is shaking in his sandals. Later in Scripture, this same type of fear attacks Elijah, another great man of faith. After experiencing a great victory on Mount Carmel and terminating 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah ran scared from one "witchy woman"-Jezebel (1 Kings 18-19).

Fear usually nips at the heels of victory. This means we must always be aware of our vulnerability after victory. We have a natural tendency to let down. Little things and small people worry us that normally would not. Frequently, we can exercise great courage and strength amidst a white-hot crisis, yet succumb to day-to-day fears. Fear can make cowards of us all.

According to our nation's Bureau of Standards, a dense fog covering seven city blocks, to a depth of a hundred feet, contains less than one glass of water. All of that fog, if it could be condensed into water, wouldn't quite fill a drinking glass. Compare this to the things we often worry about. Like fog our worries can thoroughly block our vision of the light of God's promises, but the fact is they have little substance to them. When you feel fearful, remind yourself that by tomorrow this fear may not seem as pressing. Most of the things that we fret about are relatively insignificant.

It is interesting to note that the most frequent biblical command is, "Do not fear." The inescapable conclusion is that Abram and every last one of us are fearful creatures. However, we typically hide our fear

by frantically pursuing whatever we define as success or significance. This is a reminder for us not to judge people by outward appearance of success. Beneath the homes, titles, success, wealth, and power there is often an aching and broken heart. Abram appeared to have it all but he was still fearful for his security. We are like this too.

Nevertheless, in the midst of Abram's fear, the Lord declares: "I am a shield [a protector or defender] to you." The Lord's providential care for Abram is to be seen as preventing the four eastern kings from returning and settling the score. These words undoubtedly provided a great deal of comfort to Abram's anxious heart (cf. 14:20; Psa 18:2-3). Are you afraid of something or someone today? Are you facing an enemy in your life? God is always the answer! He is your refuge, your strength, and your deliverer! If God is your shield, you have nothing to fear (cf. Heb 13:5-6).

Yet, most of us prefer to construct our own shield. We want to feel safe and secure so we turn to comprehensive insurance policies, robust 401K plans, a secure job, a steady income, and a large house. In reality, it amounts to nothing more than tinker toys and construction paper. God watches as we meticulously craft our flimsy defense. It may not be much, but it makes us feel safer; the things of this world used to ease our anxieties. And after observing for a time He says, "You don't need that. Just come and sit in the palm of My hand."

Abram not only wants the peace of security; he also wants the joy of prosperity. Like all of us, he wants not only to survive, but also to thrive and to experience a life of blessing and satisfaction. God fills that desire for joy and satisfaction by offering Himself. In 15:1, God also says to Abram, "your reward shall be very great." This phrase is better translated, "[I am] your very great reward" (see NASB marginal reading). God assures Abram that although he has just declined the king of Sodom's great reward (14:22-24), God Himself will be his reward.

We get caught up in a delusion of our own making, convincing ourselves of the value of the treasures we pursue while blind to the treasure that is right before us in God Himself. We demand gifts and quickly forget the Giver. We come to God for His presents, rather than His presence. We set our sights on the fleeting pleasures of this world-a happy family, a prosperous career, a luxury car, a beautiful house, a powerful position, a good reputation, a night on the town, a sexual experience, a good hearty laugh. We fool ourselves into thinking that satisfaction is found apart from God. But in the end we find that all of the things we chase are either elusive or unsatisfying. The truth is: satisfaction is not found apart from God or even through God-it is only found in God. The "reward" is a relationship with God Himself.

In 15:2-3, Abram verbally responds to God for the first time, "'O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.'" After ten years of waiting, Abram must have thought to himself, "What good is it that You are my shield and reward if I have no one to pass it on to?" "What good is success, without a successor?" Can you feel Abram's pain? His family line is facing extinction. The whole genealogy listed in Genesis 11, stretching from Shem to Abraham, is about to be broken. The curtain will be drawn on his family name-unless he produces an heir. Thus, Abram is ready to accept his chief servant, Eliezer, as an adopted son.

God sometimes seems to take a long time to fulfill His promises and we can get discouraged and fearful. When fulfillment of God's promises is delayed we think of lesser possibilities and are tempted to be content with less than God wants to give us (see Gen 16). But it is precisely at such a time that we must

trust in God's promises.

You may be saying, "Fear is a reality in my life. Even though the Bible commands me to shake it, I can't seem to do so." All of us can feel the e same way. Fortunately, there is an encouraging clue in 15:2 (cf. 15:8). In his doubt and fear, Abram willingly places himself under the sovereign control of God. He uses a new title for God calling Him "O Lord GOD": Adonai ("Master") Yahweh. Abram is casting all of his cares upon God because He knows God cares for him (1Pe 5:7).

What a powerful reminder that fear, in and of itself, is not sin. It really comes down to what you do with your fear. John Wayne once said, "Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway." How true! Faith is doubt saying its prayers. It is a conscious commitment to give God our fears. Have you given your fears to the Lord today? Will you trust Him with your worries?

The suspense has built up to 15:4-5, where Moses records these words: "Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'This man [God refuses to even use his name] will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.' And He took him outside and said, 'Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" Instead of rebuking Abram, God assures him that he will have a "natural-born son," not an adopted heir (cf. 12:7; 13:15-16; 17:15-16). Amidst Abram's doubt and despair, God encourages him. He not only tells Abram the promise again (12:2; 13:15-16), He confirms it by stating that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of heaven. God knows just how much we can stand. Abram is almost at the breaking point of fear and despair so God comes to his aid with even more confirmations of His promises.

In the middle of this chapter occurs the most important verse in the Old Testament: Gen 15:6. This is the first verse in the Bible that explicitly speaks of faith, righteousness, and justification. Moses writes, "Then he [Abram] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." It is important to recognize that this is not the first time that Abram believed in the Lord. The English word "then" in the NASB is misleading, that is why other English translations do not include this word. Clearly, Abram believed in the Lord and was declared righteous when he left Ur (Heb 11:8; Heb 11:31-32). From that point on, Abram's normal response to God's words was to believe them. Abram had believed in the Lord for over a decade, but he evidently had not realized that God would give him an heir from his own body (15:4). Abram's faith is not mentioned until now in order to emphasize the fact that a biblical faith is one that focuses upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Here, Abram's faith is focused upon the promise of a son, through whom blessing will come to the whole world. While it is difficult to determine how complete Abram's understanding of all this was, we must not overlook Jesus' words: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad" (Joh 8:56).

This important verse demonstrates that Abraham was "reckoned" with righteousness, not after he made some great sacrifice, or after purifying himself of all sin, or when he got his act together, but at the moment he simply believed in the Lord (cf. Gal 3:6-9). Faith is simply taking God at His Word. The word "reckon" (chashab) means, "credit to an account." In the business world, when debits are balanced by credits, the account is "paid up." Similarly, when God received Abram's trust as credit, He responded by releasing him from any debit of sin. Abram's faith caused God to write on Abram's sin ledger, "Paid in full" (see Col 2:14). We can have a relationship with God on the very same basis, simply by taking God at His word and believing in His promised Son, Jesus Christ. Have you done this today? If you have, God has credited the righteousness of Christ to your account.

[We have been challenged to trust in God's promises. Now we will be encouraged to…]

2. Rest in God's covenant (15:7-21). In 15:7-8, the pattern continues: God speaks to Abram and Abram asks God a question. What a reminder that God always takes the initiative. Verse 7 tells Abram what God has done for him ("I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans," cf. Act 7:2-5) and what the purpose of his salvation is ("to give you this land to possess it," cf. 12:7). The purpose of salvation is inheritance. God brought us out in order to bring us in. We were brought out of idolatry and sin in order to be brought into our inheritance. The Christian life begins when a person places faith in Jesus Christ. But the abundant life begins when the Christian begins to pursue Christ (Joh 10:10).

In 15:8, Abram says, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" Abram's response reveals that he had doubts about God's promise to give him the land. Even people of great faith experience their moments of doubt. Living the life of faith is not like starting at the bottom of an escalator that always and continually moves upward toward heaven. It's more like riding a roller coaster with its hills and valleys. In 15:6, Abram was on the mountaintop-he believed; in 15:8, he was down in the valley, doubting. But again, please notice that Abram brought his fears directly to the Lord. God placed within Abram a desire to believe. He does the same within us today. Therefore, we must look to God and rest in Him.

Again, instead of rebuking Abram, the Lord gives him some directions. In 15:9, the Lord said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." These are the same "clean" animals that are used later in the sacrificial system under the law of Moses. The use of five different kinds of sacrificial animals underlines the solemnity of the occasion.

Moses then tells us that Abram "brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away" (15:10-11). In Abram's day, legal and binding agreements were not drafted by attorneys and then signed by the parties involved. Instead, legal agreements were formalized by means of a very graphic covenant ceremony: the dividing of an animal sealed the covenant. The animal was cut in half and the two parties would pass between the halves while repeating the terms of the covenant. By doing so, the two parties were stating, "If I fail to fulfill my commitments to this covenant, may I suffer the same fate as this animal" (cf. Jer 34:18-20).

In 15:12-21, we come to one of the most dramatic scenes in Abram's life. Yet, the Lord puts him down for a "deep sleep" so that he is depicted as a passive, non-participant. During his nap, "terror and great dreadful darkness fell upon him" (15:12; cf. Job 33:14-18). These emotions are common when a man or woman is in the presence of God. Abram's experience reminds us that God is a fearful being. He is not to be taken lightly (see Isa 6:1-8).

In 15:13-16, God makes a seven-fold prophecy concerning the nation of Israel.

1. You will be strangers in another country (Egypt). See Psa 105:11-15.

2. You will be slaves in Egypt.

3. You will be oppressed four hundred years. (The actual period of slavery was 430 years. In this passage it is rounded off to 400.) See Exo 12:40-42.

4. God will judge Egypt. See Act 7:6-8.

5. Israel will come out with many possessions. See Exo 3:21-22; Exo 12:35-36.

6. Abram will not live through this period of slavery. See Gen 25:7-8.

7. In the fourth generation (400 years), Israel will return to the land. See Deu 9:4-6.

All of these predictions were perfectly fulfilled to the very letter because God always performs what He promises. But the promises of God to Abram and his descendants were not without pain and struggle. Many of these promises were painful. Often, God takes us through very painful periods. Why? So that we will cling to Him and so that we will have a greater appreciation for the promise of heaven. Another aspect of struggle accompanied with these promises is the time required for their outworking. There is usually a delay in God's promises (Heb 11:13). God plans it this way for our spiritual well being. Somehow delays refine us and drive us to have further dealings with God and to seek personal contact with Him. If the promises of God flowed into our lives with ease and without seeking them, we would forget where they come from. God wants us to wait on Him. He wants us to trust Him.

In 15:17, "a smoking oven and a flaming torch" passed between the pieces of animals. The smoking oven and flaming torch represent the presence of God. So the Lord Himself passed between these pieces of animals in making a covenant with Abraham (cf. Lev 26:12). In doing so, He obligated Himself to fulfill this covenant (see Heb 6:13-14). God is not saying, "Now, Abram, if you will live up to certain conditions, then you will have a son, and I will give you the land." He is not saying, "Abram, as long as you obey A, B, C, and D, I'll keep My end of the bargain." God is saying to Abram, "I'm going to give you this land, and I am making an unconditional promise that you will receive it. It is not up to you, your effort, your battle strategy, your initiative, or your intelligence. You can get that land because I'm going to make it happen. I am making this agreement. I am passing through the pieces. I am making an agreement that you'll possess this land.

This is the heart and character of God. He loves us unconditionally, no matter what we do, say, or think. God is patient and long-suffering (Exo 34:6). He is the ultimate Father and He often does His greatest work in and through us when we do nothing. This past week, I was overwhelmed by God's sovereign protection and provision. I often sense that I am simply a spectator in my Christian life. I look at how God has protected me from myself. I look at how He has changed my thought patterns. I experience blessings from Him that I don't deserve. All of this leads me to say, "It's not about me; it's all about You!" I can't take credit for anything in my life. It can only be attributed to the work of a sovereign and gracious God.

In 15:18-21, God gives the geographical boundaries and the nations of the land that He will give to Abram. From the river of Egypt to the Euphrates (see Deu 11:24-25). The borders of this land, promised to Abram's descendants, appear to coincide with the border of the garden of Eden (2:10-14). The land consists of ten nations of "ites": Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Gergashites, and Jebusites. God will grant Abram's descendants victory over these peoples. He will show Himself strong…He will be a "shield" to them (cf. 15:1). After all of these promises and confirmations, what more reassurance could be asked for?

For the past two years, our middle child, Justin, has been trying to learn to ride his bicycle without training wheels. While he has always excelled at riding his bike with training wheels, he had feared making the move to riding without training wheels. Lori and I spent a great deal of time trying to help him work through

this transition. The tactic I would always take is: “Justin, trust me, you can ride without training wheels. I believe in you. I know you can do this.” But nothing worked. Finally, Lori said, “Justin, if you ride your bicycle without training wheels, we will buy you that new Lego set that you want.” After Lori made that promise and sealed it with an oath, that very day, Justin stepped out in faith and rode his bicycle without training wheels. He trusted in a promise and rested in an oath. Now when Justin rides, he bears down and attacks the asphalt! It’s quite impressive. Watch for Justin to take the Tour de France in a few years!

Today, you and I must ask these two questions: Can we trust God? Can God be trusted? If we can answer both of these questions with a “yes,” then we must trust in God’s promises and rest in God’s covenant.

Chapter 21

\"Beware of Shortcuts\" (Gen 16:1-16)

Are you a patient person? One of the best ways I know to determine your level of patience is to ask you to consider your driving habits. Does it kill you to decrease your speed in 25 mph zones? When you are waiting for a parking space in a busy parking lot, does your heart rate increase? When you see the traffic light turn yellow, do you floor it through the intersection? It is easy to think you are a fairly patient person until you ask yourself hard questions about your driving habits.

Richard Hendrix said, “Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter.” If Hendrix is correct, and I believe he is, if we want to grow in godliness, we must grow in patience. We must learn to wait on God. In Gen 16:1-16, we will discover two principles that will help us to avoid the temptation to “make things happen.” First…

1. Wait on God’s promises (16:1-6). Moses begins our chapter with these words, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.” Verse 1 begins by identifying Sarai as “Abram’s wife.” Why is this necessary? The reader knows who Sarai is. We shall quickly see that this point is made for emphasis. God had promised Abram a son (12:2). But in Abram’s impatience, he adopted his servant girl’s son and named him Eliezer, which means, “God of help” (15:2-3). However, God rejected Eliezer and reaffirmed His promise to give Abram a son out of his own body (15:4). But ten years later, Abram is still waiting! Abram is 85 and Sarai is 75 years old. Undoubtedly, they must have been discouraged and disillusioned by the problem of Sarai’s barrenness (cf. 11:30). Sarai is likely feeling like a failure…when all of a sudden she remembers her Egyptian maid, Hagar. It is nearly certain that Sarai has acquired Hagar during their sojourn in Egypt (cf. 12:16).

So Sarai says to Abram, “‘Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” Sarai’s words are very telling. She acknowledges that the Lord has prevented her from bearing children. Yet she conjures up a solution to help God out. It is important to realize that God had indeed sovereignly prevented her from having children, not to frustrate Abram and Sarai, but to test them and to magnify His glory. But Sarai allowed her feelings to get the best of her and she made a tragic mistake. She suggested a pagan custom be followed and that Abram should get a child through Hagar. Sarai was acting without sense, without foresight, without guidance, and without assurance. She could only say, “…perhaps I will obtain children through her” (16:2). This seems to be an ancient variant on the expression, “God helps those who help themselves!”

So what was Sarai’s rationale? First, Sarai likely said, “God made the promise that you, Abram, would have a son. He didn’t specifically say that we would have a son.” Second, “We are old! My biological clock is winding down! If we don’t do something soon, God’s promises won’t be fulfilled!” Finally, “This is a culturally acceptable practice. No one will think any less of us.” Ancient documents reveal that when a woman could not provide her husband with a child, she could give her female slave as a wife and claim the child of this union as her own. But just because something is culturally or even legally acceptable doesn’t make it right for the believer. For example: abortion, adultery, and pornography are all legal but they are not moral or biblical.

Sarai asked Abram, her husband, to commit adultery and polygamy. Tragically, Abram was all too happy to oblige. Maybe he said, “Well, honey, if that’s what you think is best, I’ll make the sacrifice for the good of the family. I’ll sleep with this young and attractive Egyptian. It’s a tough job, but I guess I’ll do it.” Now men, what would you have done? In our more fleshly moments, many of us would have followed in Abram’s footsteps. Would you have had the discipline and self-control to refuse your wife’s request? The phrase “listened to the voice” is a Hebrew idiom meaning “obeyed” (cf. 3:17). Abram listens to the voice of his wife and ignores what God has already told him (see Gen 15). For Abram, this was the beginning of failure. The same is true in our lives. When we pay more attention to the voices of human beings than to the voice of God, we are setting the stage for spiritual failure. Ignoring God and working problems out on our own only makes a bad situation worse. The consequences can be devastating (cf. Gal 6:7-8).

Abram and Sarai could have avoided this predicament if they had waited on God. Unfortunately, they took matters into their own hands. Like Abram and Sarai, the first question we usually ask when we face a wall of frustration is, “What can I do?” Not, “What does God want me to do?” There are times when this question cannot be answered quickly. Therefore, we must wait on God.

In 16:3, Moses pens these fateful words: “After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram’s wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.” There is an ironic reversal here. Down in Egypt, trustless Abram had given Sarai over to the Egyptian Pharaoh (12:10-20). Now in Canaan, untrusting Sarai gave Abram over to her Egyptian servant. It is ironic how the tables have been turned. In Genesis 12, Abram’s unbelief caused him to agonize while Sarai was in Pharaoh’s palace. Now, Sarai is left to ponder what is going on in Hagar’s bedroom. Abram’s fiasco in Egypt was costly indeed. Hagar was given a promotion. While Hagar was not on equal standing with Sarai, she did become a slave wife. If she produced the heir, she would be the primary wife in the eyes of society.

The following chart draws several parallels between Genesis 16 and Genesis 3.

Sarai spoke to her husband, Abram (16:2a) | Eve spoke to her husband, Adam (3:2)

Abram listened to the voice of his wife (16:2b)

Adam listened to the voice of his wife (3:17)

Sarai took Hagar to Abram (16:3a)

Eve took the fruit (3:6a)

Sarai gave Hagar to her husband (16:3b)

Eve gave the fruit to her husband (3:6b)

The results of Abram and Sarai’s sin were pride (16:4), jealousy (16:5), misery (16:6), and injustice (16:6). In 16:4, Abram “went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.” If Sarai’s volunteering Hagar as her surrogate scandalizes us, Abram’s passive, compliant conduct is even more offensive. He, not Sarai, had heard the voice of God. He had led them from Ur. Abram had had no divine directive to employ Hagar. Otherwise he would have led the way. And Abram was fresh from the fiery presence of the Lord (15:12-21). But he did not question her idea. He did not object.

Abram made at least four mistakes:

1. Abram failed by doubting the promise of God (Heb 11:5-6). Hudson Taylor, a famous missionary to China, said, “God’s work, done in God’s way, will never lack God’s supply.”

2. Abram failed by listening to his wife’s ungodly advice. Having said that let me also say that many marriages are in trouble because the husband doesn’t listen to his wife. Your wife is your helpmate and you would be wise to pay attention to her counsel.

3. Abram failed to test his wife’s advice and counsel against God’s Word. If your wife suggests something that is contrary to clear teachings of Scripture, then you must reject that counsel and follow what the Word teaches (cf. Act 5:29).

4. Abram failed to pray for God’s wisdom or guidance. Sometimes the prayer-less decisions we make seem so insignificant and harmless. But often these prayer-less decisions come back to haunt us. If Abram had stopped to think through this situation and consult God, he would have never gone through with it. He would have realized the outcome would be disastrous.

After Hagar conceived, Sarai was “despised in her sight.” In Hagar’s opinion Sarai had been demoted. This began the first martial triangle in biblical history. And it all came about because of impatience and disobedience.

Pro 30:21-23 says, “Under three things the earth quakes, and under four, it cannot bear up: Under a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is satisfied with food, under an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maidservant when she supplants her mistress.”

In 16:5, Sarai became volcanic. The shaking ground erupted in anguished jealousy and bloodcurdling blame. Though Sarai had initially given Abram the green light, she is now flashing raging red. In her anger, Sarai said to Abram, “‘May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me.’” [A contemporary rendering of this would be: “God will get you for this.”] Logically, Sarai was wrong to place all the blame on Abram. After all, it was her idea. But actually she was right. He was the patriarch. He was the head of the home. God had spoken to him, not to her. He should never have allowed the situation. Abram was truly responsible for the “wrong” (lit. “violence”) she was suffering.

Abram is between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Unfortunately, he chooses the easy way out. In 16:6a, Abram said to Sarai, “‘Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.’” Letting Sarai have her way was a dereliction of duty on the part of Abram. He was an accomplice to this sin by refusing to resist it or to rebuke Sarai. Sarai’s stinging rebuke should have been a wake-up call, but it served only to cause Abram to retreat further. Rather than leading his wife out of the mess he had allowed to occur, he dodged his responsibility, preferring to pass the buck to Sarai. I think it can safely be said that, at this point, Sarai was wearing the “tunic” in the family. Abram becomes a passive, sissified male that abandons headship of his home (Eph 5:23).

With Abram “washing his hands” of the conflict between his two wives, Sarai began treating Hagar harshly (16:6b). The word translated “harshly” is used later to describe how the Egyptian slave masters would treat Israel. As a result of Sarai’s harsh treatment, Hagar fled from her presence (16:6b). Running away from our problems is never the answer. Barnhouse writes, “If we seek to change our circumstances, we

will jump from the frying pan into the fire. We must be triumphant exactly where we are. It is not a change of climate we need, but a change of heart. The flesh wants to run away, but God wants to demonstrate His power exactly where we have known our greatest challenge."

The next time you are tempted to sprint ahead of God's best for you, run your dilemma through these simple checks:

1. Walk a little slower. Exercise patience. Don't rush God's plans for your life. Learn to practice the arts of biblical meditation, silence, and solitude.

2. Ask God for patience. My favorite book title is I Prayed for Patience and Other Horror Stories. We laugh at this only because we can relate. But what would happen if you and I seriously prayed that God would grant us greater patience to fulfill His will. Do you think this is a prayer that God will answer (Joh 14:13-14; 1Jn 5:14-15)? Absolutely!

3. Imagine the worst-case scenario. Think how a poor decision will impact you and others-not only short-term, but long-term as well. Chances are the ramifications of that decision will be far more devastating than you could possibly predict.

[God has called us to wait on His promises. Now we will learn that we are to…]

2. Watch for God's intervention (16:7-16). After fleeing from her master, Sarai, Hagar naturally headed west toward Egypt. In 16:7-8, we read, "Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur [a word meaning "wall"]. He said, 'Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?' And she said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.'" Here in Genesis 16 is the first appearance of "the angel of the Lord" in the Bible. There is debate about who this angel is, but I believe him to be the preincarnate Christ. The text seems to supports this conclusion. First, He speaks authoritatively in the first person (16:10-12). Second, Sarai identifies Him as God (16:13). Later in Genesis, Joseph describes the angel of the Lord as "the angel who has redeemed me from all evil" (48:16). If this is Jesus, this is similar to the time in John 4 when Jesus sat with the woman at the well. Both women were not Jews and both were sexually sinful women. Yet, Jesus met them both with grace and mercy (cf. Psa 34:17-18).

The associations between Genesis 16 and Genesis 3 continue in this section of the narrative as well. Just as the Lord sought Adam and Eve in the garden after the fall (3:9), the angel of the Lord came searching for Hagar in the desert. The Lord asked Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" so the angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness and greeted her with the similar question (16:8): "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" The key issue to note is that God actively seeks man out even when man does not want to be found. When man runs away, God chases him down. God is far more interested in man than man could ever be interested in God.

Did you notice that God is strangely absent from the first six verses? It is true that God was given the credit (or the blame!) for preventing Sarai from having children (cf. 16:2). But no one had consulted God or sought His will. No one had called to remembrance His promise to provide a son. More distressing is the fact that God has not yet spoken in our text. It would seem that since man had chosen to go his own way, God stepped aside to let him live with the consequences of disobedience. Only to Hagar did God speak. And He sought her while she was running away. God continues to do this in our lives today. He is a faithful God who chases His children down.

In 16:9, the angel of the Lord said to Hagar, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.” Hagar is instructed not only to submit to Sarai’s authority, but to whatever mistreatment that involves. God calls for Hagar to humble herself. We cannot read this command without recalling Peter’s instructions to Christian slaves in his first epistle: “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God” (?1Pe 2:1820).

When God finds us wandering, this is often what He says, “Return and submit!” It may be a bad marriage, financial debt, or broken relationships. However, one word of caution is necessary here. This verse does not mean that in a marital situation, if you are being physically abused, you ought to stay there and take the abuse. That’s not what this means at all. The underlying principle being taught is that you cannot run to Egypt to avoid your problems. You cannot run away from them.

I believe the primary reason that God calls Hagar to return to Sarai is so that Ishmael will have a father during the formative years of his life. God calls Hagar back so that Ishmael can have his dad. God is taking care of the boy. He is thinking about the child. Did you know that 40% of children don’t have a dad? This is a horrifying statistic that is not bound to improve. Yet, God is always concerned about children, especially those that are fatherless. If you are a father, please invest well in your children. If you are not a father, invest in someone else’s children. One of the primary purposes of the church is to ensure that children are being cared for and developed in the Lord. You and I must each do our part.

In 16:10-11, the angel of the Lord said to Hagar, “‘I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.’ The angel of the LORD said to her further, ‘behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.’” It is only in association with her return to Sarai and her submission to Sarai that the Lord offered Hagar a blessing. Abram, Isaac, and Jacob are given a similar promise but Hagar is the only woman that is given a promise like this. She was an honored woman. The name Ishmael means “God hears” or “God has heard.” This name served as a reminder to Hagar. Whenever she murmured or sang it to her baby, she would commemorate this event. Even when he was so difficult that she shouted his name, she recalled God’s intervention.

In 16:12, the Lord goes on to say that Ishmael “will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers.’” The prophecy is not an insult. The wild donkey lived a solitary existence in the desert away from society. Ishmael would be free-roaming, strong, and like a bedouin; he would enjoy the freedom his mother sought. The word “hand” represents strength. His free-roaming lifestyle would put him in conflict with those who follow social conventions. There would not be open warfare, only friction because of his antagonism to their way of life.

In 16:13-14, Hagar called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, “‘You are a God who sees’; for she said, ‘Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?’ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.” This is the only place in the Bible where a person names God. Hagar names God El Roi-the God who sees. The Hebrew name “Beer-lahai-roi” means “The well of the living One who sees me.” The text suggests that God takes up the cause of those who are oppressed. In the midst of jealousy, cruelty, irresponsibility, impatience, and abundant sinfulness God’s grace stepped into

the life of this despised slave girl, and showed her His kindness. From that point on, she would never forget what had happened to her. She now knew that God was the One who had been caring for her all along.

God sees you where you are and He cares for you as you are. God sees our mistakes and yet treats them with mercy. He sees our sufferings and in His appointed time has plans to bring them to an end. We may sometimes feel that God is unconcerned about us, but He is faithful and always hears and “sees” (Exo 3:7) the misery of His people.

Our chapter closes with these words: “So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him” (16:15-16). These verses make it clear that Hagar obeyed the Lord and returned to Sarai. Upon her return, she no doubt told Abram how the Lord had met her in the wilderness by the spring. Abram then accepted Hagar’s testimony and named the boy Ishmael at Hagar’s request. There is no mention of Sarai in these closing verses. Even Abram responds to Hagar. It seems that Sarai’s intervention and Abram’s acquiesce may have delayed the promise for some thirteen years. Shortcuts do not promote God’s purposes.

Ishmael became the father of all the Arabic peoples who to this very day are hostile toward the natural born son, Isaac, who would become the father of the nation of Israel. In fact, the current crisis in the Middle East can be traced back to Abram’s decision to “make things happen” by helping God fulfill His promise of a son.

The tragic truth is there are some sins that cannot be undone in this world. Some sins will have lasting consequences. So before you jump the gun…stand back. Take some time. Read God’s Word. Think. Pray. And obey the revealed will of God.

Chapter 22

\"Believe it or Not!\" (Gen 17:1-27)

“Jump and I’ll catch you.” Have you ever heard a parent say that to a child perched on some high place? Can you remember one of your parents saying that to you when you were little? Did you do it? Did you jump? In a sense, that is like something that God says to us. God reaches out to us in love. He initiates a relationship with us by making some promises to us. When we believe His promise of eternal life through Christ, we begin a relationship with God. Yet, this is only the beginning. God calls us to trust His promises and dare to live our lives as if we believe He will keep all of His promises. There is some risk involved in doing that. But unless we take that risk, we can never truly live the life of faith that God intends for us. God says, “Jump and I’ll catch you.”

Yet, there is a tension in this. While we are commanded to obey, Jesus works in us, through the Holy Spirit, to accomplish obedience. When Mother Teresa was asked about her world-renowned service, she replied, “I am just a little pencil in God’s hands…doing something beautiful for God.” In a mysterious way, we’re not called to work for God, but to let God work through us.

In Gen 17:1-27, we will see a mixture of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. And we will learn how God works to accomplish obedience in Abram’s life and ours. First, we will see…

1. God is a covenant-keeping God (17:1-8). Moses writes, “Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty’” (17:1a). These words break thirteen years of silence between God and Abram. God had not spoken to Abram since he took matters into his own hands by sleeping with Hagar and conceiving a son (16:16). After these silent years, Abram must have been greatly encouraged by this encounter with God. In this revelation, the Lord manifested Himself more fully in terms of His character and attributes. God referred to Himself as “God Almighty” (E1 Shaddai). So far, the primary name by which the Lord has revealed Himself is Elohim, meaning the God who creates and sustains nature. El Shaddai, on the other hand, refers to the God who constrains nature, the One who actually causes nature to do what is against itself. In other words, God is capable of working miracles. He created natural laws; He can violate natural laws.

E1 Shaddai is a designation, which emphasizes God’s infinite power (Exo 6:3). Interestingly, the word El means “the strong one,” while the word Shadd refers to the bosom of a nursing mother. This suggests that God is the One from whom Abram was to draw strength and nourishment. By a most tender image, God seems to be saying that we are empowered to live out our responsibilities in the covenant by feeding on Him, just as a child grows by feeding on the milk of its mother.

This is a timely word. Abram had spent the last thirteen years living with the strife and turmoil that his sinful decision had produced in Ishmael. Now Abram was about to learn that God’s promises are fulfilled not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord Almighty (Zec 4:6). It would be El Shaddai who would accomplish His will in Abram’s life! God is able, whatever the circumstance and whatever the difficulty (Eph 3:20). Do you believe this? Is there anything too difficult for God to accomplish in your life? Can He restore your marriage? Can He transform your wayward child? Can He redeem your job? If He truly is a supernatural God, then He can. Will you put your trust in Him to work in your life?

This almighty God says to Abram, “Walk before Me, and be blameless” (17:1b). As Enoch and Noah had walked with God (5:21-24; 6:9) so now Abram is commanded to “walk before God.” He is not commanded to jog, run, or make a mad dash, he is commanded to walk.

A few months ago, I shared with you about a severe planter’s wart I have had on the ball of my right foot. For the past six years, Lori and I have tried to remove this wart. Despite all the elaborate treatments, we have been unsuccessful. So this year, I went to a podiatrist. After two attempts to freeze it off, he too was foiled. Recently, I completed two weeks of classes at Talbot School of Theology on the campus of Biola University. During my stay I did not rent a car so I walked everywhere I went. I logged many miles (something that I’m not accustomed to). And guess what? My wart fell off! Talk about a shock! The war of the wart was won by walking. Many people fail to recognize how simple and straightforward the Christian life is: It requires a slow and steady walk with God; not 30 days to spiritual victory if you read this book or watch these DVD’s. God esteems the patient perseverance of walking before Him.

God also states that Abram is to “be blameless.” The word “blameless” means “complete, whole, having integrity.” Abram was to conduct himself as if always being in God’s presence. What a challenge for Abram and for us. It is easy to be blameless on Sunday morning but it is far more difficult to live a blameless life Monday through Saturday. I love the book title by Bill Hybels, Who You are When No One’s Looking. God wants His disciples to be people of integrity, not duplicity.

The Lord continues in 17:2: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly.” Two times in this verse, God says, “I will…” The promises of this covenant are from God (cf. 15:18). He takes the initiative. The word translated “establish” means “to set in motion.” At this time, the Lord is going to begin to fulfill His promises to Abram. The word “covenant” (berith) is central to this narrative. The phrase “My covenant” occurs nine times. The word “covenant” appears another four times. The use of the word “everlasting” captures God’s firm resolution to establish a people through Abram. What an encouragement this must have been to Abram. In spite of his rendezvous with Hagar (16:3-4), God was going to honor His covenant with him. Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful (2Ti 2:13). Regardless of what you have done, God wants to extend His grace to you. Have you sinned against God? Have you failed Him in your marriage vows, in your relationship with your children, in your work performance? Today, He says to you: Return to Me, I want to restore you. I want to bless you.

Upon hearing these words, “Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him” (17:3). Abram responds demonstratively. Why? He met with God! In the Bible, when men and women meet with God, there is some form of physical expression. It was not a “ho-hum” yawn of an experience. Typically, our posture reflects the attitude of our heart. It is very difficult to worship God without being expressive. The idea of worshipping God within one’s heart is a western phenomenon that is not practiced by the rest of the world and will not be in the eternal state (Rev 4-5). When you meet with God, I encourage you to express yourself to Him. If you are not comfortable doing so publicly, do so privately.

In 17:4-5, the Lord says, “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.” Abram is to be the father of other nations besides Israel. “Nations” is a key word that is repeated three times in 17:4-6. This serves as a reminder that God’s program includes all people: “every tribe, tongue, people, and nation” (Rev 5:9; Rev 7:9).

In these verses, God also changes Abram's name. "Abram" means "exalted father." Now God changes Abram's name to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude." How could Abraham ever live this name down? Every time his name is called, it reminds him how hollow the promise sounds.

Now he gets his family together and announces his new name. I can hear one of his servants saying, "You've got to be kidding. What a joke! You only have one child and that by a slave. Abram is losing his mind. The desert sun is getting to him."

While I was at Talbot, I developed friendships with students from all over the world. Talbot caters to different ethnic groups from all parts of the globe. Ten of the sixteen students in my doctoral cohort were Korean students. I learned that many Korean Christians take on a Christian name (e.g., Daniel, Joseph, Jonathan) once they become Christians. They do so because they recognize that they are new individuals with a new identity. They will never be the same again. They are expressing the same thought that God did when He gave Abram a new name (see Neh 9:7). As believers in Jesus Christ, we have also been given a new name and a new identity. Thus, we seek to live according to who we are.

God's drama continues, and it is for our benefit that He writes the script. He delights us with an age-old theme of just an ordinary man doing the extraordinary-a simple, humble man chosen to become the father of a great nation. Isn't it wondrous that God takes insignificant people like you and me and uses us beyond our greatest expectations (Psa 113:5-9; Eph 3:20)?

Notice the first two words of 17:6: "I will." These words occur five times in 17:6-8:

1. "I will make you exceedingly fruitful." God promises Abraham many descendants. This has been God's plan from the beginning (e.g., Adam, Noah).

2. "I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you." Not only would nations come from Abraham but even kings, eventually culminating in Jesus-"the King of Kings."

3. "I will establish my covenant between Me and you and your descendants." We worship God individually, but we also want to have a legacy of unbroken family members trusting in Christ.

4. "I will give you and your descendants the land as an everlasting possession." God will give not only descendants, but land as well.

5. "I will be their God." This last phrase is significant. God wants to be our God. He wants our relationship with Him to change our lives! This makes sense when you think about it. After all, you wouldn't expect to get married without it modifying your life at all. Imagine someone saying, "Oh yes, I'm married, but I don't let it affect my life. I do what I want with my money and my time. No, I don't spend time with my wife. Yes, I talk with her occasionally, but only when I really need something from her." You would think that was a pretty strange way to behave; yet people think that they can behave that way with God.

[God is a covenant-keeping God, but we will also see that…]

2. God expects our obedience (17:9-27). "God said further to Abraham, 'Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the

covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.'" Many people wrestle with the nature of this unconditional covenant. The question that is raised is: If this covenant depends upon God, why are conditions placed upon Abram? The answer is simple: Although God's promises to Abram were unconditional Abram's enjoyment of the blessings was conditional. In other words, within God's unconditional promises, God makes demands.

He commanded Abram and Sarai to leave their home and their extended family and go to a new land (12:1). He commanded them to be a blessing to others (12:2), to walk before Him and be blameless (17:1), and to circumcise the males in their household as a sign of the covenant (17:10). Although God's promises were unconditional, Abram's temporal participation in God's blessing was conditioned on his faithfulness and obedience to God's commands.

When God says, "You shall," He is not saying "My will is dependent upon your action. God does not say, "You must do this, and if you don't, I won't do what I've promised." God does not act like that. God is sovereign. God is going to do what He will do. But it is no less true and no less important that we must do something. In the case of Abraham, he was to circumcise himself and every male in his household. The word circumcision means "cutting around." It refers to a minor operation that removes the foreskin from the male organ. Only males underwent circumcision, of course. In the patriarchal society of the ancient Near East people considered that a girl or woman shared the condition of her father if she was single, or her husband if she was married. Circumcision was a fitting symbol for at least three reasons:

1. It would have been a frequent reminder to every circumcised male of God's promises involving seed. Circumcision of the male only may have signified the special responsibility, which God had assigned to the father. (This may have had particular significance to Abraham after the incident with Hagar.) God will bring about His seed in His time and in His way.

2. It was a physical reminder of sexual and spiritual fidelity. The male organ of procreation was to be set apart for the Lord's purposes rather than for sexual immortality. Abram had committed sexual immortality by sleeping with Hagar. Now he was to submit it to God. The male organ of procreation would be the vehicle through which the seed of man would pass, ultimately preparing the way for the Messiah. This sign alerted a member of the covenant never to use the organ bearing this mark in a promiscuous manner. If this part of man's body is devoted to the Lord, the entire man will be devoted to the Lord. All manners of sexual sin come from this organ. This organ is to be used for sexual pleasure in the context of marriage and godly offspring. Circumcision assured a wife of her husband's submission to the Lord. It reminded a husband that he belonged to the Lord. No Israelite man could ever engage in sexual relations without being reminded of the fact that he belonged to God.

3. It was an illustration of God's approach to dealing with the flesh (Col 2:10-12). The circumcised male was one who repudiated "the flesh" (i.e., the simply physical and natural aspects of life) in favor of trust in the Lord and His spiritual promises. Circumcision didn't save Abram or make him righteous before God (Rom 4:9-12). His righteous standing before God was on the basis of faith (11:30-31). Circumcision, water baptism, confirmation classes, communion, being born into a Christian home, being a part of a certain denomination, or even saying the sinners prayer are outward symbols of an inward faith. But apart from a changed heart and life, these religious symbols have nothing to do with

salvation.

In the New Testament, the physical act of circumcision is no longer required for believers. Instead, we are to be circumcised in our hearts, which is the seat of decision-making. This expresses three things:

1. It is an expression of our identification with Christ.

2. It is an expression of spiritual fidelity to the Lord.

3. It is an expression of cutting off or putting to death the sinful nature (Php 3:3). We are to have no reliance upon ourselves, but rely totally upon Him. That is the circumcised life.

This paragraph concludes in 17:14 with this warning: “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” Here is a classic play-on-words. God is saying, “If you don’t cut yourself, I’ll cut you off.” This is a reference to execution, sometimes by the Israelites but usually by God, in premature death. The person who refused to participate in circumcision demonstrated his lack of faith in God by his refusal. Thus he broke the covenant of circumcision. Only by keeping these conditions can man enjoy the blessings of God as guaranteed in the covenant.

In 17:15-16, God transitions in his discussion with Abraham. He says, “‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’” For emphasis Sarah’s name appears three times in these two verses. God is a God of grace. Sarah had been immoral. She asked her husband to commit adultery and polygamy. But God still blesses her. The names are two different forms of a word meaning “princess.” It is as though God is saying, “Now Sarah will really be a princess!” The Lord, possibly testing Abraham’s faith and his reliance on Him for help, did not specifically indicate that Sarah would be the mother. Abram undoubtedly assumed that Ishmael would be the promised heir until God told him that Sarah would bear his heir herself. That revelation is the most important feature of this chapter. God gave the name changes and circumcision to confirm the covenant promise of an heir and to strengthen Abram’s faith.

In 17:17, we read these words: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, ‘Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” In 17:3, Abram “fell facedown” exhibiting respect and reverence for the Lord. Here in 17:17, he again falls on his face but this time it is to hide his laughter. When Abram heard that God would greatly increase his descendants, he responded with respect and submission. But when he heard how God would carry out his plan, his respect contained a tinge of laughter.

Soren Kierkegaard said, “When you read God’s Word, you must constantly be saying to yourself, ‘It is talking to me, and about me.’” So put yourself in Abraham’s sandals for a moment. He began following God at age 75. He is now 99. He has been following God for 24 years. During these years God has repeatedly told him that he will have a son and he will possess the land. After 24 years, what does Abraham have to show for it? Nothing! He does not have a son nor does he possess the land. He and Sarah keep getting older. If you were 99 and your wife was 90, and God said you are going to have a son you would burst out laughing too! How would you like to be the mother of a two-year-old at 92 years of age? Just think about that for a moment! A two-year-old! How would you like to be 108 when he got out of high school and 112 when he got out of college? No wonder Abraham laughed! He said, “God, you’ve got

to be kidding!" It wasn't a disrespectful or cynical laugh (see Rom 4:18-21). It was a laugh of shock!

Why does God delay in our lives? His opportunity may not even begin until we have exhausted our own resources and all other options. His delay is designed to bring us to the point where we recognize that there is no human hope-our only hope is in God (Rom 4:18-21)!

In 17:18, Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" We must feel the agony of this request. All of Abraham's love, all of his hopes, and all of his dreams have been poured into this boy. Abraham was not expecting another son. He must have thought: "Lord, be reasonable. After all, Sarah is a very 'iffy' proposition whereas Ishmael is a certainty. Let's go with a sure thing." Abraham is seeking to protect God from the embarrassment of not keeping His promise. Abraham has gotten into the habit of being content with something less than what God intended. Be careful to ever limit God.

In 17:19, God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.'' God once again confirms His promise, but this time explicitly states that Sarah shall be the mother. God even says that the boy's name shall be "Isaac," which means "laughter." God thus made an ironic play on Abraham's response and his son's name. Every time he heard his son's name, Abraham would be reminded of the miraculous birth. God always gets the last laugh!

However, God is gracious. He responds to Abraham's request. He says, "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (17:20). God heard the prayers of Abram and He blesses Ishmael. As the Hebrew people would have twelve tribes, so Ishmael's people would also have twelve families. God blesses both believers and unbelievers (Mat 5:45). He is a gracious God-slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. Nevertheless, while sin can be forgiven, the consequences of sin can linger for a lifetime.

In 17:21-22, the Lord says, '"But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.' When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham." For the first time, God gave a specific date for the birth of the promised son. Within a year, Abraham would know whether or not God had fulfilled His promise.

Our story concludes in 17:23-27. Moses writes, "Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him." Now I want you to imagine this scenario: A 99-year-old father tells his 13-year-old son to go get a flint knife so that all the males in the household can be circumcised. Think about this. Most junior high kids won't even take out the garbage but somehow Ishmael is willing to be circumcised. Why? I believe that he observed his father's tendency to obey God and he was willing to follow his father's example. Fathers, are you that kind of a man? Is your life a model of obedience? Do your children see Christ in you?

Verses 23■27 stress three elements of obedience in our Christian lives.

1. Biblical obedience is complete. Abraham circumcised “every” male in his household. The words “all” and “every” are used four times in 17:23 and 27.

2. Biblical obedience is prompt. Abraham obeyed God “the very same day” (17:23, 26). Abraham did not say, “All right, God, I hear you. I know what You want. I’ll do it tomorrow, or next month, when I have a little more leisure time. I’ll do it after I do something else I want.” Abraham knew that the time to obey God was now.

3. Biblical obedience can be risky. Circumcision is quite painful and disabling (Gen 34). Abraham’s obedience rendered his family defenseless. He trusted God to protect and provide for his family. In order to be true to what I read in the Scripture, I have to take risks.

Again, it is important to note that circumcision was not a condition of the covenant but a sign of participation in it. Likewise, our responses to God are not the conditions of our salvation but are the appropriate and expected signs of our participation in the new covenant.

Why does God delay in our lives? Sometimes God’s opportunity does not come until our human extremity is reached. His opportunity to meet our need may not even begin until we have exhausted our own resources and all other options. His delay may be designed to bring us to a point where we recognize that there is no human hope-our only hope is God.

When God says, “Jump,” will you trust and obey and take that leap of faith?

Chapter 23

\"A Divine Encounter\" (Gen 18:1-15)

In a recent survey of a very large congregation in North America, the question was asked, “What do you fear the most?” The primary answer from the pew was a bit startling: “intimacy with God.” It’s possible that many Christians might give this same response. Why is this?

Let me pose another question: What would happen if God came to Thurston County? What if He came to your front door? How would you feel? What would you do? What would you not do? When God visits, people’s priorities are quickly laid bare. Lives change…for the better!

In Gen 18:1-15, Abraham experiences intimacy with God and once again discovers that God is a loving and patient God that reaffirms His covenant. We will learn from Abraham and Sarah’s reactions the proper way to react to God. First…

1. Respond to God’s intimate care (18:1-8). Our passage begins with the following account: “Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre [13:18; 14:13], while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men [18:10, 13, 16-17, 33; 19:1] were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by”’ (18:1-3). In chapter 17, the Lord had appeared to Abraham for the first time in thirteen years (17:1). Now, just a short time later, God appears again. The Lord is encouraging Abraham with His presence and friendship. The text says that the Lord (Yahweh) appeared to Abraham “in the heat of the day.” It was siesta time in the hot East and Abraham was resting at the door of his tent. Abraham did not see his three guests walking from a distance, they just appeared.

Many Bible students don’t believe that Abraham recognized the identity of the three men. Personally, I believe he did recognize the identity of the visitors. Abraham responded by running to meet them and bowing himself to the earth (18:2). Even though the ancient Middle East was known for its hospitality, I’m not sure that the 100-year-old Abraham would have responded with such fervor. The clues intensify. Abraham addresses one of the men as “my lord.” Unfortunately, this translation “my lord” is misleading, since the Hebrew text refers to a title for God (cf. 18:27, 31). The Hebrew reads adonay (“LORD”) not adoni (“lord” or “sir”). The ESV, NKJV, and KJV translate this title correctly. Finally, Abraham says, “if now I have found favor in your sight.” In the Scriptures, this is always spoken to one of a higher rank. These clues all point to the fact that Abraham recognized the Lord (cf. 12:7, 17:1).

We can assume that this was God, in the person of Jesus Christ, appearing to Abraham before He took on flesh and was born at Bethlehem. The Bible teaches that no man has ever seen God the Father (Joh 1:18; 1Ti 6:16). Therefore, if God appeared to someone in human form in the Old Testament, it makes sense that it was the second person of the Trinity, the God-man that we know as Jesus Christ.

Abraham responds with one of the greatest lines in Scripture: “My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by” (18:3). He was eager to encounter and experience God. He wanted God to remain with him so he said, “Please do not pass your servant by.” This is precisely how the church should respond when Jesus knocks to be invited in for fellowship (Mat 25:31-46; Joh 6:53-58; Rev 3:20; Rev 19:7). We ought to be receptive and responsive to His visitation. God is sovereign. He does visit

His people. He fulfills His plan and program. The only question is: Will He pass us by or will He come down and visit us? Typically, God only stays where He is wanted. He is not like a visiting in-law that forces his way into our home and then wears out his welcome. He wants to visit those that seek Him and desire Him. Today, can you honestly say that you long for God's appearing?

In 18:4-8, Abraham responds to the Lord with great zeal. He says, "'Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.' And they said, 'So do, as you have said.' So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.' Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds [yogurt] and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate." Abraham jumps to provide service and care for his guests. He prepares a basin for them to wash their feet and he promises them that he will bring "a piece of bread" (18:5). The Hebrew word translated "bread" (lehem) can refer either to bread specifically or to food in general. Based on Abraham's directions to Sarah in 18:6, bread was certainly involved, but 18:7 indicates that Abraham had a more elaborate meal in mind.

As this section unfolds, there is a striking emphasis on worship. [These principles are also relevant to hospitality.] Abraham demonstrates worship in three ways: (1) speed, (2) selection, and (3) service. First, we will look at speed. When Abraham saw the men, "he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth" (18:2). The text goes on to say that Abraham "hurried" into the tent to delegate the orders to Sarah (18:6). I love this verse because it is so realistic. Abraham is a lot like most husbands. He makes commitments without talking to his wife. Men, are you guilty of this? At one time or another, I think every one of us has been. In effect, Abraham says, "Come on in, I'll wash your feet. I'll feed you a meal. Rest with us. I will take care of you." But he has nothing prepared for these unexpected guests. So Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, "Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes." "Don't ask me any questions, Sarah," he might have said. "Don't give me the old lecture that I always over commit myself. Let's not have a family discussion. I'm in a bind. Bail me out!" Like a wonderful, loving wife, she does just that. In the very next verse, Abraham "ran" to his servant to have the best meal possible prepared (18:7). Good old Abraham definitely got his fair share of exercise when company came into town. The man took worship and hospitality seriously.

Not only was Abraham a man of speed but also he was a man of selection. Abraham prepared the best available food for his guests (18:6-8). He didn't hold back his first fruits for his family; rather he gave of his wealth to others. He was a man of great generosity. The feast that Abraham had prepared could have fed a small army. The ingredients for the bread cakes, "three measures of fine flour," are equivalent to about thirty quarts of flour, which would make a lot of bread. Depending on the breed of cow, the calf butchered for the meal could produce up to 100 pounds or more of tender veal. I call this "Abe's All You Can Eat Steakhouse."

Lastly, Abraham was willing to provide service. We know Abraham had 318 men in his household who were his servants (14:14), but here he himself becomes personally involved. He does not "pass the buck,"-he hastens to do this himself. Abraham sought the rest and refreshment of his company (18:4-5). He was after their best interests. So much so that Abraham was willing to make himself available to these men as a waiter/busser ("and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate," 18:8).

Throughout their encounter, the Lord treated Abraham as His friend. He shared an intimate occasion with him-a common meal. This was a unique privilege for Abraham. It was the only case before the incarnation in which Jesus ate food set before Him. There were certainly many other occasions on which the Lord appeared to people and they offered Him food. However, on all those occasions He turned the food into a sacrifice. But with Abraham, He enjoyed a special relationship. He sat down at the table and ate with him. God reveals Himself to those who desire Him.

[We are encouraged to respond to God's intimate care. Additionally, we are encouraged to…]

2. Rely on God's infinite resources (18:9-15). In the next seven verses, the narrative pans in on Sarah, Abraham's wife. Moses records: "Then they [the guests] said to him [Abraham], 'Where is Sarah your wife?' And he [Abraham] said, 'There, in the tent.' He [the LORD] said, 'I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son'" (18:9-10a). Again the narrative confirms that Abraham's guests were not ordinary men. They had used the new, divinely given name of his wife (17:15). Furthermore, the Lord affirmed His promise that Sarah would have a child the following year (cf. 17:21). He even promised that He would show up for the birth.

In 18:10b, we learn that "Sarah was listening at the tent door," behind Abraham. It was customary in Abraham's day, as in some cultures today, for women to be neither seen nor heard while male guests were entertained. Sarah thus prepared the bread out of the sight of the men (cf. 18:6), and now she remains inside the tent as they ate. While she carefully kept out of sight, her curiosity got the best of her. She may have peeped through the folds of the tent. At the least, she had her ear to the door, anxious to hear the conversation outside. I doubt that any of us could have avoided such temptation either.

In 18:11-12, the narrator gives us the inside scoop: "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'" Sarah had been infertile her entire life (cf. 11:30). She was now 90 years old and has been through menopause. So she was doubly dead in respect to childbearing. The promise that she would be a mother next year was absurd. In human terms it was impossible. So "Sarah laughed to herself." Here, laughter was not the result of stubborn resistance to God's will, but of hopelessness and years of disappointment.

Many of you have read the comic strip Peanuts by Charles Schultz. For many years there has been a recurring story line in which Lucy holds a football for Charlie Brown to kick. Each time she pulls it away at the last second, causing him to fall on his backside. One year Lucy solemnly promised Charlie Brown that this time she wouldn't pull the ball away. Thus encouraged he took a long run at the ball only to have her pull it way at the last second. As he lay on his back with a dazed look on his face, Lucy peered down at him and said, "Charlie Brown, your faith in human nature is an inspiration to all young people." Sarah became cynical. She won't try to kick that football again! God has pulled it away one too many times.

Ladies, before we move on, I'd like you to notice something very important. Even in her unbelief, Sarah calls Abraham "my lord" exhibiting respect for her husband (1Pe 3:6). Is this your response? Not that you need to call your husband "lord," but do you respect him? This is a challenging example for every wife to respect her husband (Eph 5:22-24). Sarah, however, needs to see beyond her lord (Abraham) and see her Lord. Wives, this word is also applicable to you.

In 18:13-14, the Lord turned and said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at

this time next year, and Sarah will have a son." I find it interesting that God confronts Abraham for Sarah's lack of faith. Had Abraham deliberately kept God's promise from her? Was his faith so weak that he could not convince his wife? Somehow he must give account for his wife's response. Abraham was the head of the home and was responsible for the spiritual instruction in the home. Sarah's response of disbelief had mirrored Abraham's (17:17). Sarah saw unbelief in Abraham and she responded in kind.

Husbands, are you modeling a life of faith to your wife? Fathers, what are you modeling for your family? When you're under pressure? Tired? In crisis? Discouraged? Do those that know you best and love you most see you as an exemplary man of faith?

Although the announcement of the birth of a son is made to Abraham, the focus of the narrative is clearly on Sarah's response. Sarah receives the same promise of a son. It must sound like a broken record. It's not nice to laugh at God! Laugh at me? I'll find another couple that will take me seriously. Even when we doubt His Word and laugh at His promises, God remains faithful (2Ti 2:13). We might think God would say, "I gave you this promise twice and twice you laughed at it. That's it! No more promise. I'll take it to someone who will appreciate it." Instead, God responded by dealing with her sin of unbelief, but not by taking away the promise. Instead, He reaffirms His promises to Abraham and Sarah. This is interesting. The underlying issue is the physical impossibility of the fulfillment of the promise through Sarah. Once the physical impossibility of Sarah's giving birth was clearly established, the Lord repeated His promise to Abraham.

God is sovereign over history. God prepares people by waiting. We want everything to change but we won't change. God waits so long because He's in it for His glory. Here is the bedrock issue. The only reason for such unbelief is a failure to comprehend the extent of God's ability to work in and through us. While it may not be reasonable to believe in resurrection, faith transcends reason.

The Lord had already told Abraham that Sarah would have son "at this time next year" (17:15-21). What, then, was the purpose of returning to repeat the announcement? We need to hear God's promises over and over again in order to strengthen and develop our faith. This is why we must assemble together for the teaching of God's Word. We desperately need instruction, whether we realize it or not.

The fact that the Lord knew Sarah had laughed and knew her thoughts demonstrated His supernatural knowledge to Abraham and Sarah (Psa 139:1-2; Psa 139:4; Heb 4:13; 1Jn 3:20). The Lord's rhetorical question, one of the great statements of Scripture, reminded the elderly couple of His supernatural power and further fortified their faith (cf. Jer 32:17; Jer 32:27; Mar 10:27; Luk 1:37).

The words of our Lord speak as loudly to Christians today as they did to Abraham, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (18:14a). What problems are you facing in life? Addictions? God can deliver you! Discouragement over an unbelieving spouse? God is faithful! A wayward child? Nothing is too hard for Him! Despair over debt or marital problems? Nothing is impossible for God. Do you see the importance of this passage for your everyday living? It applies to those with families and those without them. It applies to anyone who feels they are in an impossible situation.

• Those facing infertility…is your problem too hard for the Lord?

• Those facing an overwhelming illness…God is able to meet your needs.

• Those who look at their rebellious children and feel they are "hopeless"…The problem may seem beyond you…it is not too hard for the Lord.

• Those who face old wounds that seem impossible to overcome…is this beyond God's power to mend?

• Those raised in dysfunctional homes…God can unravel the mess and heal the pain.

• Those who look at the costs of a college education and say, "It is impossible." Do you really think it is impossible for the God of the Universe?

• Those who feel that their marriage is hopelessly over…the God who made you one can renew the love.

The list could go on. I suspect I've given enough examples to help you see your own need in the light of these words. The simple laughter of Abraham and Sarah reminds us that we often laugh when we should trust. We often throw our hands up in the air when we should be putting them together in prayer. We are too prone to focus on our lack of strength instead of His sufficient strength.

A question arises as to why the Lord is angry with Sarah's laughter at hearing that she would give birth to a son the following year; but the Lord does not appear to be angry with Abraham who earlier (17:17) also laughed at hearing that he and Sarah would have a child. It is clear that both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the news that they would have a son so late in life. The question, then, is this: Why was Sarah the only one who was rebuked? The fact that Abraham immediately posed the issue of Ishmael and how he would fit into the promised seed if another son were born shows that he too spoke out of unbelief, just as much as did Sarah. The issue was not just Ishmael's person, but his posterity as well. The promise of another son, Abraham feared, would destroy all hope that he had placed in the one already given. So Abraham was equally guilty of unbelief. So why the rebuke on Sarah?

It is true that Sarah only laughed to herself but so did Abraham. Nevertheless, the Lord saw what transpired in her inner being and openly spoke of His displeasure of the same. And since the principle from which both of their inward laughing sprang was the same (that is, unbelief, and not that one was a laugh of admiration and joy whereas the other was a laugh of disbelief and distrust), the unbelief of both of them was the main basis for the rebuke.

Does this mean that Abraham's unbelief was without blame, but Sarah's was? No, for the condemnation of one was equally a condemnation of the other. The text focuses on Sarah's unbelief because she went on to deny it (thereby making the issue memorable and newsworthy) and because, when the whole matter was ended, it also became the basis for the naming of Isaac, which is associated with the word "he laughs" or "laughter" (21:3, 6).

Our passage closes with these words: "Sarah denied it however, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. And He [the Lord] said, 'No, but you did laugh'" (18:15). Poor Sarah. When confronted about her laughter, she denies it. I would too. It's not nice to laugh at God! The Bible does not gloss over the sins of its heroes and heroines of faith (cf. 12:13). This is yet another indication that the Bible is God's Word. What other book would expose the failures of its heroes?

If this were the entire story, we would be tempted to say that this woman is no example to follow. But over in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, we get the rest of the story. There, in that wonderful eleventh chapter, the hall of fame of the heroes of faith, Sarah's name appears: "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful

who had promised (Heb 11:11). Now we begin to see what must have happened. After the guests left, Sarah was still thinking about what she had heard, and the words of the Lord came home to her heart in peculiar power, especially the question God had asked, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” (18:14) As Sarah thought about it, she had to face that question. Is there? Is anything too hard for the Lord? As Sarah began to think of the One who had said these words, she looked beyond the contrary facts of her own life and beyond the contrary feelings of her own heart and said, “Of course not. Nothing is too difficult for the Lord. If He has promised, then it shall be done.” Through faith she received power to conceive when she was past age because she counted Him faithful who had promised.

Chapter 24

\"If I was God…\" (Gen 18:16-33)

One of the facts that humans have yet to master is that we cannot outperform God. In the movie Patch Adams, the main character (Robin Williams) is an unconventional medical student who believes that humor and compassion are the most important tools of the doctor's trade. His idealism is shattered when his girlfriend, who has helped him start a free clinic based on these principles, is murdered by one of the psychotic patients. As Patch stands on a high cliff pondering suicide, he has the following monologue with God:

So answer me please-tell me what You're doing…You can create man, man suffers enormous amounts of pain; man dies. Maybe You should have had just a few more brainstorming sessions prior to creation. You rested on the seventh day-maybe You should have spent that day on compassion.

As he looks down into the valley far below, again considering the possibility of jumping, he says, tragically, "You know what? You're not worth it."

These same sentiments resound like an incessant gong throughout our society. Talk to any person on the street and you will likely hear doubts about the fairness of God doing this or that. In today's climate of tolerance, many reject the God of the Bible as an ogre. Sadly, many Christians unknowingly do the same. Whenever we raise questions about God's justice we suggest, as Patch Adams did, that we would be more just if given the chance. When we question God's love we imply that we can be more loving. When we question His grace, His mercy, His patience-name whatever attribute you will-if we think we can do them better than God, we have a defective view of God.

A.W. Tozer said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." So what comes to your mind when you think about God? Do you question Him? Do you doubt His love for you? Or do you trust Him and find your confidence in Him? Wherever you fall on this scale, God wants to increase your view of Him because right Christian living comes out of right Christian thinking. In Gen 18:16-33, we need to stop and reflect on our view of God. First, we must…

1. Understand God's purposes and plans (18:16-21). This section inaugurates a break from fellowship to judgment. After eating at "Abe's All You Can Eat Steakhouse" (18:1-15), Abraham and the three men walk off their meal. Notice that Abraham didn't just wave good-bye to his visitors. He walked with them awhile to "send them off" (18:16). It was during this time that Abraham learned about Sodom. If he hadn't taken the time to walk with them he would have never had the opportunity to understand God's purposes and plans. This is a simple principle: If we do not make time to spend with the Lord we will not understand His ways and will be confused in our thinking about Him (Isa 55:8-9). We can't build a relationship with God "on the fly." If we are going to attempt to understand God's ways, we need to make time to do so. When we make time to be with the Lord, His will and His plans are revealed to us.

During this farewell jaunt, the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed?" (18:17-18) The Lord chooses to disclose His intentions to Abraham because he is to be a channel of blessing to all the nations of the earth (12:2a; 13:3b). Additionally, Abraham is the only man in Scripture that is called God's "friend" (2Ch 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jam 2:23); and good friends share intimate secrets with

each other. This is an important truth. There is a difference between a servant and a friend. A servant may not know his master's purposes, but a friend does (Joh 15:15). In John 14-15, Jesus invites disciples to enjoy friendship with Him. Yet, He explains that friendship is conditional-it is based on obedience (14:21, 23). Can you say that you are actively and intentionally seeking to obey Christ in very area of your life? Do you long to be His friend? If so, tell Him today of your intent to obey Him and become more intimate.

In 18:19, the Lord further explains His purposes for Abraham: "For I have chosen (lit., "known") him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." Abraham was chosen to be a blessing to the whole earth (12:2-3), but his vocation was to begin to take effect in the simplest way. He was called to "command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD." His being a blessing to the world depended on his being a blessing to his own home. Do you share this priority? Does your heart resonate with God's fatherly heart? Have you spent the necessary time this past week investing well in your children? Are you helping them to "keep the way of the LORD?" There is no greater task that parents must fulfill.

It is important to recognize that grace was not transmitted automatically to Abraham's offspring, but through godly parenting (Deu 6:6-9; Psa 132:11-12; see also Eph 6:4). This is a general rule today as well. One of my daily prayers is that Lori and I would do four things for our children: (1) pray for them, (2) instruct them, (3) exemplify Christ, and (4) discipline them. The acrostic "PIED" helps me to remember these critical prayers. While I believe that any success in parenting is the result of God's grace, I also believe that God requires parents to be faithful in this most important stewardship. In my experience, it is usually parental failure in one of these four areas that causes children to not keep the way of the Lord. Parents, this reality ought to shake us to our core. In which of these four areas are you weak? Are you committed to grow in a particular area? Jesus was deeply concerned about the spiritual health and maturity of children. In all three synoptic Gospels, He declared, "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mat 18:6; cf. Mar 9:42; Luk 17:2). These are sobering words for parents.

The Lord further tells Abraham that he will accomplish this task by training his children in "doing righteousness and justice" (cf. Mic 6:8). As we shall see, these desired behaviors are contrasted with the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:20-21). Like Abraham, we are to instruct our children in "doing righteousness and justice." This means explaining to them what God expects of His followers when it comes to right living and justice and then providing them opportunities to fulfill God's commands. This may lead to ministering together as a family in capacities that carry out righteousness and justice.

The last phrase in 18:19: "so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him," emphasizes the conditional aspect of God's unconditional covenant with Abraham. If Abraham and his descendants are to personally enjoy the benefits of the covenant, they must follow God's commandments. Like Abraham, if we are to enjoy our fellowship with God, we must obey Jesus. When we do we experience the abundant life (Joh 10:10). Today, is this your experience? Or do you feel worried and miserable? God wants you to experience all that He has for you but it takes place as you obey His will. Right Christian living comes out of right Christian thinking.

In 18:20-21, the Lord continues to speak, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry,

which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." We naturally think of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah as largely sexual in nature. After all, Sodom provides the basic word (sodomy) for sins outside of normal sexuality. But if we imagine the sins of these cites only in sexual terms, we miss the depth of their depravity. The word for "outcry" is used in Scripture to describe the cries of the oppressed and brutalized. It is used for the cry of the oppressed widow or orphan (Exo 22:22-23), the cry of the oppressed servant (Deu 24:15), and the cries of Israel in Egypt (Exo 2:23; Exo 3:7; Exo 3:9). This is confirmed by Ezekiel who described the inhabitants of Sodom: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it" (Eze 16:49-50).

There is an equation in this passage that is instructive:

Arrogance + abundant food + careless ease = a lack of concern to help the poor and the needy.

This eventually led to haughtiness and "abominations" (the sins we usually equate with Sodom). Yes, Sodom was sexually depraved (2Pe 2:6-7; Jud 1:7); but there were also no human rights. The poor, the needy, and the defenseless were especially brutalized. Why? Because Israel was arrogant, had abundant food, and careless ease. (See NIV: "overfed and unconcerned.") The application is clear, although it will not be popular: Most of us are proud and idle people who need to go on a diet!

The sad reality is "abundant food" leads to "arrogance" and "careless ease." However, few of us worry about how much we eat or how much our fellow believers eat. Gluttony seems to be one of the few acceptable sins in our churches. We might condemn the abuse of alcohol and smoking as sins against our bodies, the temples of the Holy Spirit (1Co 6:19). Yet we refuse to preach against overeating, poor diets, and obesity, even when the temples of the Holy Spirit in our churches start to look more like amphitheaters.

No, this is not a pitch for the South Beach or Atkins diet. My point is that we forget that our bodies, spirits, and actions are intricately intertwined. If we grow arrogant or complacent in our hearts, our prayers wane and we forget about the needs of others around us. We begin to care less about others, whether they're across the street, across cultural barriers, or across oceans. And if we allow ourselves to live as "overfed" people-with no apparent curbing of our gluttonous appetites-it follows that we will lose a sense of concern for others. How apathetic and sleepy we get when our bellies are too full.

Ezekiel's condemnation of those who were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned for the poor has forced me to scrutinize my own life to make sure my appetites are not dulling my spiritual senses and numbing my compassion. The greatest evaluation of whether we're guilty of the sin of Sodom is whether we're genuinely hospitable to poor people.

In 18:21, the Lord declares, "I will go down and see…" He is not going down to learn the facts; He already knows everything (Job 38-39; Ps 139). This is Moses' figurative way of saying that God always thoroughly investigates the crime before passing sentence (see 3:11-13; 4:9-12; 11:5). By this He assures Abraham that He would base His judgment on full, accurate information He already perfectly knew.

In this verse, we must come to grips with the reality that God personally observes sin (18:21). The Hebrew text literally states, "I will go down personally and see if their sin is made complete." Sin has been building up in Sodom. God has delayed judgment because of His love and mercy. More sin builds up. Now the cup

of sin has been filled, and God moves in judgment. And He does it personally. He does not send angels or other messengers. He does not judge sin on what others report. He does not judge the observations of His assistants. He does it Himself. He never delegates the matter of judgment.

I need to ask a very sobering question: How much sin would you carry out if God was sitting next to you? Most Christians would not want to sin in the presence of God, yet we do so constantly. Could it be that we don't recognize the nearness of God? In our busyness and stress, we commit all kinds of sin without realizing that we are doing so in the face of God. Yes, not only is He looking down and observing our lives; He's also living inside us (Eph 4:30; 1Th 5:19).

[We have been urged to understand God's purposes and plans. Now we will be challenged to…]

2. Understand God's justice and grace (18:22-33). In 18:22-23, Moses writes, "Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. Abraham came near and said, 'Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?'" The two angels leave and the Lord remains with Abraham. Abraham then "came near" and began praying. The principle is this: Effective prayer is a matter of drawing near to God so we can pray with His heart. In this section, Abraham, the friend of God, becomes a true friend of men. Earlier Abraham was the savior of Sodom (14:13-16); now he becomes Sodom's intercessor. To "intercede" is to plead the case of another person. When a friend speaks up on behalf of a student about to be punished, that friend is interceding. Here, Abraham's relationship with God had taken on a new dimension-concern for someone other than himself. The previous dialogues between Abraham and God (Gen 12, 15, 17) had all concerned the covenant promises and Abraham's need for assurance that the promises were true and irrevocable.

In his willingness to be an intercessor Abraham is like Jesus, because the greatest intercessor of all time is Jesus. He is interceding for us even now (Rom 8:26-27). Every Christian can know that Jesus is at the right hand of God the Father interceding for him. Jesus prays for exactly the right things for us. He prays that we might be kept from being captured by Satan, that we might be kept in unity, and that our faith might continue. The reason why the Christian survives at all is because he has a great Intercessor. Yet Jesus' intercession is also done through His church. By His Spirit He leads us to pray for each other. Praying for others in this way is one of the greatest things we can ever do. Prayer is also one of the most unselfish things you can ever do. It identified with God and with Jesus. It is truly Christlike. Abraham is never more like God than at the moment he is praying for Sodom. His prayer did not save the city, and it was never intended to do so, but it did make Abraham manifest in his own life the mercy and the compassion of God. This is why God asks us to pray, that we might take upon ourselves something of His own character.

In 18:24-25, Abraham says, "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" Abraham's primary purpose seems to have been to secure justice (i.e., deliverance) for the righteous minority in their wicked cities. Secondarily, he wanted God to spare the cities. This interpretation finds support in Abraham's appeal to the justice of God rather than to His mercy (18:25). This appeal was the basis of his intercession. Abraham was jealous for the Lord's reputation among his neighbors. If this was his primary purpose, Abraham succeeded in obtaining justice for the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah.

In 18:26, the dialogue continues. The Lord replies, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.” To save the cities for ten righteous showcases God’s amazing grace. Although He is a God of justice (Deu 32:4), His grace is all-encompassing and all-surpassing. When we ponder this truth it will affect our lives. Right Christian living comes out of right Christian thinking.

In 18:27 Abraham replies, “Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes.” Abraham models profound deference and humility when he says, “I am but dust and ashes.” By this he means, dust in origin, ashes at the end. We ought to approach God with this same reverence and awe.

In 18:28-29, Abraham says, “‘Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ He spoke to Him yet again and said, ‘Suppose forty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it on account of the forty.’” Abraham turns into a reverse auctioneer.

In 18:30-32, Abraham said, “‘Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it if I find thirty there.’ And he said, ‘Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the twenty.’ Then he said, ‘Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the ten.’” Abraham’s boldness grew and for his last petitions he lowered the number of necessary righteous by tens! The Bible tells us that God is a “consuming fire” (Heb 10:31; Heb 12:29) and yet it also tells us to come to Him boldly (Heb 4:14-16). The Bible also exhorts us to persist in prayer (Luk 18:1-8). A man becomes physically strong by working continuously. A weight lifter trains constantly. Someone has said prayer is the gymnasium of our soul. Only through persistent prayer is our faith exercised and strengthened.

One of the questions from this text is: Why did Abraham stop at the number ten? Why did he not press for five? The answer was that he probably felt there were at least ten righteous people in Sodom. It may be that he figured that there were ten righteous people in Lot’s family (Lot, his wife, at least two sons (19:12), at least two married daughters and their husbands (19:14), and two unmarried daughters (19:8)-exactly ten). Even if the daughters of 19:14 had not yet married their fiancés, and were the same as the daughters of 19:8, it was plausible to assume that Lot could find two other righteous people somewhere in the city of Sodom. Yet, Abraham misjudged God’s grace. He bargained all the way down to ten, but God exceeds his requests and delivers the four who “qualify” anyway (19:12-22). God’s grace always exceeds our expectations (Eph 3:20).

Our passage closes with the following words: “As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place” (18:33). It does not say, “And the Lord went His way when Abraham had finished speaking to Him.” It says, “As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed.” In other words Abraham did not quit here, God did. Intercession doesn’t change God’s plans; it changes us. God changed Abraham’s understanding of divine justice and mercy. Abraham did not change the mind of God; he demonstrated it. God did not suddenly alter His purposes; He informed Abraham of His purposes so that He could evidence His mercy and justice and compassion.

But that raises an interesting question: Why did God allow Abraham to intercede for Sodom? After all, God already knew the facts and He already knew what He was going to do. Doesn’t that render Abraham’s

request useless? To say it that way is to come up against the greatest mystery of prayer. If God already knows what He is going to do, why pray? Some of the answers to that question may be seen in our text. First, God allowed Abraham to intercede in order to reveal His mercy. Second, He did it so that we would know that He (God) takes no pleasure in destroying the wicked. Third, Abraham's prayer shows us the power righteous people can have. Fourth, in a larger sense, it teaches us the value of intercession. This is the purpose of prayer.

In 1886, Dr. John Pemberton introduced Atlanta, Georgia to his caramel-colored syrup concoction. He first distributed this drink to Jacobs Pharmacy where Coca-Cola was sold for the first time. As its popularity rose, Dr. Pemberton's concern was that every person alive should be able to taste his product at least one time in his or her life!

It has been over 100 years since Dr. Pemberton's concern took action. Surveys now show that 97% of the world has heard of Coca-Cola, 72% has seen a can of Coca-Cola, and 51% has tasted Coca-Cola! What we need are more people like Dr. Pemberton that will let their concern move them to action! An understanding of God's justice and grace is far more valuable than Coca-Cola. Can we equal Dr. Pemberton's burden and fervor and share it with others? Right Christian living comes out of right Christian thinking.

Chapter 25

\"Sin and the City\" (Gen 19:1-38)

How many of you would like to get a tan this summer? In our society, there's something culturally attractive about having a deep, dark tan. But here's a sad reality. Noted dermatologist Michael Kalman warns, "Today's deeply tanned beauties are tomorrow's wrinkled prunes." (Now, I'm sure he means that with all due respect.) If we're aware at all of the research being done on the sun's rays and the sensitivity of our skin, we know that we may one day pay a price for looking good.

Sin is like getting a tan. It may look and feel great today, but tomorrow it can bring consequences. In Genesis 19, we are going to be scorched with the insanity of sin! In this chapter, we will learn about the depravity of man, the judgment of God, and the failure of believers.

Our story begins in 19:1-3: "Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. And he said, 'Now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant's house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way.' They said however, 'No, but we shall spend the night in the square.' Yet he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate." Verse 1 informs us that two angels came to Sodom "in the evening." The evening scene is deliberately contrasted with the noontime scene when Abraham met these same angels (cf. 18:1). These angels approached Lot at the "gate of Sodom." The city gate was the place where the civic leaders met to finalize legal and business transactions. It was a place of prominence and influence. The implication is Lot had achieved not only his material goals but also his social and political ambitions. He had arrived! Yet, at this moment he was not aware of what his earthly success would eventually cost him.

Keep in mind, Lot started well. In Gen 12:4, he was a faithful member of Abraham's entourage and trekked the full 800 miles from Ur to Cannan. Unfortunately, when Abraham selflessly presented Lot with a choice of land, he selfishly chose the lush land. Thus, he went from looking toward Sodom (13:10), to pitching his tent toward Sodom (13:12), to living in Sodom (14:12), to eventually becoming an important leader in Sodom. Lot could be a poster boy for spiritual compromise. The fact that Lot had worked his way up to become one of Sodom's leading citizens indicates that he was no longer a threat to their immoral way of life. The people of Sodom must have said, "Lot, we like you. You were smart to give up that nomadic existence because you have the gifts of leadership that we need here. And because you are a shrewd man, we're willing to give you a place of honor at the city gate."

Take note: You do not get honored in Sodom unless you have decided to be quiet about your faith. If you are so well thought of by the world that you compromise your testimony, you have paid too much for your success. If everyone likes you, you're probably a quiet Christian. You may be like the Artic River, frozen over at the mouth. But if you talk about Jesus Christ and are willing to lovingly call sin "SIN," I can assure you that you're not going to be popular with everyone. Always beware of a politician who is popular and well liked across the board-that usually means he or she stands for nothing. The same is true with a Christian.

In 19:2-3, Lot invited these visitors into his home. When they refused his invitation, Lot "urged them strongly" to enter his home. Lot would not take "no" for an answer. He did some major arm-twisting until

they said “yes.” Lot knew the wickedness of his city (cf. Jdg 19:18-20). Undoubtedly, he had witnessed the abusive behavior of his fellow Sodomites toward other unsuspecting visitors.

So he insisted that these two angels in disguise spend the night in his home. Unfortunately, if Lot had hoped his guests had entered his home unnoticed, he was tragically mistaken.

In 19:4-7: “Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them.’ But Lot went out to them at the doorway, and shut the door behind him, and said, ‘Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly.’” In 19:4, Moses attempts to emphasize that every man and boy in Sodom is dangerous and wicked. This seems over the top. After all, most little boys do not practice homosexual rape. How was the perversion so widespread? We may not like the answer. Evidently, the older men discipled the children in sexual deviance. Undoubtedly, there was sexual abuse in the home that caused the little boys to respond like they did. This tragic storyline continues today. In the US, one in three girls and one in four boys has been sexually abused before they reach the age of eighteen! Consequently, we live in a sexually confused society. Men, you can model and disciple your boys in purity or perversion. The choice is yours. However, if you choose the latter, your boys will turn into young men with all kinds of addictions that will alter their lives forever. Today, choose to intentionally model and disciple your boys (and girls) in purity.

Sodom and Gomorrah have become a proverbial symbol of wickedness, perversion, and moral depravity. In 18:16-33, I addressed some unfamiliar sins that Sodom was guilty of: arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease that resulted in being unconcerned about the poor and needy (Isa 1:10; Isa 1:17; Eze 16:49-50). Yet the Scriptures also mention that they were guilty of rejecting God’s Word (Luk 10:8-12), adultery, lying, and abetting the criminal (Jer 23:14), and here homosexual perversion (Eze 16:44-59; Jud 1:6-7; 2Pe 2:6-7). Thus, this passage and several others clearly identify the practice of homosexuality as sinful (e.g., Lev 18:22; Lev 20:13; Rom 1:21-27; 1Co 6:9-10; 1Ti 1:8-10). God’s original intent has not changed. From the very beginning, God ordained marriage between one man and one woman (Gen 1:27; Gen 2:24). However, we must be careful not to imply that homosexuality is the vilest sin. From God’s perspective, sin is sin. That means the adulterer, the pornographer, the gossip, and the slanderer are just as guilty.

In 19:8, Lot responds to the Sodomites with a startling suggestion: “Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof.” This offer is horrible and cannot be justified. We understand it a little more when we consider the low place of women in the pre-Christian world and the very high place of any guest in your home. It was understood a guest was to be protected more than your own family. However, Lot’s response is sick and wrong. I don’t have two daughters, I have one and I cannot even fathom what Lot is saying here. How could a father even make such a statement? It is against reason, against nature, and against love. It is against everything a father believes. How could a father make such an offer? The only answer I find to be reasonable is that sin is insane. Even though Lot believed in God, he had been contaminated by the culture in which he lived. He did something he thought he would never do because sin is insane.

We have all had similar experiences. Have you ever said, “Well, Lord, I want You to forgive me for this sin. I have really struggled in this area of my life. I promise You that I will never do it again.” We have all made similar commitments. Guess what we did? We walked right out the door and fell in to that area of sin

again. It doesn't make sense-sin is insane! It doesn't operate on logical, rational principles.

In this context, Lot (a believer) says, "You homosexuals (unbelievers) are wicked; here, rape my girls!" We're often just as crooked as the unbelievers. The world mocks us because of all the hypocrisy they see in the church…and even in our lives. Their response to us is, "The Catholic priests are pedophilias.

The mega- church pastors are involved in this or that. There are scandals everywhere. We don't claim to be Christians. Yet, you do and you're hypocrites."

This verse should remind us to be especially humble and gracious as we interact with unbelievers. Peter aptly said that judgment begins first with the household of God (1Pe 4:17). We need to take the log out of our own eye (Mat 7:3).

Fortunately, the sick Sodomites did not take Lot up on his offer. Rather, they told him to, "'Stand aside.' Furthermore, they said, 'This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge; now we will treat you worse than them.' So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. But the men reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. They struck the men who were at the doorway of the house with blindness, both small and great, so that they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway" (19:9-11). Lot may have had a degree of political power, but his spiritual influence was pathetic. The men of Sodom identified him as "an alien." Instead of being the salt of the earth, Lot had become tasteless and was good for nothing, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. Ironically, the two angels prevented Jesus' words in Mat 5:13 from being fulfilled in their midst. As the men of Sodom were trying to break down the door, the two angels grabbed Lot, shut the door, and struck the perverts with blindness.

In 19:12-14, Moses writes, "Then the two men said to Lot, 'Whom else have you here? A son-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whomever you have in the city, bring them out of the place; for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has sent us to destroy it.' Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, and said, 'Up, get out of this place, for the LORD will destroy the city.' But he appeared to his sons-in-law to be jesting." In those twilight hours before sunrise, we can only imagine Lot's frantic effort to convince his own family of God's impending judgment. But because of his spiritual compromise, only his wife and two daughters were able to leave the city. Compromise had destroyed his testimony. In fact, Lot had lost such credibility with his sons-in-law that they treated his message as a joke. Notice that we are not told that they refused to believe Lot so much as they did not even take him seriously. There seems to be only one possible explanation: Lot had never mentioned his faith before. His words were not a repetition of his lifelong warnings of sin and judgment-they are something totally new and novel. What a rebuke to the witness of Lot. It is one thing to warn men and have them reject our message. It is far worse for them not even to consider our words as spoken seriously. The most serious moment of Lot's life was ridiculed by his children, who in effect said, "Dad, you can't be for real! You're a joke!" This is logical, though. When you possess a tasteless testimony, your family is always the first to pick up on it! Do you have a sense of urgency when it comes to spiritual matters? Do your children and loved ones know that you are dead serious about escaping God's wrath? Do they know that you are banking everything on the person and work of Christ?

In 19:15-16, Moses writes, "When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.' But he

hesitated. So the men seized his hand and the hand of his wife and the hands of his two daughters, for the compassion of the LORD was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city." Verse 15 strikes me so funny because the angels command Lot with the word "up." This is my four-year-old daughter's favorite word. Whenever she sees me, she commands me by saying, "up…up…up," until I take her in my arms, lift her up, and hold her. For Jena, it is a command of urgency. It was for the angels as well. The angels warn Lot. They tell him there are great consequences for sin but he delays responding to God. One would think that Lot would have been so overcome with gratefulness that he would have immediately obeyed the command to flee for the mountains; but urban life had its icy fingers around his throat. Lot was so attached to this present world of family, friends, power, and material things that he just could not bear the thought of leaving it all behind (see 1Jn 2:15-17). He felt more secure inside an evil city than outside of it with God.

Yet, God still exercises His "compassion" and delivers Lot. What a reminder to you and me that deliverance or salvation and Christian growth is dependent upon God's mercy (Tit 3:5).

In 19:17-23 the account continues, "When they had brought them outside, one said, 'Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away.' [See Luk 9:62.] 'Oh no, my lords! Now behold, your servant has found favor in your sight, and you have magnified your lovingkindness, which you have shown me by saving my life; but I cannot escape to the mountains, for the disaster will overtake me and I will die; now behold, this town is near enough to flee to, and it is small. Please, let me escape there (is it not small?) that my life may be saved.' He said to him, 'Behold, I grant you this request also, not to overthrow the town of which you have spoken. Hurry, escape there, for I cannot do anything until you arrive there.' Therefore the name of the town was called Zoar." Lot is saying, "I'll run out of Vegas, but can I run to Reno." He just can't shake the city life. Lot flees temptation and then leaves a forwarding address. Amazingly, the angels give Lot over to his sinful behavior (Rom 1:24; Rom 1:26; Rom 1:28). This is yet another example of how divine grace, not human righteousness is the basis of God's deliverance.

In 19:24-25, "The sun had risen over the earth when Lot came to Zoar. [The sun motif is an Old Testament picture of God's salvation.] Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. In the midst of God's deliverance, we see His judgment. Three times in these two verses, Moses points to God's sovereign initiative and judgment in obliterating these cities. He did this…it was the work of His hands. Yet, many Christians like to say, "I am a Christian, but I'm not the "fire and brimstone" type. The problem with this statement is the Bible is full of God's judgment. Thus, whether we like it or not, we must be "fire and brimstone" Christians. God is a God of judgment.

In 19:26, we come across an intriguing verse: "But his wife, from behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt." The Hebrew verb translated "looked back" signifies an intense gaze, not a passing glance (cf. 19:17). Furthermore, in Luk 17:28-32, Jesus implies that Lot's wife returned to Sodom: "It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house must not go down to take them out; and likewise the one who is in the field must not turn back. 'Remember Lot's wife.'" She lost her life because of her reluctance to let go of her household stuff. She was a wife after Lot's own heart. Her sorrow over her goods so fixated her that she could not or would not move. Perhaps

she decided that she would be better dead than separated from her possessions. Ethan Allen furnishings and Nordstrom's attire consumed her. Ladies, is this a struggle for any of you? If it is, remember that all that Lot and his wife had gained by living in Sodom burned up like wood, hay, and stubble (cf. 1Co 3:10-15).

By the way, Mrs. Lot's family never saw it happen. They had obeyed the warning about not looking behind them. Not until later did they realize what had occurred. There's a definite lesson here about running from wrong: Even if others are disobedient, you must be obedient!

In 19:27-29, Moses provides a parenthetical comment for us. "Now Abraham arose early in the morning and went to the place where he had stood before the LORD; and he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the valley, and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land ascended like the smoke of a furnace. Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived."

The substitution of Abraham for Lot in the phrase: "God remembered Abraham," (19:29; cf. 8:1) makes an important theological point. Lot was not saved on his own merits but through Abraham's intercession. This is the second time Lot owes his life to his uncle (cf. 14:12-14). Previously, he was delivered from capture and now from death. Abraham prays and then trusts the Lord with the results. God hears and answers prayers.

We are to rescue those who have sold out to Sodom. We are to rescue those who are entrenched in their sin. There are two ways we must do this: Pray and act. Lot wasn't destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah because of Abraham's prayer (18:16-33; 19:27-29). It was James who said that the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much (Jam 5:16). In amazing fashion, God sovereignly used Abraham to accomplish His own purpose to save Lot. God loves to work through the prayers of His people. So who are you presently praying for God to rescue?

In 19:30-38, Moses records this tragic conclusion. "Lot went up from Zoar, and stayed in the mountains, and his two daughters with him; for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; and he stayed in a cave, he and his two daughters. Then the firstborn said to the younger, 'Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him that we may preserve our family through our father.' So they made their father drink wine that night, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. On the following day, the firstborn said to the younger, 'Behold, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve our family through our father.' So they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. [There is tragic irony in this section. In 19:8, Lot had offered his two virgin daughters to be victimized by the perverts of Sodom. Now later in the same account, these same daughters victimize a drunk Lot who carried out the very act which he himself had suggested to the men of Sodom-he lay with his own daughters.] The firstborn bore a son, and called his name Moab; he is the father of the Moabites to this day. As for the younger, she also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi; he is the father of the sons of Ammon to this day." Nine months later, Lot became a father and a grandfather at the same time. These two nations were born of this incestuous relationship. While God dealt kindly with these nations because of their relationship to Abraham (Deu 2:19), they were a continual source of grief and conflict to

Abraham and his descendants. Zep 2:9 informs us that eventually, these nations would suffer the same judgment as Sodom and Gomorrah.

This account is one of the most graphic and repulsive in the Scriptures. Why does Moses include it in Genesis? For two reasons:

• First, to reveal the consequences of sin. Moab and Ammon provide the worst carnal seduction in the history of Israel (i.e., Baal-Peor, Num 25) and the cruelest religious perversion (i.e., Molech, Lev 18:21).

• Second, to demonstrate that the spiritual shallowness of parents is often duplicated and amplified in their children. Evidently, trusting in God didn't even occur to them. This is another indictment against Lot's failed spiritual leadership. His daughters simply mirrored the spiritual compromise of their father. Lot was able to take his daughters out of Sodom, but he was not able to take Sodom out of his daughters.

Later in Israel's history, the tribes of Moab and Ammon cause numerous problems for the people of God, even to becoming the enemies of God's people (as such they at one time were barred from entry into the assembly of the Lord for ten generations, cf. Deu 23:3). The Moabites and the Ammonites also became idol worshippers and even led the Israelites astray into idolatry (cf. 1Ki 11:33). Yet, strangely, God at times protects the interests of the Moabites and the Ammonites (cf. Deu 2:9; Deu 2:19; Deu 2:37), perhaps because of His regard for Lot, the ancestor of those two nations-and God permits Moabite blood to be part of the line of the Messiah (cf. Rth 1:4-5; Rth 4:13; Rth 4:17). But in time, God uses what was evil for good as only He can (50:20). Eventually, out of the lineage of the godless Moabite race came a woman named Ruth, and subsequently Jesus Christ (Rth 4:18-22; Mat 1:5).

Desperation and fear can make us do sinful things. Yet, we are not much different than Lot's daughters. Have you ever said to God, "I must have a husband (or a wife) for my life to be meaningful"-or "I must have children," or "I must have a career," or "I must have good health," or whatever? If there is anything in your life that you must have, apart from God, then it is your idol. When push comes to shove and you have to choose between serving your idol and serving God, then you will find out where your real commitment lies.

At this point, it is natural to ask: Is Lot a saint or an "ain't?" (I know this isn't proper.) The answer is: he is a "tainted saint." In 2Pe 2:7-8, the apostle Peter calls Lot "righteous" three times in two verses. If he had not emphasized this fact, no one would believe Lot was saved. While Lot was righteous, there is very little or no fruit evident in his life. This is an example of a believer that will be saved yet as through fire (1Co 3:15)-he will be saved but singed. The life of Lot shows us that it is possible to have a saved soul and a wasted life.

How many of us are like Lot? We're Christians, yes. But we also want to have our part of the world. We must have our slice of the action. We feel that we can't possibly give it up completely; that would be simply too great a cost to bear. So, like Lot, we seek instead to do our best in a hopelessly compromised situation, trying to maintain dual citizenship in the world and in heaven.

Ten years ago, Lori and I made a summer trip around the western half of the US. One of our stops was in Arizona, where we visited her grandparents. While we were there, it was very hot but since it was a dry heat we decided to lie out and enjoy the sun. After combing the landscape, we decided that the best place would be the roof. So we climbed the attic stairs, opened the hatch, and climbed up on the flat surface. We had music, sunglasses, and drinks. We were set! After a while, Lori decided to go in and spend some time

with her grandparents. She urged me to go in as well. She warned me that I would get burned if I stayed out in the Arizona sun. I told her I would be fine. I assured her that I was man enough to handle it. I chose to stay out.

An hour and a half later when I woke up…I stood to my feet, eyed myself, and smiled at how good I looked. I was bronzed to perfection. So I headed downstairs feeling pretty smug only to be greeted by looks of horror! Lori and her grandparents wanted to know what on earth happened to me. I looked at my skin once again and sure enough I was a walking, talking lobster. You see, when I woke up and first looked at my skin, I was standing atop an adobe roof in the Arizona sun. I could not see how scorched I was. But when I went downstairs and was no longer blinded by the sun's deceiving rays, I could see what I had done to myself. For the next several days, I could hardly move or sleep. Lori had to apply the gel from Aloe Vera leaves to my sun-scorched body. I was miserable. Fortunately, the consequences for failing to heed Lori's warning were temporal. This is not so with warnings from the Lord. There can be both temporal and eternal ramifications for your actions.

Believer, sin is insane! It deceives, then defiles, and then destroys. If God is calling you to forsake sin today, respond to Him before irreparable damage occurs.

Suggested Reading on Same-Sex Attraction

Overview

Robert Jeffress, Hell? Yes!: And Other Outrageous Truths You can Still Believe (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2004), 93-118.

Erwin W. Lutzer, The Truth About Same-Sex Marriage:6 Things You Need to Know About What's Really at Stake (Chicago: Moody, 2004).

N. Allan Moseley, Thinking Against the Grain: Developing a Christian Worldview in a Culture of Myths (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 185-209.

Randy Newman, Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 143-164.

In-depth

Joe Dallas, A Strong Delusion: Confronting the "Gay Christian" Movement (Eugene: Harvest House, 1996).

James B. De Young, Homosexuality: Contemporary Claims Examined in Light of the Bible and Other Ancient Literature and Law (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000).

Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

Jeffrey Satinover, Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

Thomas E. Schmidt, Straight and Narrow? Comparison and Clarity in the Homosexual Debate (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

Alan Sears and Craig Osten, The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).

Marion L. Soards, Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

James R. White and Jeffrey D. Niell, The Same-Sex Controversy (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002).

Donald J. Wold, Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

Note: If you are interested in any of these books, I would encourage you to go to www.addall.com

Chapter 26

\"Been There, Done That!\" (Gen 20:1-18)

Some time ago, I read about a pastor that preaches a sermon series every year called “Summer Reruns.” Each summer, when the attendance plummets, he preaches his most popular sermons from the previous year. You could call this, “Pastor’s Greatest Hits.”

As we eyeball Genesis 20, you may feel that we are having our own summer reruns! If you have been studying with us, you are about to experience a strange sense of déjà vu. Previously, we looked at a very similar account in Gen 12:10-20. In that passage, Abraham and Sarah devised a scheme to avoid problems with Pharaoh in Egypt. Abraham asked his wife to lie and tell the Pharaoh that she was his sister. Now, eight chapters later, the names and places are changed but the results are nearly identical. This has led some to say it really was the same account recorded twice. Yet, clearly these are two different accounts.

The reason we take up this second account is because it speaks to an issue that is relevant to all of us: recurring sin. Here, we see Abraham making the same mistake again.

These things should not surprise us. It parallels our own experience. Aren’t there things in your own life that dog you relentlessly? Are there sins that you have taken to the Lord and said, “Never again?” Only to find yourself returning to the Lord to confess the same sin again and again. It may have to do with substances (alcohol, drugs, food). It may have to do with interpersonal relationships (gossip, anger, slander). It may be physical (some habit you can’t shake). It may be mental (lust, anger, bitterness, resentment). It may have to do with money (debt, a lust for the material, a reluctance to give to the Lord). It may have to do with time management (wasting time, neglecting time for God). Whatever the sin, I suspect you don’t have to look very far to find one or two that you struggle with constantly. Today, in Genesis 20, we will look at how to move toward victory in the embarrassing reruns of life.

Moses begins our account in 20:1: “Now Abraham journeyed from there [Mamre] toward the land of the Negev (cf. 12:9-10), and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar.” As we begin, we must ask the obvious question: Why did Abraham leave Mamre (cf. 18:1)? While no reason for Abraham’s move is given, it would seem that God pouring out burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah had some effect on Abraham’s ability to raise his great herds of cattle (cf. 21:22-34). Despite the logic of Abraham’s move, there is no indication that God led this decision. Apparently, once again, he took matters into his own hands and moved ahead of God. I don’t know about you but when I’ve made decisions apart from the will of God, I have invariably suffered for it. Pro 16:25 says, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” In his journeying, Abraham “sojourned in Gerar.” Gerar is the capital city of the Philistines. It is hostile, enemy territory. This would be comparable to an American going into Iraq. The stage is set for trouble.

In 20:2, “Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ‘She is my sister.’ So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.” Why did Abraham repeat the same mistake again (cf. 12:11-13)? He was concerned about his own personal safety. He feared that because of Sarah’s beauty he would be killed, and she would be taken as a wife by violence. Quite simply, Abraham feared man more than he feared God. In Mat 10:28 Jesus said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” We can all find ourselves in situations where we are motivated

by fear. Yet, God longs for us to exercise faith in Him. As the old adage says, “Those that fear God most are least afraid of men.”

Of course, the fear of man is merely a symptom of a core issue: unbelief. Abraham refused to trust God. If he had trusted God, he would have recognized that God was capable of protecting both he and Sarah. Abraham had a track record with God. Twenty■five years earlier, God saved him from the hand of Pharaoh (12:17-20). In this situation, Abraham did not act out of ignorance, but rather out of unbelief. Abraham’s response is all the more disheartening since he has just been told that Sarah will give birth to the miracle-child (17:16; 18:10). Now he risks the birth of the child by letting Sarah be taken into the harem of another pagan king (cf. 12:15). Behind the staging of human history is Satan himself, attempting through Abraham’s unbelief and fear to foil God’s plan for a promised deliverer-Jesus Christ!

Interestingly, the information Abraham gave was totally factual. Sarah was his half-sister. But it wasn’t the whole truth. Abram’s intent was clearly to deceive (cf. Lev 19:11). He was trusting in his deception to protect him instead of trusting in the Lord (Pro 3:5-6).

The problems with lying:

• First, it makes it easier to do the next time. Abraham has already pulled the same stunt with Pharaoh of Egypt twenty-five years earlier (12:13). One would think that the disgrace Abraham experienced in Egypt would have cured him. But he has not faced his proneness to needless deceit and his inconsideration towards Sarah. Abraham is compromising his character and integrity. This will make it tougher to trust his word in the future.

• Second, it affects and influences others around us. The sad reality is we can pass on our character flaws to our children. Abraham lied about his wife on two occasions in order to protect his own life. These events happened before his son Isaac was born. Yet, later in Genesis, Abraham’s son, Isaac, pulls this exact same stunt with his wife Rebekah and Abimelech’s grandson (26:1-3, 7). Furthermore, he undoubtedly damaged his relationship with Sarah. What message does Abraham send to Sarah as he willingly lets her go to the home of another man knowing full well what the man’s intentions are? Sin brings negative consequences. Some are external, some are internal; some are public, some are private. God does not allow His children to sin without consequence.

• Third, it brings a reproach to the name of God. Abraham’s lie and subsequent exposure is an embarrassment to the name of God. Abraham compromised his ability to testify and minister in Gerar. He was supposed to bring blessing to the world…but here he is bringing judgment on them. If you are going to claim to be a Christian, please don’t dishonor that name by being a habitual liar. Honesty is not the best policy; it’s the only policy. Always remember: You may be the only Bible your friends and family ever read…and they expect you to be a person of integrity. Remember these sobering words: Integrity takes years to establish and only a moment to destroy.

In 20:3, God begins a dialogue with Abimelech. Moses records these terrifying words: “But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, ‘Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.’” Now a dream like this will get your attention! Abimelech learns the truth about Sarah from God Himself! But what’s funny is God sounds like Guido from Jersey or Vinny from Philly. He’s going to knock Abimelech off! He’s going to “wack” him. God doesn’t play games (see Heb 10:31).

The reason God is so abrupt and dead serious (pardon the pun) is because He places a very high premium on marital fidelity (Lev 20:22; Deu 22:22). Heb 13:4 says, “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (see also Pro 6:27-29). Do you hold your marriage in this same high regard? How are you protecting your marriage?

In 20:4a, Moses, offers a brief parenthetical comment: “Now Abimelech had not come near her.” Moses wants his readers to understand that Abimelech appears to be more righteous than Abraham. How convicting! Don’t you just hate it when sinners are more righteous than saints? After this interlude, Abimelech says, “‘Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless? Did he not himself say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this’” (20:4b-5). I feel for Abimelech. Two believers deceived him. Nevertheless, he did sin even though he did so unknowingly. This lets us know that sin can be committed when there is no knowledge of it and no sinful intentions. Sin is an objective matter; it is not just a question of intention. This means, we can’t say, “I didn’t mean to” or “I wasn’t aware of what I did.” This is why it is so important to practice 1Jn 1:9 : “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” When we confess (lit., “say the same thing as God”) those sins that we are aware of, God cleanses us from all unrighteousness (i.e., those sins that we are unaware of-sins of omission).

Some have suggested that Sarah was not responsible for this sin since she was being submissive to Abraham. However, submission has its limits-we must always obey God rather than men (Act 5:29). In the biblical chain-of-command, God’s revealed will is supreme, and it overrules all other levels of authority if they are in direct conflict with God’s Word. So Sarah is guilty of disobeying God. When we obey our spouse or employer in violation of God’s Word, we are guilty of disobedience.

In 20:6, God seems to understand Abimelech’s plight so He gives him a chance to get out of his sticky situation: “Then God said to him in the dream, ‘Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.” The Lord says literally, “I, even I, kept you from sinning against Me.” Moses records this for emphasis. The Lord Himself preserved Abimelech. He restrained his normal sexual impulses. In this, God demonstrates His sovereign ability to protect Sarah and Abraham. When God’s promise of a son is eventually fulfilled, it will be clear that it was God that did the work both morally and physically. Truly, all of God’s purposes are achieved by the grace of God.

In 20:7, God says, “Now therefore, restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.” Don’t you love how God gives options? Option #1: Give Sarah back and live (see Eze 33:14-16). Option #2: Keep Sarah and die-you and everyone in your family! This is the character and nature of God. He extends grace and mercy but if we refuse to obediently respond, He offers another option. It’s as if God graciously says, “Okay, you can have it your way.”

Before moving on, notice God’s amazing grace: He instructed the deceiver to pray for the deceived! This must have left Abimelech shaking his head. How could Abraham be a liar and at the same time a man of God to whom Abimelech must go to receive healing and salvation? Answer: God uses sinful people to accomplish His purposes. This can be seen in the fact that while Abraham was not eager to talk about his faith to Abimelech, God was not reluctant to own Abraham as a person and a prophet. Why didn’t God keep His relationship to Abraham quiet? Wouldn’t the poor testimony of Abraham drive Abimelech away

from God? Apparently, God has such confidence in Himself and His grace that He can still use broken vessels like Abraham and you and me. God does not withdraw His grace because of our failure.

It is so common to think that God will love us more if we perform some great work, some external achievement. But the Bible focuses on making a great heart. Here God was working with Abraham to create an unusual dependence upon Him. He does the same with us today.

The question of the hour is: Will Abimelech take God's threat seriously? You better believe it! After God obliterated Sodom and Gomorrah, Abimelech knew not to mess with God. Moses writes, "So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened" (20:8). Abimelech must have called up his secretary and said, "Cancel all my appointments, God says, 'I'm a dead man!'" Like the sailors and the king of Nineveh in the book of Jonah (1:16; 3:6-9), the Philistines responded quickly and decisively to God's warning. Like Jonah, however, Abraham in this narrative was a reluctant prophet.

In 20:9-10, the pagan preaches to the prophet. These two verses are dripping with irony. Abimelech calls Abraham and says, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.' And Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?'" Abimelech asks Abraham three questions. The most important question is the final one. "Why?" As a parent I have frequently asked the same question in many different forms. "Why?" "What was your reason for doing this?" "What were you thinking?" "What was going through your brain?" Can you imagine what Abimelech is thinking at this moment? You've got to be kidding me? I almost lost my life because two believers pulled the wool over my eyes? Unbelievable!

This must have been a humiliating experience for Abraham-this man of faith, this great patriarch of the saints, this friend of God, to be confronted over his ungodly deception. Abraham had not only done what was wrong in the eyes of God, but even in the eyes of pagans. Abraham who was to be a source of blessing (12:2-3) had instead become a source of stumbling and suffering for the people of Gerar.

A grievous truth is: Often non-Christians are more moral than Christians. The Christian community has come up with Christian Yellow Pages in the hope that we can support fellow believers, yet often these believers are not ethical or hardworking. If you are a Christian business man or woman, please be a person of integrity for your sake, for our sake, and most importantly, for the sake of Christ.

One last tip: If an unbeliever ever rebukes you, you better listen! At least ask the question: Is what he or she is saying about me true? God does speak through unbelievers. And He usually does so as a means of humbling us. So don't assume that because your boss, neighbor, or relative is an unbeliever that God can't speak through him or her.

In 20:11-16, the dialogue shifts from God and Abimelech to Abraham and Abimelech. You would think that Abraham would be in a state of full-scale repentance. But there is no indication that he acknowledged or repented of his sin. In three verses Abraham justifies his deception with three rationalizations. First, he says, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife" (20:11). Abraham "thought." He didn't talk with God. He didn't seek counsel. Rather, he excuses his sinful deception by saying there was no fear of God in Gerar. But the real problem was that the fear of God wasn't in Abraham! What bitter irony! We must be careful not to judge people on appearances. Often, the ungodly are not as ungodly as one might think and the godly are not as godly as one might think.

Abraham jumped the gun and made a judgment error. He then tries to imply that it was an honest mistake-“no big deal.” We’re good at this one, aren’t we? We try to sidestep responsibility by pointing to our upbringing (that’s just the way I am), or by blaming the media (they are always planting sinful thoughts in my head). The truth is that we are responsible for our own decisions. Abraham may have made his decision based on a faulty premise but he was responsible for the faulty premise!

Second, in 20:12, Abraham says, “Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.” I can just picture Abraham stuttering and stammering to get these words out. Yet, this explanation is not even helpful and it is totally confusing. What Abraham is saying is, “Look, technically I didn’t lie.” He tries to defend himself by technicalities but not by truthfulness. But a half-truth, said with intent to deceive, is always a whole lie.

How often do you allow people to draw the wrong conclusions or impressions by withholding evidence? Do you want to give the impression you are spiritual when you are not? Do you try to appear happy when your heart is breaking? Do you try to look sophisticated when you are desperate and despondent? Faith is facing up to reality and dealing openly with others, even when the truth may appear to put you in jeopardy or may make you vulnerable.

Lastly, Abraham even blames God for his vulnerable condition. In 20:13a, he says, “And it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father’s house.” The implication is that if God had not told him to leave his father’s house, he would have never ended up in Abimelech’s kingdom. If he had never arrived in Abimelech’s kingdom, he would have never lied. “Therefore, it’s not my fault, it’s really God’s fault.” Whether we are conscious of it or not, we often blame God for the sins we commit. Lord, if only You…

To make matters worse, in 20:13b we learn that Abraham coerced Sarah into his deception. He said to Sarah, “This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, ‘He is my brother.’” Ladies, Abe used one of the oldest lines in the book-literally! “If you really love me…” We do this today. If you love me, you’ll sleep with me! If you love me, you’ll lie to the IRS when the auditor comes! If you love me, you’ll understand my need to play the field! If you love me, you’ll tell the boss I’m sick. If you love me, you’ll put me ahead of God! Yet, this is in contradiction to the message of the Bible. God loves us with an unconditional and everlasting love and He expects us to love one another with His love (Joh 13:34-35; Joh 15:12).

The irony continues in 20:14-16: “Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. Abimelech said, ‘Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please.’ [cf. 13:8-9] To Sarah he said, ‘Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared.’” Abimelech gave sheep, oxen, and servants to Abraham. In showing generosity to Abraham, Abimelech was heaping burning coals on Abraham’s head (Rom 12:20). Abraham should have been giving gifts to Abimelech, because he was in the wrong. Instead, it was Abimelech who was generous (cf. 12:16). By God’s grace, Abraham did not receive punishment but plunder. Wherever he went, whatever he did, Abraham stood under God’s protection and blessing.

During this exchange, I wish I could have seen Sarah’s face and read her mind. She must have been thinking: a house, a car, and a few million bucks. I’m staying with Abimelech. He honors me. He respects me. He doesn’t call me his sister and try to give me away to other men. Husbands, even the greatest man of God can treat his wife poorly.

Our passage closes with these remarkable words: “Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife” (20:17-18). What a humbling experience it must have been for Abraham to intercede on behalf of Abimelech. A deep sense of unworthiness must have come over him. It was surely not his righteousness, which was the basis for divine healing. Any time that we are used of God, it is solely because of the grace of God.

As we close, please notice one last thing. God reopens the wombs of the women of Gerar but He has not yet granted fertility to Abraham’s own wife. God is more concerned with the growth and development of individual believers than He is certain aspects of our lives moving forward. He wants to perfect our faith through the trials and tests of life (2Co 4:16-18; Jam 1:2-4; 1Pe 1:6-9).

Sometimes when a horse is learning how to jump over fences, it comes to one that it refuses to jump. It sticks its ears back and its nose down; it digs its hooves in, and will not jump. What do you do in those circumstances? You walk the horse around for a while to calm it down, and then you take it right back to the same fence. If necessary you do it over and over again until finally the horse sails over the fence, as it should.

Abraham needed to learn that God can be trusted to take care of him. He needed to learn that lesson well, because there would be an exam, a test of his faith, coming up (see 22:1-19). God would take him back to the same hurdle over and over again, so that he would be prepared to jump over it with flying colors.

This is also true for us. Today, you may feel like giving up. Repeated failures always tempt us to give up. But that is exactly what the devil wants us to do! Therefore, focus on the goal and not the obstacles. Remind yourself that growth takes time. If you have children, you remember when they first learned to walk. How often they would fall. Sometimes they banged their head. Other times they cut their lip. But one thing is certain…they kept getting up.

We need that same kind of focus as we learn to walk by faith. There will be falls. There will be times of frustration but keep getting up! When you have drifted, come back to the Lord. When you have sinned, confess it. When you have fallen, get back up and begin again. The holy life is worth pursuing with every ounce of strength we have. May the reruns of your life be days of faithfully seeking the Lord.

Chapter 27

\"The Last Laugh\" (Gen 21:1-21)

Two young girls were talking and one said she had ten pennies. The other girl looked at her hand and only saw five. So she said, “You only have five pennies.” The first girl replied, “I have five and my father told me he would give me five more tonight. So I have ten.” This little girl understood that her father’s promise was as good as done.

Our heavenly Father has a passion for you and me to become like this little girl. He longs for us to take Him at His Word and trust that His promises are as good as done. Unfortunately, we are a bit cynical. We live in an era of unfulfilled promises. Nations sign important treaties and then break them at will. Married couples show little regard for their wedding vows. Employers promise one thing and deliver another. At times it seems that no one can be trusted-no one is honest-no one keeps his word. Thus, we have a sarcastic phrase for our jaded skepticism: “Promises, promises!”

In Gen 21:1-21, we will be challenged with a truthful phrase: God always performs what He promises. Therefore, we can trust in God because He is faithful, powerful, sovereign, and compassionate.

1. Trust in God because He is faithful and powerful (21:1-7). The events of 21:1-7 can be seen in three different dimensions. In 21:1-2, we see the divine dimension in the birth of Isaac. Verses 3-5 record the response of Abraham to the birth of his son. Finally, in 21:6-7, we have the jubilance of Sarah over the arrival of the long■awaited child, who is the joy of her life.

In 21:1-2, we see the divine dimension. Moses writes, “Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him.” After 25 years, God fulfills His Word to Abraham and Sarah-the miracle child is born (cf. 17:16; 18:14). Moses declares, “Then the LORD took note of Sarah” (21:1a). This phrase focuses on God’s supreme care and concern. Other translations render this phrase: He “visited” her (NET, ESV, NKJV) or “was gracious” to her (NIV). So here we see God’s grace and compassion showcased. Notice the phrase “the LORD” is repeated twice in the first verse. The point is that this is all God’s work. In addition to God’s grace, there are three important truths that will build our confidence in the Lord.

• You can trust God’s Word. Three times in these two verses there is a reference to God’s Word: “as He had said” (21:1), “as He had promised” (21:1), and “of which God had spoken” (21:2). It may have taken 25 years for this promise to come to pass but the Lord did for Sarah what He had promised-just as He always does. But the promise of a son was not fulfilled because Abraham was perfect in his obedience…he wasn’t. The promise was fulfilled because God was faithful to His Word.

• You can trust God’s power. The birth of Isaac was a precise, empirical validation of God’s power. God defied nature and biology. He intervened in the bodies of Abraham and Sarah and performed a miracle. God still performs miracles today, yet many of us are not seeking God’s supernatural intervention. We are trying to control the outcome of our situations.

• Have you ever seen a “belt-and-suspenders” man? A “belt-and-suspenders” man is someone who wears both a belt and a pair of suspenders to hold his pants up. That way even if his belt breaks, he is still

covered. In other words, he has an extremely cautious approach to life. He likes to have a strategy to deal with every possible problem before it occurs.

• While this may seem to make logical sense in the natural realm, God wants us to live out a supernatural existence. He wants us to trust in His miraculous power instead of always trying to cover all of our bases.

• You can trust God's timing. I know some people who are never on time. Getting somewhere on time is an impossibility for them. Not so with God. He is never early…He is never late…He is always right on time. In the case of Abraham and Sarah, God did what He promised, not a year early or a year late, not a day early or a day late. Now God does not operate on our timetables. Our wristwatches or palm pilots don't rule Him. His timing may be personally inconvenient for us and it may not make sense, but it is always "at the appointed time."

• This means there is no point in fretting, fussing, and fuming when God does not operate according to our schedule. How much better to say, "Lord, Your will be done in Your own time and in Your own way" (Mat 6:10). Today, why not implore the Lord for new strength and divine wisdom. Patience is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). But for patience to grow, it must be tested. I have found that God repeatedly puts me in situations that require a great deal of patience. So why not just join in God's work instead of making yourself miserable?

These three truths demonstrate that God always performs what He promises. His Word is timeless. However, a note of caution is in order. Not all of the Bible's promises are applicable to all people. There are at least three questions you should ask before you decide to appropriate one of God's promises.

• Is the promise universal in scope? A promise is universal when words like "whoever" or "anyone" are used. In Rom 10:13, Paul writes, "For 'whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Another example is Luk 9:23-24 : "And He [Jesus] was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it.'" Such universal promises are held out to anyone-anytime-anywhere, who follow their advice. When you find such a promise underline it. You may want to underline the promise in a unique color so you can easily find it as you page through your Bible.

• Is the promise personal in nature? A specific promise given to someone else is not necessarily meant for you. For example, consider God's Word to Paul in Act 18:9 b-10: "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." Gen 15:13-16 holds another promise with a clearly marked nametag: "God said to Abram, 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.'" It's tempting to claim the comfort intended for someone else's ear, but hoping in promises that were never made to you only invites disappointment.

• Is the promise conditional? Some promises are dependent upon personal action. That is, if you fulfill the condition, the promise will follow. Jam 4:10 is one of those promises: "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you." The condition here is to humble ourselves before God. If and when we do this, the Lord will exalt us.

• Another example is Php 4:19, where Paul writes, “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” While many Christians quote this verse, this is not an unconditional, blanket promise, for the context makes it clear that this is dependent upon generous financial giving (4:13-18). So if you note a condition, make it your goal to obey God’s Word so that you can enjoy His promise.

In 21:3-5, Moses picks up Abraham’s response: “Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.” Verses 3-4 emphasize Abraham’s obedience. The key phrase is “as God had commanded him.” Upon the birth of Isaac, Abraham immediately obeyed by calling the boy “Isaac” (21:3; cf. 17:19). Isaac means, “he laughs” or “may He [God] smile.” The name Isaac was to stand out on the pages of history as a constant reminder to the world that, on the one hand, God’s promises are no laughing matter. On the other hand, this was a promise that was going to be a “laughing matter”-a hilarious event because of its impossibility from a human perspective. Abraham also obeyed God by circumcising his son “when he was eight days old” (21:4). This was God’s command to Abraham and His covenant with him (see 17:7-14).

Verse 5 concludes by emphasizing Abraham’s age (cf. 17:1, 24). The writer of Hebrews says that Abraham was “as good as dead” (11:12). And you may think you’re old! When Abraham could have been drawing Social Security payments for 35 years, he became a parent. And at the age of 113 he would enter into the teenage years with his son. Talk about challenging times!

In 21:6-7, the scene shifts to Sarah who says, “‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.’ And she said, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’” I imagine that every time Abraham and Sarah called “laughter” in for supper, they remembered how God had turned their laughter of disbelief to laughter of joy! Sarah becomes a ninety-year-old, nursing mother and Abraham becomes a father at 100! What a happy ending!

[As is often the case in life, after a mountaintop experience, one usually descends into the valley. This section records another crisis in the story of Abraham. This is one the strangest and saddest portions of the Bible. Yet, in this section we learn that we can…]

2. Trust in God because He is sovereign and compassionate (21:8-21). In 21:8-9, Moses writes, “The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned [approximately three years after his birth, cf. 1Sa 1:22-25]. Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking” (lit. “Isaacing”). Fourteen years earlier, Hagar had given birth to Ishmael and for most of the intervening period Abraham had treated Ishmael as the heir. By now Ishmael was a teenager (15 or 16). As a growing and alert teenager, he in no way would miss the message he was hearing. His parents had often told him that he was the promised seed and now he gradually began to realize that his folks were in error. They had deceived him as well as themselves. Bitterness and anger began to well up in Ishmael as Isaac, little by little, began to replace him. And no doubt the great feast and the glad speeches in Isaac’s honor caused these feelings of bitterness to reflect themselves in ridicule and persecution (21:9; cf. Gal 4:29). What he did and how he did it, we can only conjecture. But one thing is sure: Ishmael’s jealousy turned into mockery.

Therefore, Sarah forcefully gave Abraham an ultimatum: “‘Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.’ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his

son. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant.'" (21:10-13). Sarah was ticked off! She doesn't want to share her husband with her servant girl. Sarah recognizes that it is impossible for a man to enter into an intimate relationship with a woman and then simply walk away. The relationship that Abraham had with Hagar was more than just physical. Abraham and Hagar became one. Sex is more than a physical act; it is a spiritual act that affects the mind, emotions, and soul. The evidence of the sexual union between Abraham and Hagar was Ishmael. Not only did Sarah not want to share her husband, she also does not want to share Isaac with Ishmael. Sarah recognizes that Isaac is the promised seed (Rom 9:6-9), so she doesn't want anything or anyone to adversely affect him.

Of course, all of this "distressed" Abraham (21:11-12). Yet, God reassured Abraham that He was divinely guiding Sarah's counsel. Husband, your wife is God's gift to you (see 2:18). She is to be treated as a treasure-like any valuable gift. Draw on her wisdom and unique perspective. Nurture and facilitate her. You and your family will be blessed as a result. Wife, when you speak to your husband do so with self-control. Follow Peter's words and exude a "gentle and quiet spirit" (1Pe 3:4).

In 21:14, Moses records these painful words: "So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba." This parting must have been excruciating. I'm sure that Abraham never dreamed that sleeping with Hagar would lead to so much heartache and confusion. In fact, I'm sure he justified it in his own mind as the best way to make his wife happy and also to "help" God keep His promise. But it didn't work out that way. Sarah was wrong to suggest the idea and Abraham was doubly wrong to act on it. If he had been the proper kind of spiritual leader, so much heartache would have been avoided.

When we compromise our standards, lower our convictions, or when we try to take a moral or ethical shortcut, it never works out in the end. Choices have consequences…and sometimes they are painful. As believers, we need to learn this lesson well. We also need to make sure that our children and grandchildren learn this lesson early in life. Choices have consequences. When we sin and confess that sin we are forgiven but the consequences of those choices often carry on. Please don't learn this lesson the hard way. Determine today that you will learn from the experiences of Abraham and Sarah (Rom 15:4). Do not sow your wild oats and then pray for a crop failure. It is unlikely to happen.

Now back to our story. In 21:15-16, we read: "When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, 'Do not let me see the boy die.' And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept." Here we find the first record of a single mom in history. Like other single moms, she is without child support. All that she was given was a few gallons of water and a picnic lunch. She is now at the end of her rope. So she lifts up her voice and cries. Maybe you can relate to Hagar.

In 21:17-19, we read these touching words: "God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink."

Notice, it was not Hagar's cries that arrested God's attention, but the boy's. It is no coincidence that the name "Ishmael" means "God hears" (cf. 16:11). As a descendant of Abraham, Ishmael was the object of God's special care. His cries brought divine intervention. God loves children and He also desires to be the God of the outcast, the rejected, the abused, and the dying.

The following Scriptures powerfully reiterate the character of God:

• Psa 68:5-6 : "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation. God makes a home for the lonely; He leads out the prisoners into prosperity, only the rebellious dwell in a parched land."

• Isa 54:5 : "For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth."

• Psa 34:18 : "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

When you have come to the end of your own resources, and you sit down to sob, remember God has a lot of options left-He hears, He calls, and He opens. I love the fact that Hagar saw the well that had been there all along. Only her tears and her fears kept her from seeing it. God does provide but often we don't see it. Often, we're too busy crying or complaining. We're not looking with any hope or faith that God provides.

Those of you who are being emotionally or physically abused and continue in the relationship because you are afraid of the financial, emotional, and physical wilderness, pay attention to Hagar's situation. Even though she suffered greatly, her need for support was supplied (17-21). God did not forget Hagar. Nor did He forget His promise to greatly multiply her descendants (16:10). God had compassion on Hagar's plight and became like a father to Ishmael.

Doug Edmonds, the elder chairman at our previous church, loved to say, "God provides." He even signs his emails and letters that way. Do you believe God's provides? Single mom, can God meet your needs? Wife who is married to an unbeliever, can God be your husband? Can He provide for you? Child or teenager who has been victimized by divorce, can God provide? Yes, a thousands times, yes!

Our story closes in 21:20-21 with these encouraging words: "God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt." God demonstrates His sovereignty and His compassion. Moses says that "God was with the lad." Some of you have watched a son or daughter make wrong decisions and choices. That child moved in destructive directions. He or she walked away from God. You watched your child go into the desert, and you desperately wanted to stop him or her. You knew there was nothing you could do. Your heart was broken, like the heart of Abraham. But may I remind you: (1) God hears your cry, (2) He can open a way in the life of your wayward child, and (3) He is with your child. You can trust God because He is a sovereign and compassionate God.

Since the time our children were young, we have always read to them The Chronicles of Narnia, these wonderful children's stories about the magical land of Narnia. In the second book, Prince Caspian, Lucy enters Narnia again and sees Aslan, the great lion. She has not seen him in a long, long time, and so they have a wonderful reunion. Lucy says to Aslan, "Aslan, you're bigger now." Aslan says, "Lucy, that's

because you are older. You see, Lucy, every year that you grow, you will find me bigger."

Hasn't that been the case for many of you? For many of us, every year we grow spiritually, we find the Lord bigger in His faithfulness, His power, His sovereignty, and His compassion. Why? God is always bigger than you and I could ever ask or imagine (Eph 3:19-20). Do not forget these words: God always performs what He promises. You can trust Him today. And the promises that He has given you, you can depend on all the days of your life.

Chapter 28

\"Dealing with Conflict and Living to Tell About it\" (Gen 21:22-34)

In the last few years, there have been many “strange but true” stories about people who get into deadly conflicts over crazy things. In Orlando, a 48-year-old man was shot to death by his wife after a fight over the satellite TV controls. In California, a man was stabbed to death by his girlfriend because he brought home a McDonalds ham, egg, and cheese bagel instead of the two Egg Mcmuffins that she’d asked for. (Husbands, let that be a lesson to all of you…get it right!) In Dallas, a 37-year-old man was beaten to death by his roommate after a fight over the thermostat setting in their house. In Maryland, a 15-year-old boy has been charged in the shooting death of a man who was playing reggae music on his car stereo. Apparently, the boy really hates reggae music.

Although these are extreme cases and responses, we can all acknowledge it can be difficult maintaining positive relationships with others. As Christians we will have times of conflict; sometimes with a neighbor who seems unbearable, sometimes with an employer, customer, or government official who seems overly demanding or unfair, sometimes with a relative, or even a fellow Christian. The answer to handling these types of problems is not revenge, hostility, denial, or avoidance of the problem. The Bible tells us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Rom 12:18; cf. Heb 12:14). So as God’s people our goal should be to build and preserve our relationships. This is precisely what Abraham does in Gen 21:22-34. In these verses, we discover three principles that will enable us to deal with conflict and live to tell about it.

1. Agree to live in peace (21:22-24). Our story begins in 21:22-24 with these words: “Now it came about at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, ‘God is with you in all that you do; now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned.’ Abraham said, ‘I swear it.’” When we last saw Abimelech, Abraham prayed that his wives and slave girls could have children again (20:17-18). This time Abimelech brought his enforcer “Phicol” along and wants to sign a peace treaty with Abraham. King Abimelech proposes to enter into a treaty because he realizes that God’s hand is upon Abraham. In fact, he says to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do.” In other words, Abraham enjoyed special, divine provision and protection. Now please understand that Abraham was far from perfect. He had his faults and hypocrisy. He committed his fair share of sins. Yet, Abimelech knew that God was with Abraham. As a result, he wanted to have a treaty with Abraham in order to protect himself and his people from being on the wrong side of his God.

Do people recognize that God is with you in everything you do (cf. Act 4:13)? Is there something about your presence in your neighborhood or workplace that causes others to sit up and take notice? Let’s face it; we’re all hypocrites and sinners-every last one of us! We can wholeheartedly agree with the accusation that the church is made up of hypocrites. The issue is: In spite of your hypocrisy and sin is God still revealing His grace in and through you to an onlooking world?

The good news for Abraham is that he failed in the past with King Abimelech (20:1-18), yet God now gives him another chance. This is sweet redemption! Believer, even if you have failed God in the past, God can

raise you up in the present. Yesterday, you may have been a disgrace but today you can be a display of God's glorious grace. Don't give up on your failed testimony. Don't count yourself out! God wants to use you today. He wants to give you an opportunity to redeem yourself.

Although Abimelech was an unbeliever, God worked in his life so that he was willing to make peace with Abraham. As a result, Abraham was able to fulfill God's original promise of being a blessing (12:2-3). It is possible to make peace with your enemies but it isn't easy and it won't happen overnight.

But before we move on, I must pose a question: How would you feel if a king and his prime minister flattered you by acknowledging that God was with you in a very special way and then made you promise that you wouldn't lie anymore? Whew! Abimelech respected Abraham's God but he didn't trust Abraham. And who can blame him? After all, Abraham had already been exposed as a liar and Abimelech had nearly lost his life because of Abraham's deception (20:3). By putting Abraham on oath Abimelech sought to remedy the problem of deception.

It is amazing how many conflicts are caused or magnified by simple dishonesty. In Eph 4:25, we are told to lay aside falsehood and speak the truth to our neighbor. The context of this passage deals with unity; so it again is showing us how dishonesty spoils positive relationships. Abimelech could never have a positive relationship with Abraham until he was sure he could trust him. This could only happen if Abraham was honest from this point forward.

Can people depend on your words and promises? If not, what good are you? A promise is only as good as the promise-giver. As a result, there are few promises in life that you can unreservedly rely on. Yet, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) and not say anything that will grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30). This is an example of what it means to live in peace.

Another example is exhibited by Abimelech. The pagan King Abimelech made the first move-he demonstrated humility. Someone has to take the first step. Think about the strained relationships in your own life. Someone has to make the first move. Will you be the one to pick up the phone? Will you take the time to write a letter? Will you stop making excuses? Jesus made the first move when he "humbled Himself" by leaving heaven to be born as a tiny baby (Php 2:5-11). He showed us what it means to take the initiative to heal a broken relationship.

As long as you sit where you are things will never change. But you say, "It's not my fault." Maybe it's not but Jesus said, "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Mat 5:23-24). Someone has to make the first move. Why not you? Is there someone in your life you really don't want to see right now? That's probably the first person you need to talk to.

Abimelech also displayed courage. Peacemaking takes courage because you never know how the other person is going to respond. There aren't any guarantees. Sometimes your best efforts will be rejected. In our case, Abimelech didn't know how Abraham would respond. If he got angry, it might lead to war. The same is true for you. If you make that phone call, or if you go see your boss, or if you write a letter to your mother, you're taking a big chance. The other person might not understand, or they might take it as a sign of weakness, or they may try to twist your motives. Peacemaking is risky business. That's why so few people try to do it. And that's why it often fails. But if you have a broken relationship in your life, it's not going to get better by itself. If you do nothing, things will only get worse.

Do you want harmony in your relationships? Make a commitment today to seek peace as far as it depends on you (Rom 12:18) and be upright in your speech.

2. Restore peace when it has been disrupted (21:25-30). In 21:25-27, Moses writes, “But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. And Abimelech said, ‘I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor did I hear of it until today.’ Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant.” In contrast to Abraham’s previous fear of Abimelech, we now see him boldly standing up to this powerful king. His walk with God has matured him and given him a greater fear of God. This should be true for every follower of Christ. Do you fear God more than man?

In this section, Abraham brings up the matter of the well that Abimelech’s servants had seized from him. They made peace and immediately Abraham starts complaining. But he’s perfectly justified because if he lets that issue fester, pretty soon the whole peace treaty will go up in smoke. So he has to mention it even though it might have been easier to overlook it. If you and I want to live in peace with others, honesty is not the best policy, it is the only policy.

Yet, many of us shy away from this kind of open confrontation. We’d rather just look the other way when problems come. But I learned years ago that the first price you pay is always the cheapest. When you don’t deal with relational problems, the price for solving those problems always goes up. It never goes down. The truth may hurt but it is always more satisfying in the end. Without honesty in relationships, peace is impossible.

Abraham and Abimelech also show great patience with one another. Peacemaking requires patience because attitudes don’t change overnight. You can’t overcome years of hostility and mistrust over one quick lunch at Denny’s. In this case, both Abimelech and Abraham had to learn to live together despite their differences in background and religion.

Would you like a definition of patience? Here’s one that works for me. Patience is the willingness to wait for God to solve my problems. So many times we get frustrated with other people because they aren’t changing fast enough to suit us. Parents get angry at their children, husbands at wives and wives at husbands, adult children get frustrated with their elderly parents, workers with their bosses, bosses with their employees, students with their teachers, friends with friends, relatives with relatives, and church members get frustrated with each other all the time.

We throw up our hands and say, “What’s wrong with those people?” That’s the wrong question because it focuses all the attention on others when we really ought to throw the spotlight on our own sinful impatience. What we ought to ask is, “Am I willing to wait for God to solve my problems?” Pro 21:1 reminds us that the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. If that’s true, and if we have committed the people who frustrate us to the Lord, then we can simply sit back and wait for God to do His work. Sooner or later, even the hardest heart must bend to His will.

In 21:28-30, Moses writes, “Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘What do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?’ He said, ‘You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand so that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well.’” In their last conflict, it was Abimelech that modeled generosity (20:14-16). Here, Abraham returns the favor in a small way. It is his way of saying, “I want to do my part to restore peace. I want to dwell in harmony.” This little gesture made a big difference.

This is true for you as well. Small gestures can have big results.

3. Use your peaceful, prosperous life to serve God (21:31-34). Our story concludes with these words: “Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because there the two of them took an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, arose and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days.” “Beersheba” means both “well of seven” and “well of the oath.” Beersheba, one of the more important sites throughout Old Testament times, became Abraham’s possession. So he planted a tree there. By planting a tree Abraham indicated his determination to stay in that region. Tamarisk trees were long-lived and evergreen. The tree was meant to be a lasting landmark to God’s provision and a focal point of Abraham’s worship. It served as an appropriate symbol of the enduring grace of the faithful God.

After planting the tree, Abraham “called on the name of the Lord.” This is a phrase that suggests worship and public proclamation (cf. 4:26). In honor of the Lord, Abraham called on “the Everlasting God.” The Hebrew phrase El Olam is only used here (21:33). This name stresses God’s everlasting nature. God’s promises and covenant are everlasting because God Himself is eternal. Abraham has now found God to be what He claimed earlier to be, a shield to him (cf. 21:22; 15:1). He, further, seems to be growing in his conception of God; He is now the Everlasting God. Even through this time of conflict in his family and among his neighbors, Abraham kept a real, live walk with God. Conflict can drive us away from God, but we should allow it to push us closer to Him.

The last three verses tell of the positive results of this peace treaty:

1. Abimelech and his men returned home (21:32).

2. Abraham worshipped God in Beersheba (21:33).

3. Abraham lived in peace for a long time (21:34).

Abraham now owned a small part of the land God had promised him. By granting Abraham rights to a well, Abimelech had made it possible for Abraham to live there permanently and had acknowledged his legal right, at least to water. In other words, after so many delays the promises of land and descendants at last seem on their way to fulfillment.

God encourages us when we are moving in the direction of inheriting the promises. We ought to take notice when small things happen to us that take a step towards inheriting what we know to be God’s will for our lives. God is still alive. He still gives us affirmations of His will.

So why has the narrator included the story of this treaty? Gradually, Abraham is establishing roots in the land-digging wells and planting trees. Additionally, as relationships are established with the peoples in the land, the blessing is taking root (12:2-3). Finally, the relationship with God is taking root as land and family becomes established. Abraham has everything going for him: his wife, his promised son, his land, his servants, his wealth, and peace with all his neighbors. Life is grand! In one sense this sets up a false sense of security (literally), as the narrator gets ready to drop the bombshell of Genesis 22. Just as the elements of the covenant are beginning to look routine, a major disruption is about to occur. God is doing a work to prepare Abraham. The grinding and polishing of old Abraham had been going on for years. The frictions of adversity had been polishing his soul. Thus, Abraham’s soul was becoming luminous and it is going to dazzle us with divine light!

How can we boil down this unusual story? First, remember that conflict is a good thing. It makes us better believers. Second, remember that both conflict and prosperity typically prepare us for further challenges.

Players gathering for the first day of basketball practice at UCLA were full of anticipation. They wondered how their coach, John Wooden, would set the tone for the long season to come. They didn't have to wait long. Veterans knew what was coming. But first-year players were no doubt perplexed by the initial lesson imparted by their Hall of Fame coach: He taught them how to put on a pair of socks. He did not teach this lesson only once, but before every game and practice. Why?

Wooden discovered many players didn't properly smooth out wrinkles in the socks around their heels and little toes. If left uncorrected, these wrinkles could cause blisters that could hamper their performance at crucial times during games. Many players thought the practice odd and laughed about it then. Wooden knows some of them still laugh about it today. But the coach would not compromise on this basic fundamental principle: "I stuck to it. I believed in that, and I insisted on it."

In our desire to grow as Christians, we can easily forget about the fundamentals of our faith. If we do, we run the risk of developing painful spiritual blisters that can hurt us as we run our race.

Chapter 29

\"Let Go!\" (Gen 22:1-24)

A man was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff. Realizing that he couldn't hang on for long, he called for help.

Man: Is anybody up there?

Voice: Yes, I'm here!

Man: Who's that?

Voice: The Lord.

Man: Lord, help me!

Voice: Do you trust me?

Man: I trust you completely, Lord.

Voice: Good. Let go of the branch.

Man: What???

Voice: I said, let go of the branch.

Man: [After a long pause] Is anybody else up there?

Like this dangling, cliffhanger, are you ever afraid that God might ask too much of you? Consider for a moment what would be too much? Our daily lives are built around people and things we enjoy: a spouse, children, friends, a job, a hobby, possessions, and future plans. These are the pillars and beams of our earthly support system; and if one of them is removed, we sometimes feel as though the framework of our lives is collapsing around us. But there are times when God says "Let go!" and the nuts and bolts that hold our world together suddenly snap. If you've ever been in that situation you know the pressure a test like that can exert on your faith. Abraham was well acquainted with such strenuous tests. In Genesis 22, we come to one of the greatest chapters in the entire Bible. It is also one of the greatest crises in the Bible. This crisis is a crisis of obedience and it is structured in three flowing segments.

1. The test of obedience (22:1-8). Our passage begins with the phrase, "Now it came about after these things." This phrase looks back over Abraham's pilgrimage of faith. During these years, Abraham encountered several tests; some he passed and others he failed. Abraham was quite human, like you and me. Yet, despite a mixture of success and failure, God sought to mature Abraham and use his life powerfully. Maybe you have had your share of success, but you've also experienced some failure along the way. You need to know today that God has not discarded you, nor is He finished with you. In fact, He wants to take you to your next spiritual level. He does this through tests. Notice the next phrase "God tested Abraham." The word "test" still conjures up nightmares for me: burning the midnight oil to memorize volumes of facts, noticing my increased heart rate as the instructor passed out the test, staring into space

and trying to remember a name or a date. We have all been through the stress of tests. Yet, it is wrong to assume that tests only take place in school. The real tests take place in the course of our lives. In these tests, whether we pass or fail is of the utmost importance.

We must keep two things in mind here:

• First, there is a vast difference between God's purpose in testing a person and Satan's purpose in testing a person. God tests to confirm and strengthen. Satan tests to corrupt and weaken. In the New Testament, James lets us know that God was testing Abraham so his faith could be "perfected" before men (Jam 2:22). The word "perfect" means complete or mature. Persevering through tests and being obedient to God made Abraham's faith visible to an on looking world. God tested Abraham in order to give him an opportunity to display his true character.

• He will do the same for you. Every test God brings into your life is an opportunity for you to shine and advance to another spiritual grade level. This ought to excite you. Even if spiritual tests are difficult, they have a wonderful purpose: to make you more like Christ so the world can see God's greatness revealed in you (Pro 17:3; Jam 1:2-4; Jam 1:12-14; 1Pe 1:6-7).

• Second, we need to be aware that Abraham had walked with God for about 35 years before God tested him in this most severe way. God did not give him this severe test until He knew Abraham was equipped for it. One of the great things about God is that He does not give us tests we cannot pass. His tests come when we are prepared. Furthermore, He supplies an extra measure of grace to help us through times of testing (1Co 10:13). God is not like some of our former teachers who gave us premature tests or pop quizzes on information they had never covered in lectures. He is gracious and faithful. He wants for us to receive the highest grade possible!

We are told from the very first verse in this chapter that Abraham will be tested. Notice when God calls Abraham's name, Abraham responds with, "Here I am" (22:1; cf. 22:11). He was willing to hear from God and be moved to action. Howard Hendricks, the great Christian writer and teacher, likes to say that great leaders must be "FAT: faithful, available, and teachable." Do those characteristics define who you are? Obedience and discipleship demand that you be a person who is FAT. Sometimes people and things can become too important to us. We grip them with closed fists and white knuckles, so God has to pry open our fingers to loosen our hold. This is not ideal. Are you in the midst of a test? Is something that is important to you at risk or being taken from you? A job? A dream? A friendship? Your finances? Don't let God take it from you; give it to Him! Be a FAT person for the glory of God.

The Lord speaks again in 22:2: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." This verse is not made up of a series of gracious requests. Instead, God gives three blood-curdling commands ("take, "go," and "offer") without an explanation. Abraham was not simply to wound his son and then nurse him back to health. He was to offer his son as a burnt offering. Can you feel this man's pain? It must have been horrific!

The question that is often asked at this point in the text is, "How could a God of love command Abraham to offer up his only son as a sacrifice?" For family devotions, Martin Luther once read this account and his wife, Katie, said, "I do not believe it. God would not have treated his son like that!" "But, Katie," Luther replied, "He did" (see Isa 53:10). Thus, we are forced to the conclusion that the sacrifice of Isaac could not have been wrong, whether only attempted or accomplished, because God is incapable of evil (Jam

1:13-15; 1Jn 1:5). Much more than this, as Luther recognized, it could not be wrong to sacrifice an only son because God actually did sacrifice His only begotten Son (see Joh 3:16).

Shortly after our first child, Joshua, was born, as his father I dedicated him to the Lord. I'll never forget that moment. I had just finished getting him ready for bed when the Lord impressed upon me that he did not belong to me. While little Joshua was lying on his back on our changing table, I got down on my knees and acknowledged to the Lord that Joshua was His. I told the Lord that He could have His sovereign way with him. I love Joshua with all that is within me, but I told the Lord He could take him from me at any time if that was in accordance with His perfect will. I pray that will not be the case, but Joshua is not mine; he is not Lori's. He belongs to God and God alone! You see, it's one thing to say, "The Lord blessed me with a child," but the question is, what do you say when the Lord asks for your child back? Life is merely on loan to us, both as parents and as children. God can ask for its return at any time. Are you living with this realization? I challenge you today to hold loosely what God has given you.

In 22:3-4, we see that Abraham obeyed God's commands immediately and unquestioningly. Moses informs us that Abraham "rose early in the morning." Now, if I had been Abraham, I would have spent at least a day or two praying and fasting. I would have talked things through with my wife. I would have sought the best pastoral counsel available. But not Abraham…he obeyed (Psa 119:60). Scripture does not say, but I suspect his decision to get up early may have had more to do with torment than eagerness. Notice Abraham "saddled his donkey" and also "split wood for the burnt offering." This is a man who is over 100 years old and has numerous servants. What was he thinking? My guess is he was probably trying to occupy his mind with activity so he wouldn't have to think about what lie ahead. Yet in spite of all of this, he "arose and went to the place of which God had told him." What is even more unbearable is that he could not finish the deed quickly; he was given time to think about what lay ahead. It was a three-day journey from Beersheba to Moriah (50 miles). Three days in which to think about what he must do. This was all a part of the test of obedience.

In 22:5-8, we see that Abraham's obedience was based on faith. After seeing the dreaded destination, Abraham spoke. He instructed his servants to stay behind with his donkey. Why didn't Abraham bring the servants up the mountain with him? He knew his servants would try to stop him. They would have kept him from placing his son on the altar. They would have concluded that he had lost his mind and would have tried to subdue him "for his own good." Granted, they would have done this out of ignorance. Nevertheless, they would have attempted to foil God's plan for Abraham. We must show the same wisdom that Abraham did. If we want to be faithful followers then we must be diligent in removing every obstacle. Sometimes we must eliminate people that keep us from holy living. We must constantly be evaluating our friendships because some people will lead us in the wrong direction. Sometimes effective discipleship begins with subtraction. Here is another test of obedience. Are you willing to do whatever you can to walk with God?

Don't miss the last phrase in 22:5: "we will worship and return to you." Abe is saying, "God told me to go kill my son, but we are coming back." He was prepared to kill Isaac, burn his body as an offering and then watch God raise him up off the altar. Why? Because he believed God was able. Now I'm sure he must have been praying his heart out, but he was obedient in the midst of great anguish. Abraham's response is rather remarkable when you realize that God's command was illogical. From every human viewpoint it was contradictory and inconsistent. God had promised Abraham He would establish His covenant with Isaac and it was to be "an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (17:19). So at the ripe old age of 100, Abraham became a father and now God wants to take his son. This doesn't make sense. Yet

Abraham was obedient and did what contradicted logic (Heb 11:17-19).

There will be times in your life when obedience will not make sense. Are you prepared to obey God even in these cases? I confess there are many things in the Bible that I wish were not there-life would be easier. I could blend in better with our culture. But the real test of surrender isn't when I obey commands I like. If I say to my kids, "Eat your ice cream," that is not a good test of how well they obey me. The true test is when I ask them to do something difficult. If God is calling you to something difficult today, will you say, "Here I am?" Will you obey? If God is calling you to let go of something today, will you?

Abraham's test intensifies in 22:6-8 when he has to take the wood of the burnt offering and lay it on his son. As Abraham and Isaac are trekking along, it dawns on Isaac that the most important element is missing. So Isaac finally breaks the silence and speaks to his dad: "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (22:7) Who can imagine what went through Abraham's mind when Isaac asked that question? What could he say? "You're it! I love you, son, but I'm going to sacrifice you."

Rather, Abraham replied, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8). Not only did his response shroud the truth from Isaac, it also demonstrated faith in God.

What he was saying is, "Let's let God take care of it." I want to come to the place in my own life where I can confidently say, "God is big enough to take care of me." If I'm faithful to obey Him in all He asks of me, He will provide for me all that I need. The only way this kind of obedience can be pulled off is by walking with God and knowing His heart.

[Abraham passed the test of obedience, but now we come to…]

2. The commitment of obedience (22:9-12). In 22:9-10, we see that Abraham's obedience was thorough and complete. The whole procedure is drawn out like a slow-motion replay. It has taken three days to get to Moriah. Once Abraham finally arrives, he has to climb Mount Moriah. Then he has to build the altar, arrange the wood, bind his son, lay him on the altar, stretch out his hand, and take the knife to slay him. Now, on my best spiritual day, I probably would have had faith to build the altar but not to kill. Abraham did everything yet heaven remained silent. I'm sure as he raised that knife, every bone in his body must have wanted to disobey. But if Abraham had not raised the knife he would not have heard from God. Did you catch that? It took raising the knife of obedience with intent to kill (that's commitment), and then Abraham heard from God. Many of us may be willing to lay something on the altar but when we do we take along a rubber knife. Yet, our obedience is not complete if there are some strings attached.

One thing is very clear: Abraham could not have offered Isaac without Isaac's consent and cooperation. Isaac, as the bearer of the wood, was the stronger of the two. As a young man he was also the faster of the two. Clearly, he was strong enough and big enough to resist or subdue his father. Apparently, Isaac had decided to obey his father whatever the cost, just as his father had decided to obey God whatever the cost (cf. Isa 53:7).

At this point in our story it is often our tendency to object to God's demands. We wonder why God wants such sacrifice from us. We may ask ourselves, why does He want all of me? Well, let me try to put this into perspective. Husbands, is it inappropriate for your wife to want all of you? Is it wrong or unfair for her to not want to share you with other women? How much more so with our heavenly Father? He wants all of you! Remember, total obedience is not only measured by what you give God; God also takes into account what

you keep for yourself. Can God get close to the most important things in your life: your possessions, business, plans and dreams, and relationships? Are you willing to let go (Luk 14:26-27)? Sometimes the supreme test of our faith will be a matter of putting obedience to God above something we have lived for all of our lives. Sometimes it will involve something that might to everyone else seem foolish and ridiculous. Are you willing to be sacrificially obedient to God in every area of your life?

As his knife was raised to slay his son, something amazing happened: “But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’” (22:11-12). What a relief this interruption must have been. Abraham must have wiped his tears and jumped for joy! The angel of the Lord informs Abraham that Isaac was spared because “now I know that you fear God” (cf. 20:11). This verse cannot mean that God discovers by knowledge, in finite time, that Abraham fears Him as a result of Abraham’s faithful actions with Isaac. For that would make God less than one who is omniscient. The Bible teaches that God decrees all things and has done so before the creation of the universe; so certainly He need not wait until Abraham is faithful in deeds in order to “know” that Abraham fears God (cf. Psa 139:1-4; Psa 139:16).

The angel of the Lord is saying to Abraham, by your faithful actions I experientially know that you fear God. The language is accommodated to the human understanding, uttered, as it were, from man’s point of view. For example, a chemistry professor, lecturing to his class, says, “Now I will apply an acid to this substance and see what the result will be.” He speaks in this way, although he knows perfectly well beforehand. Having performed the experiment, he says, “I now know that such and such results will follow.” In saying this he puts himself in the place of the class and speaks from their standpoint.

We must differentiate between knowledge as cognition and knowledge as experience. Although God knew ahead of time what Abraham was going to do, there is still ample evidence throughout Scripture that God desires us to act out our faith and worship regardless of the fact that He knows our hearts. God wants us to pray even though He knows what we’re going to say and may already have the answer in motion. He wants us to praise Him even though He knows how we feel. God asks us to express our faith and love. It is honoring to Him for us to demonstrate those things that He knows exists because it pleases Him. Are you willing to worship and fear God? Will you let go of people, things, or dreams that you’ve been holding on to? Will you commit to holding these things loosely?

[We’ve looked at the tests and commitment of obedience. Now our story shifts gears and transitions into…]

3. The blessing of obedience (22:13-24). Obedience is rewarded in three ways:

• First, God blesses us by providing the things which He demands of us (22:13-14). Moses writes, “Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, ‘In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.’” When Abraham demonstrated that he was willing to go all the way in his obedience to God, the Lord provided a solution to his crisis. Remember, God was testing Abraham (cf. 22:1). He didn’t want the sacrifice of a son; He wanted the surrender of a father. Fittingly, Abraham named this place “The Lord will provide” (Yahweh Yireh) or literally, “The Lord will see.” In English there is a cliché that says, “The devil is in the details.” Typically, people who are not administratively inclined or detail

oriented like to use this line. However, if the devil is in the details we are in trouble. Fortunately, in this verse Abraham is saying, “God is the One who is in the details.” He is the One who will “see to it” that everything is appropriately cared for. The name he chooses does not draw attention to himself but to his Lord. He does not name the place “Abraham was obedient.” He focuses on God’s mercy and faithfulness, not on his own obedience. Abraham wanted there to be a record for Isaac. He wouldn’t have any problem trusting God again. Here we see that God is both tester and provider. When God tests you He will provide for you. What you release to God, He replaces with something even more valuable. Do you believe that? One more important note: If you’re observant you may have noticed that Abraham stated that God would provide a lamb for the burnt offering. However, it wasn’t a lamb caught in the thicket, but a ram! The ram could not provide the once-and-for-all sacrifice that Abraham prophetically spoke of in 22:8. That high calling was reserved for God’s own dear Son, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time (1Ti 2:6). He is our substitute…our Savior. Salvation is recognizing your need of a Savior and placing your faith in that Savior Substitute, Jesus Christ.

• Second, God blesses us by providing assurance of His promises (22:15-19). In 22:15-18, we have the final recorded instance of God speaking to Abraham. God here says, “By Myself I have sworn” (22:16) in affirming the promises, which He has already given to Abraham. God has to swear by Himself because there is no one greater He can swear by (Heb 6:13-14). It is unusual for God to speak with an oath. Abraham’s supreme act of obedience drew forth God’s supreme assurance of blessing. If you lack assurance of God’s promises to you, obey Him! He gives His greatest assurance to those who obey Him most fully. We are not told whether or not God spoke to Abraham during his three-day journey to the mountain. But once he arrived and was performing the sacrifice, God spoke commanding Abraham to stay his hand and then again to give a word of promise. It is a good word. It is as though He told Abraham, “Well done, good and faithful servant…enter into the joy of your master” (Mat 25:21). It is worth noting, it is “the angel of the Lord” who speaks to Abraham. As it will be at the judgment seat of Christ, Jesus commends Abraham.

• Third, God blesses us by providing for our future needs (22:20-24). Our narrative closes with the happy news that Abraham’s brother Nahor has become the father of 12 sons. They would later become the ancestors of 12 Aramean tribes. The central purpose of this list is to introduce the future bride of Isaac, Rebekah (22:23). No doubt Abraham had wondered where he would find a wife for Isaac so that his son would not be absorbed into the Canaanite culture. God had already taken care of the matter in the person of Rebekah. When we obey God fully we can trust that He is looking farther ahead than we are. He is already taking care, not only of our future needs, but also of the needs of our children! But please recognize that God has not promised Christians great physical blessings, but whenever we make a sacrifice for Him He gives us a deeper relationship with Himself at least. For this reason we should not fear making personal sacrifices for God.

Several years ago, a pastor’s family was driving along Interstate 94 in Wisconsin. Their gas tank was hit by a piece of road debris-a 5-by-18 inch hollow piece of steel bracketing used to hold mud flaps on trucks-weighing 20-35 pounds. The parents were in the front of the minivan. Six of their children were in the back. The vehicle burst into flames, killing five of the six children and injuring the sixth. The parents survived. What is most memorable about this tragedy was this Christian mother’s response when she watched her children die. She said to her husband, “This is what God has been preparing us for all of our lives.” I need to tell you: This kind of trust does not generate at the moment of impact. It had been developing for a very long time. It is the conviction that God can be trusted no matter what happens.

A nail would certainly question the value of a hammer. To the nail, the hammer is a cruel instrument. But what it doesn't see is that each blow forces the nail to bite deeper and hold more effectively. Without the hammer the nail would not be effective. Tests are like the hammer. Sometimes they come suddenly…other times they appear over the passing of many months, slowly as the erosion of earth.

Are you a "nail" that has begun to resent the blows of the hammer? Are you at the brink of despair, thinking that you cannot bear another day of testing? As difficult as it may be for you to believe this today, the Master knows what He's doing (Heb 4:14-16). Your Savior knows your breaking point. The hammering process is designed to reshape you, not ruin you. Your value is increasing the longer He lingers over you.

God wants you and me to hold people, things, and dreams loosely. To help us in this pursuit, He uses tests. He will test your obedience and your commitment. If you pass His tests, He will bless your life.

Chapter 30

\"A Piece of the Promise\" (Gen 23:1-20)

[Play The Jefferson's theme song] "Well we're movin' on up…To the east side…To a deluxe apartment in the sky. We're movin' on up…To the east side…We've finally got a piece of the pie." I grew up watching The Jefferson's. I loved George & Louise Jefferson and their maid, Florence. I learned some of my best "trash talking" from the Jeffersons. But of course what has stayed with me all of these years is their theme song. The last line is what grabs me: "We've finally got a piece of the pie." You've heard the expression "a piece of the pie," right? Everybody wants a piece of the pie. The Jefferson's certainly did. They wanted to experience the "lifestyles of the rich and famous." They wanted to be successful in their business, family, and personal lives. If we're honest many of us also want our "piece of the pie." Yet, I'd like to challenge each of us and ask a question of priority: What is more important to you-a "piece of the pie" or a "piece of the promise"?

Think of a promise you have from God, something you believe God will bring about. It may be heaven, forgiveness for your darkest sins, the comfort of never being alone, the special purpose He has for your life, the salvation of a loved one, or an answer to prayer. What do you do when that promise is unfulfilled after years of waiting? What do you do when something you felt God was committed to now seems less likely? When God's promises are still in the future, what can we do to show that we believe?

God promised Abraham many things, the most remarkable being a son in his old age, and it happened. But God also promised him a land for his people forever, yet Abraham didn't own so much as an acre. He was living in tents and moving from place to place. This promise of land was not coming to pass. In Genesis 23, we are going to discover how Abraham responded when it seemed that God was not fulfilling His promises. This is a most unusual chapter, one that has perplexed Bible students for centuries. At first glance, the primary thrust of this episode appears unclear. The first two verses record Sarah's death and the next eighteen verses have to do with the purchase of the plot where Sarah is buried. Thus, many pastors preach sermons on how the Christian can cope with the death of a loved one or engage in business practices. I do not think either of these topics is the main message of this chapter. Rather, we must seek the greatest part of our instruction from the greater part of the passage; in this case, the purchase of the plot of ground in which Sarah is buried. The focus of this story is that Sarah was buried "in Canaan" (23:2, 19), and that Abraham went to great lengths and cost to make this a certainty. This demonstrates how Abraham's actions reflect a faith for the future.

In 23:1-2, Moses writes, "Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her." As commentators over the centuries have noted, Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose age is revealed. And at 127 she is no young woman. But the death of Sarah would have seemed untimely because of her apparent youthfulness. Even at the age of ninety she was a woman attractive enough to catch the eye of King Abimelech (20:1■2). Sarah must have appeared to find the fountain of youth. She was Mrs. Oil of Olay. Her youthfulness and beauty would have concealed the fact that death was coming upon her.

Note that Sarah died "in the land of Canaan." Abraham mourned and wept, meaning that in addition to the crying he went through the traditional mourning customs of his day: tearing clothes, cutting his beard,

spreading dust on his head, and fasting. This was all done in the presence of the body. The Jews had a very elaborate and intense process that they went through when someone died. Genesis 50 tells us about Jacob, Abraham's grandson. When he died there was a period of 40 days that his family was at hand. As he was being embalmed, the family had a time of grieving and then he was buried. After he was buried, for another seven days they continued to grieve.

Gen 23:2 is the first record of a man's tears in the Bible. It is fitting that it should be a husband weeping and mourning over the death of his loyal wife of 60 years. It is remarkable that this is the only time we are ever told that Abraham wept. He had been through so many bitter disappointments and heartaches in his life: He was disappointed when Lot left him (13:5-12). He was heartbroken when he sent Ishmael away (21:9-14). He was devastated when he had to offer Isaac (22:1-10). But the only time the Scriptures reveal that he wept was when Sarah died. This reveals the depth of his grief and love for this woman. I would also add that a willingness to put Isaac to death enabled Abraham to accept the passing of his wife, Sarah. God used the offering of Isaac to prepare Abraham for the death of his wife.

The death of a loved one has always been a time to think about the eternal. Ecc 7:2 says, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart." In light of this eventuality, two of the most profound and beneficial questions I think we can ask ourselves are: (1) How would you like to be remembered at your funeral? (2) What steps do you need to take for that to happen?

I believe these verses remind God's people that, as we go through this life awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises in the future, we will undergo difficulties. We are told this in Act 14:22 which says, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." We will endure difficulties but we can endure them in faith as Abraham did. Abraham did not just mourn but also reflected on God's promises concerning the future and this is what motivated him to make the effort to purchase a tomb in the land of Canaan. We are to do the same when we encounter difficulties-we are to have faith for the future. We are to keep our faith and our focus on eternity because God's promises to us are primarily future realities.

Abraham recognized and believed that God's promises are still in the future. Sarah's death would have been a reminder to him of how little he had actually received of God's promises to this point. He would also have been reminded that his death could not be very far away. This could be a very trying moment for Abraham's faith. Yet this story demonstrates that he continued to believe faithfully for the future and act accordingly, despite many difficulties. He expected God to fulfill every one of His promises. In this way, Abraham serves as an example to Christians today who also have been given "precious and magnificent promises" that we must wait to inherit (2Pe 1:4). In other words, most of the great things that God has promised His people will not be received in this life. This was true of Abraham and most of the other saints of God (Heb 11:9-10; Heb 11:13-16; Heb 11:39). We must have a faith for the future; we must have a confidence in God that goes beyond even this life for the fulfillment of His promises. We need to remember Abraham's example and keep our faith by remembering that God's promises are primarily future realities.

In 23:3-6, Moses writes, "Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, 'I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight.' The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, 'Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead.'" Abraham' first words are "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you" (cf. Lev 25:23;

1Ch 29:14-15; Psa 39:12). Abraham realized that Canaan was not his home! He was living for his future home beyond the grave (Heb 11:13-16)! Do you live as if your home is here in Thurston County? Are you so caught up with your life here and now that you don't live for the eternal? It's easy to live for today, but God wants us to live for tomorrow. Therefore, it is always appropriate to remind ourselves that our goal here is not to build up a sizable estate, but to live our life as a pilgrim on the way to our true home-the heavenly Jerusalem. Life rushes by at such a fast rate. It is therefore essential that we live for the world, which is to come.

Before we move on, please note that the sons of Heth call Abraham "a mighty prince among us." Apparently, Abraham's influence counted for something (cf. 21:22-23). Does yours? When God does something supernatural in your life people will sit up and take notice. I am convinced that one of the reasons we make such a small impression in our present world is that God isn't doing anything in our lives; we are on spiritual autopilot. If God were really working supernaturally in our lives, transforming us into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29), it would be so obvious to those around us that we would have many opportunities to share our lives and experiences with them. There is an old saying that people will drive from all over to see a fire burn. The same is true in regard to our churches and personal lives: If we are allowing God to work in our lives, people will drive from all over to see us on fire for God.

In 23:7-11, we read these words: "So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, 'If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site.' "Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, 'No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.'" Abraham, in faith, wishes to "stake his claim" in the Promised Land by buying a cave which was used traditionally as a tomb. The sons of Heth are currently in control of this area of Canaan so Abraham proceeds to make the request of them. Again, this is a reminder of how little of the promises of God that Abraham had actually received to this point. He did not own even enough land to bury his wife, but rather he had to buy it from a people who were cursed by God (see 9:24; 10:15). The same is true today: It often seems that unbelievers are better off than believers, but God's people should not be discouraged about their current situation because God's promises to us are primarily future realities.

In 23:6, the sons of Heth offer to "loan" Abraham any tomb he desires, but Abraham clarifies that he wishes to purchase a tomb at "full price" and therefore "own" the land (23:7-9). This is important. Abraham could have saved a lot of money by borrowing a burial site. Why did he insist on purchasing a tomb? Because when we borrow something it is only temporarily ours and must be returned, but when we own something it is a permanent possession. Abraham wished to express that the land of Canaan was to be his home and not merely a stopping-off place. This was an act of faith in the future fulfillment of God's promises. Abraham's planning demonstrated his faith! We too are to live with the same certainty of God's promises being accomplished despite how impossible and distant they may seem at the present. We are to have a faith for the future because God's promises to us are primarily future realities.

Often, Christians view being a Christian as an insurance policy to save us from hell and make sure that we have a good life here on planet earth, but that is not the correct view of salvation. We must not act as if God's blessings for us are entirely for our life in this world. Peter said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the

fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1Pe 4:12). Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation" (Joh 16:33). We are not to expect an easy life. Our sights are to be set on glory beyond the grave.

Ephron offers to give Abraham the field (23:10-11). In fact, he makes three "I give" statements (23:11). Abraham ought to be feeling good. I would be licking my lips at this prospect. After all, even the wealthy appreciate a "free lunch." But we shall see that apparently Abraham knows something that we the readers do not.

In 23:12-13, our story continues: "And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, 'If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me that I may bury my dead there.'" Abraham sticks to his guns. He is bent on purchasing this land. Why is this so important to Abraham? The answer will become clear in a moment.

In 23:14-15, Ephron answers Abraham, saying to him, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." If Abraham had been given to quick retorts, he could have answered Ephron's "what is that between me and you?" with "A whole lot, Ephron! You're taking me to the cleaners." Now we can see that Ephron's "gift" is not really a gift in the sense that it costs nothing. He is saying what many television evangelists say, "Give me a hundred dollars, and I will give you this free book." The evangelist is not really giving you anything. Like the evangelist, Ephron said, "I will give you this." But he had a price in mind. Even though Ephron offers to give Abraham the land free of charge, he places a value on the "gift" that is offered. This accomplishes two things. (1) It names his inflated asking price. (2) It makes it almost impossible for Abraham to bargain over the price without looking like a cheapskate. After all, if Ephron is so generous as to offer to give the land to Abraham, how could Abraham be so small as to dicker over the price? Ephron is extorting Abraham. All he wanted was the cave but Ephron added the field. More real estate, more money! Abraham knew it but there was nothing he could do. He had been sincere in his offer to pay "full price" (lit., "full silver") for the grave, but Ephron had just a wee bit more in mind.

But instead "Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard. So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth before all who went in at the gate of his city" (23:16-18). Ephron was certainly not being generous to a grieving man. In fact the price and terms of the sale indicate that Ephron was greedy and unfair. This Gentile "gentiled" Abraham out of some money, but Abraham regarded the land as priceless because of what it meant to him spiritually. He now had a part of the land promised to him. First, Ephron insists that the cave and the field be sold to Abraham. Abraham only needed the cave at the end of the field (23:9) but Ephron gives Abraham a raw deal. Secondly, the price Ephron asks for the field is exorbitant. Many centuries later Jeremiah buys a field for only seventeen sheckles of silver (Jer 32:9). David paid only one-eighth that amount-50 shekels of silver-for the purchase of the temple site from Araunah (2Sa 24:24). Nevertheless Abraham bought the field according to those extremely unfair terms and price.

Ephron likely anticipated that Abraham would bow again and make a counteroffer but Abraham accepted Ephron's price…and he got just what he wanted. First, the deal was transacted at the city gate in full public view and full disclosure. Second, the agreement was struck in the hearing of the sons of Heth who watched as the money was measured out. Third, the price was high, so that no subsequent city dweller could dispute Abraham's ownership. It was important for Abraham to have uncontested ownership and he was willing to pay top shekel for it. If you have ever purchased a house you may understand this. If you want to the house bad enough you will pay top dollar to make sure your offer is accepted. This is the first spot of land Abraham owned in the Promise Land. God promised all of the land to him (12:7; 13:13) over 77 years ago; now he buys a small burial plot. What faith! Abraham believed God's promises to us are primarily future realities.

Obviously, this passage is not telling Christians how to do business! Why would Abraham make such a bad deal? For one reason and one reason only: because he had faith for the future. He firmly believed his descendants would own it all one day so he was willing to invest quite heavily in this portion of the land, by faith. He was determined to pay any price for Sarah to be buried in Canaan, because he really believed God's promises. The way we spend our money is certainly one indicator of the health of our faith!

Our story ends in 23:19-20, with these words: "After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth." We are again reminded that Sarah was buried in Canaan, in a field and cave that Abraham had purchased and possessed the deed for. Later Abraham was buried there (25:8-9), so was Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah (49:30-33, 50:13). The very fact that Abraham buried Sarah in the land of Canaan is proof of his unwavering faith. Knowing that his descendants would have to endure four hundred years of bitter bondage in a foreign country (15:13), he looked beyond that to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises. Notice, Abraham buried Sarah facing "Mamre" (cf. 23:17). Mamre was where Abraham built an altar and worshipped God (13:18). It was where the Lord appeared to him and repeated the promise of a son (18:1).

Verse 20, the concluding verse of our story says: "So the field and the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth." This seems strange appearing after 23:19, which would have been a reasonable note on which to conclude. Its placement here points out that the crucial element in this chapter is not Sarah's death, but Abraham's acquisition of land from outsiders. As such, it is an indication of things to come.

Both of these acts, Sarah's burial and Abraham's legal purchase of the land, remind us that Abraham had a faith for the future. He was not looking at his current situation but at God's promised future. As believers we also should be looking forward in faith not backwards or at the present situation.Abraham could have bought something long before this; he was a wealthy man. Instead, he lived in tents, banking everything on the promise. His action here is not about manufacturing the plan, but rather making some tangible act that expresses faith that God is going to come through. The lesson for God's people is: Those who believe invest in God's promises.

• It took a death for Abraham to begin possessing God's promises. We possess the riches of God by our death with Jesus Christ (Eph 2:3-7). We must live daily with a view of death (Gal 6:14; Luk 9:23). We invest in the promise every time we participate in the Lord's Table with understanding and sincerity.

• Perhaps you are single and looking for the right man or the right woman. On good days you believe God has put this desire in your heart and has the right person for you. Express your faith by purchasing a symbolic diamond as a visible, tangible expression that you believe.

• Paul writes to Philemon: “Prepare me a lodging” or a “guest-room” (NIV, Phm 1:22). He is in prison but his hope is that prayer will be answered and he will be freed. Preparing the room is an investment in the promise.

• Maybe you’re looking for a job. As you search and wait, invest in the promise. Take some symbolic action that shows you believe God will provide that job. Buy a new briefcase or calendar or something that symbolizes a piece of the promise.

• Every believing loved-one whose body you put into the ground is a piece of the promise. Each one is a seed of the resurrection, demonstrating that because Jesus lives, they also live. Through your tears of sorrow and loss take comfort that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Maybe it’s a little one who died-a daughter, son, or sister. Perhaps your child was unborn. In the pain and heartache of that loss, grab a piece of the promise when you believe the Creator of all knows what He is doing and the day is coming when He will wipe every tear from our eyes. You are purchasing a little piece of the promise to come. Take some symbolic action to show you believe. Grab some soil. Keep a memento.

• I believe our church is destined to grow. I am banking on this promise whether it happens in my lifetime or not. At our prayer seminar yesterday I sensed that God gave me a verse to claim for our church. This verse is Act 16:31 where Paul and Silas proclaimed to the Philippian jailer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Our church has unveiled a vision to reach children, teens, and young adults with the Gospel. Could it be that God is calling us to step out and include in this year’s budget a large sum of money to go toward the future growth of our church? Is this a step of faith that God is requiring us to make? I believe so!

These are some ways that you and I can exhibit faith knowing that God’s promises to us are primarily future realities. Let’s face it: If our faith is something that really does not make a big difference, if it is actually not crucial that we or others believe, no wonder it seems boring to some of our young people. Anything we don’t care much about can’t be very interesting. The things we do care about, however, we inevitably talk about. ...If faith is real, it seeks expression. It will communicate and profess. It will have the energy of passion.

In Abraham’s story we have a preview of the Christian life. It begins with justifying faith. Our call to salvation is at the same time a call to ministry and inheritance. Faith is the master characteristic of the Christian life.

• We begin by faith (Gen 15:4-6).

• We live each day by faith (Rom 4:18-20).

• We finish by faith (Heb 11:11-13).

Today, will you be a man or woman of faith? Will you live your life in such a way that you could be included in God’s Hall of Faith? It begins today by stepping out and trusting in God’s promises.

Chapter 31

\"The Fingerprints of God\" (Gen 24:1-67)

In Genesis 24, we come to one of the greatest love stories known to man: The blind marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. This chapter is the longest chapter in the book of Genesis; yet, it shifts scenes like a romantic movie. Nevertheless, the story of Isaac and Rebekah is more than just a story of “boy meets girl.” It is a wonderful revelation of the sovereign work of God. Driving each scene is the implied question: How will God carry out His incredible promises? Abraham has been promised immeasurable seed that will bless the earth. Therefore, further questions abound: What woman will the Lord find for Isaac to further this promise? How will He overcome the inevitable human stumbling blocks? In this account we will see that God will guide us, as we are faithful to His Word.

Our story begins with these words: “Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in every way” (24:1). The two-fold repetition of “old” and “advanced in age” is deliberate. In the Bible, old age is a sign of blessing on a great person (cf. Jos 13:1; Jos 23:1; 1Ki 1:1). The same is true today. If God has given you long life and you’re walking with Him, praise Him for His goodness to you. Verse 1 affirms “the Lord had blessed Abraham in every way.” This is also true of us, isn’t it? While the material blessings of Abraham are not ours, we are recipients of God’s blessings. When you consider your life, you should be able to see the many blessings that God has given (Jam 1:17). These blessings that we take for granted everyday are evidence of the fingerprints of God. When we acknowledge the Lord’s blessings and express gratitude we take a step forward in recognizing His hand of providence.

In 24:2-4, Moses moves from an introductory comment to the storyline. As we have already noted, Abraham is an old man. Like many men Abraham makes use of his “golden years” by getting his house in order. High on his “To Do List” was finding a godly wife for his son, Isaac, who is about 40 years old at this time (25:20). So he sends for his unnamed servant and makes a very important request: “Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” The oath Abraham makes with his servant seems a little bizarre. I don’t know about you but I don’t want another man putting his hand under my thigh! Yet this was customary in Abraham’s day (cf. 47:29), and this oath alludes to circumcision (cf. 17:11).

Abraham asked his servant to swear an oath not get a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites (cf. 9:25). Abraham’s mindset is that it is better to have no wife than to have a Canaanite wife. In the Old Testament period, the family was the most important educational unit (Deu 6:6-7; Pro 1:8). Undoubtedly, Abraham understood the critical role of the mother. If Isaac had an unbelieving wife there would be little chance of having godly children. So Abraham insists that Isaac marry a woman who is a believer (Deu 7:3-5; 1Co 7:39; 2Co 6:14-16). Where else would Abraham send his servant than to his own relatives? Now I am not recommending this for any young people today. But I would suggest that if you want to find a godly spouse you look where godly Christians should be. Furthermore, if you want a godly spouse you need to be the kind of person a godly spouse will be looking for.

A point of tension in our story hits in 24:5 when Abraham’s servant says, “Suppose the woman is not willing to follow me to this land; should I take your son back to the land from where you came?” This is a

legitimate question. This is not the age of the Internet. A young woman cannot go to Equally Yoked, look at a man's picture, read about his interests, and then make a thoughtful selection. What Abraham is seeking to do, however, would require blind faith…and not too many women are so eager that they will step out, sight unseen.

In 24:6-8, Abraham resolves the tension when he says, "Beware that you do not take my son back there! The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath; only do not take my son back there." Twice Abraham warns his servant not to take Isaac back to Ur (24:6, 8; cf. 12:1; Luk 9:62). This is faith! Abraham knows God has called him out of Ur and has promised him abundant descendants and land, so he is willing to trust the Lord in whatever He chooses to do. This is a great illustration of salvation. When God calls you, He is calling you out of something to something. He doesn't want you looking back to your old life. He wants you to move forward and press on, to new life in Christ.

After hearing the strength of Abraham's convictions, "the servant placed his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and swore to him concerning this matter" (24:9). The point of this section is to show Abraham's concern for God's promise that was to come to the descendants of Isaac (cf. 21:1). In these verses, he also takes upon himself the responsibility of ensuring that God's program continues to the next generation. Like Abraham, we must be willing to claim God's promises and do all we can to ensure that His kingdom program continues in our descendants and in our church.

In 24:10-27, we enter a new section. Moses writes, "Then the servant took ten camels from the camels of his master, and set out with a variety of good things of his master's in his hand; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia, to the city of Nahor. [Nahor was the brother of Abraham.] He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at evening time, the time when women go out to draw water" (24:10-11). Verse 10 encompasses hundreds of miles and several months as the servant assembled a caravan and made his way to Mesopotamia. In 24:11, there is a subtle wordplay connecting this section with the previous section. Moses records that Abraham's servant "made the camels kneel down." This appears to be an unnecessary detail but the Hebrew verb "kneel" (wayyabrek) sounds just like the verb "bless" (barak) in 24:1. Moses is drawing the reader's attention to the fact that the arrival at the proper place was all a part of the divine blessing. God's hand is in the events of this story.

In 24:12, the servant prays, "O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show lovingkindness to my master Abraham." Notably, this unnamed servant is the first person described in Scripture as asking for divine guidance at a critical juncture. Now I might have gone about this task in a very different manner. I might have come into town advertising the fact that I worked for a very wealthy foreigner with a handsome, eligible son who was to be his only heir. I would have publicized my task and declared that only one lucky girl would be chosen. To select such a bride I might have held a "Miss Mesopotamia" contest. Only those who were the most beautiful and talented would be allowed to enter, and the winner would become the wife of Isaac. But that's not what this godly servant did. Instead, when his small caravan arrived in Nahor he immediately went to prayer! When we are in need of divine guidance prayer should be our first activity rather than our last resort.

Notice, this servant prays a bold prayer. He asks for God to provide a wife for Isaac "today." I'm sure many young people looking for a spouse would like to pray that prayer: "Oh Lord, give the answer today!" But

God does not always guarantee to be so speedy. Sometimes He desires us to persevere in prayer. Are you praying about decisions you need to make regarding relationships? Have you committed them to the Lord? If you need to make a decision regarding business, have you prayed about it?

The servant prays that God will “show lovingkindness” to his master, Abraham. This word translated “lovingkindness” (hesed) refers to God’s covenantal loyalty. Abraham’s servant can pray with bold confidence because he knows that the God of Abraham is faithful to His promises. Do you have a proper view of God? Do you recognize His love and compassion for you? The servant goes on to say, “Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; now may it be that the girl to whom I say, ‘Please let down your jar so that I may drink,’ and who answers, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels also’-may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown lovingkindness to my master” (24:13-14). Culturally it was a normal act of hospitality to provide water to thirsty travelers. But the idea that a woman would also provide water for ten thirsty camels was going far beyond what would normally be expected. In praying this prayer the servant “stacked the deck” against finding someone. It would take a remarkable woman to volunteer for this lowly and backbreaking task.

Yet, in 24:15, Moses pens these important words: “Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.” Did you catch that? While the servant is praying the answer is already on the way. This is classic God! He is so gracious and faithful that He often answers prayer before or as we’re praying. He does this to demonstrate His power. The servant’s answer to prayer is named Rebekah. She is the daughter of Bethuel, a second cousin of Isaac. This is exactly what Abraham was seeking for his son! Furthermore, in 24:16, we learn that “the girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her.” Rebekah was very beautiful. Her appearance isn’t the primary basis of the servant’s choice, but it is interesting to note that God chose a wife that would also be attractive to Isaac. She was a virgin. She did not practice “safe sex”; she practiced “save sex” for marriage. She understood that sex was a gift from God, to be enjoyed within the commitment of marriage. Maybe you’re thinking, “That’s nice to preach, but I have already made those mistakes. What should I do?” First, seek the forgiveness of God (1Jn 1:9). Then make a new commitment to God and to the person whom you are dating. Begin practicing God’s standard for moral purity.

At this point in our story Abraham’s servant is beside himself. (If he is single, he’s probably wishing he was Isaac.) Nevertheless, he runs up to meet Rebekah and says, “Please let me drink a little water from your jar.’ She said, ‘Drink, my lord’; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink. Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, ‘I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking.’ So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels” (24:17-20). In these verses, Rebekah demonstrates an amazing servant’s heart. To grasp what a wonder this was we must understand that the ancient well was a large, deep hole in the earth with steps leading down to the spring water, so that each drawing of water required substantial effort. Moreover, a camel can consume 25 gallons of water in ten minutes. How would you like to get 250 gallons of water for ten camels? With a water jar holding about three gallons of water this means that Rebekah made 80 to 100 descents into the well. Rebekah’s labors filled 90 to 120 sweaty minutes. Ladies, Pilates, Spinning, and Tae-Bo have nothing on this workout. Interestingly, Rebekah didn’t realize that she was about to become an integral part of God’s eternal plan of salvation by marrying Isaac. She served simply because it was the pattern of her life. I wonder how many of us desire to be used of the Lord in great

ways, but have not proven reliable in the small things in life? (See Mat 25:21) Women, are you willing to serve your husband and children like Rebekah? Are you a woman who is known for how you serve?

By the way, both Jacob (29:1-12) and Moses (Exo 2:15-22) found their future wives at a well, after long journeys. Single men, guess where you should be hanging out? Seriously, these stories anticipate an event in the life of Jesus in John 4.

On His long walk home from Jerusalem Jesus stopped at a well in Sychar where He also met a woman, although of a rather different reputation. This woman had been married to several different husbands. As a result of Jesus' visit the entire town believed in Him and participated in the promises of God (Joh 4:39-42). Today, will you meet Jesus? Maybe you're looking for a spouse to meet your needs. Jesus would say to you, "No spouse can fully meet your needs but I can."

A second point of tension occurs in 24:21. Moses writes, "Meanwhile, the man was gazing at her in silence, to know whether the LORD had made his journey successful or not." The servant is exhibiting caution. He is no doubt in a hurry to get back, however, throughout this narrative he shows concern for seeking God's will. He is sensible, sensitive, and prayerful. He exhibits loyalty, patience, and steady, trusting devotion to God. We are to do the same and God will guide us. We are not to act impulsively or impatiently. We are to move forward in faith and depend on the Lord.

The tension is alleviated with the inquiry and identification of Rebekah. Moses writes, "When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold ring weighing a half-shekel and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels in gold, and said, 'Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room for us to lodge in your father's house?' She said to him, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor.' Again she said to him, 'We have plenty of both straw and feed, and room to lodge in.' Then the man bowed low and worshiped the LORD. He said, 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His lovingkindness and His truth toward my master; as for me, the LORD has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers.'" Again, Rebekah is impressive. This time she manifests great generosity and hospitality. Verse 27 points out the obvious: God is deliberately behind the scenes, yet directing the acts. In this respect the account is very similar to the book of Ruth. The story records no word from God, no miracle, no prophetic oracle; it doesn't even restate the Abrahamic covenant. It merely evidences God sovereignly working through the circumstances of those who are acting in faith. Consequently, Abraham's servant bows down and worships the Lord. No doubt he is overwhelmed with God's guidance. He praises God once again for His hesed love and also "His truth." God is a God of unconditional faithfulness.

When God moves in your life do you respond like this servant? If you are physically able, I challenge you to bow before the Lord on a daily basis. Recently I was challenged by a young man (Michael Fletcher) to prostrate myself before the Lord on a daily basis just to acknowledge that He is God. I have been attempting to do this and I have found it serves to remind me of how small I am and how huge God is.

In 24:28-33, Rebekah returns home and shares everything with her family. Obviously she is excited, as any woman would be. Rebekah's brother, Laban, invites the servant in and even offers him food. But in 24:33, when food is set before him he refuses to eat until his mission is accomplished. He considers his master's business more important than his pleasure. Do you have this mindset as well? Is Christ's mission for you more important than your pleasure?

A third tension-filled episode occurs in 24:34-49 as the servant seeks to obtain the approval of Rebekah's family. Genesis 24, as a whole, is an excellent example of the ancient storyteller's art. In those days people enjoyed repetition-in fact, they preferred it-as they listened to tales or read them. Repetition served several purposes. It was used (1) to linger over sites and scenes that were especially enthralling or otherwise important; (2) to lend additional emphasis wherever necessary; and (3) to serve as a memory aid to the hearers (or reader). Far from being signs of inept editing or dual authorship, repetition and duplication were often deliberately employed as effective literary devices.

The key themes repeated in this section are:

• God's blessings upon Abraham

• the servant's sensitivity and responsiveness to the Lord

• the Lord's providential hand working behind the scenes

In 24:50-54, the tension is resolved by the family's approval: "Then Laban and Bethuel replied, 'The matter comes from the LORD; so we cannot speak to you bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken.' When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed himself to the ground before the LORD. The servant brought out articles of silver and articles of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother. Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank and spent the night. When they arose in the morning, he said, 'Send me away to my master.'" Again, the servant responds appropriately by bowing to the ground in worship and gratitude (cf. 24:26).

Another severely tense moment takes place in 24:55-57: "But her brother and her mother said, 'Let the girl stay with us a few days, say ten; afterward she may go.' He said to them, 'Do not delay me, since the LORD has prospered my way. Send me away that I may go to my master.' And they said, 'We will call the girl and consult her wishes.' Then they called Rebekah and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' And she said, 'I will go.'" This is powerful! What relief! Rebekah demonstrates her faith in Abraham's God by decisively choosing to leave her family to marry Isaac (cf. Rth 1:16). His invitation to marriage is not an easy choice that she is asked to make. She is being asked to leave her family and everything familiar and to go with a man whom she has just met a day or two before, and to marry another man whom she has never seen before.

The "I will" statement is typical of countless marriage ceremonies. At my own marriage ceremony Lori surprised me by singing a song by Steven Curtis Chapman entitled I Will Go There With You. By singing this song she committed herself to me-to go wherever I felt God calling us to go. The "I will" statement is also typical of the Christian life. Indeed, marriage is the greatest illustration of the love between Jesus and His church. The Christian life is a matter of putting ourselves in the hands of Jesus. The Holy Spirit comes to us and says, "Will you go with this Jesus? Will you go to Him? Will you spend the rest of your life in fellowship with Him?" And we respond and say, "I will." The best way to know God's will is to say, "I will," to God.

After Rebekah's courageous step of faith, Moses records these words: "Thus they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse with Abraham's servant and his men. They blessed Rebekah and said to her, 'May you, our sister, become thousands of ten thousands, and may your descendants possess the gate of those who hate them.' Then Rebekah arose with her maids, and they mounted the camels and followed

the man. So the servant took Rebekah and departed" (24:59-61). Thus the reader has been given three witnesses that these events have been the work of God: the narrator (24:15-16), the servant (24:26-27), and Laban (24:50). The final witness is Rebekah herself, who, against the wishes of her brother and her mother, returns with the servant to Isaac.

A final episode of tension is found in 24:62-67. The question is: How will Isaac and Rebekah respond to each other? Will it be love at first sight or will there be utter disappointment? Moses gives us the play-by-play account. "Now Isaac had come from going to Beer-lahai-roi; for he was living in the Negev. Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, camels were coming. Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from the camel. She said to the servant, 'Who is that man walking in the field to meet us?' And the servant said, 'He is my master.' Then she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done." Beer-lahai-roi, where Isaac lived and meditated, was a place where God had previously answered prayer (cf. 16:14). It is likely that Isaac was seeking God for his future wife. Rebekah dismounted out of respect for her intended husband (cf. Jos 15:18; 1Sa 25:23). Her respect was evident in how she approached him.

The final verse of our chapter has a hint of romance: "Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." Isaac married Rebekah and Moses writes: "He loved her." This is the first reference to marital love in the Bible. Do you notice that love came last, not first, in this chapter? Love came after marriage, not before it. Romantic love is never the basis for marriage. Instead, marriage is the basis for romantic love (Eph 5:25). Moses also states that Issac was "comforted after his mother's death" (Pro 18:22; Pro 19:14). Rebekah had taken the place of Sarah in the line of the descendants of Abraham and she brought comfort to Isaac.

This marriage was essential to the work of God in the world. Perhaps the question that should be asked today by those seeking guidance in who to marry is: What value to God would this marriage be? What value to God would this business venture be? How does God benefit?

Here are a few quick principles in the marriage arena:

• Don't worry about finding the right person, become the right person yourself.

• If you are married, you are married to the right person.

• Practice servanthood in your dating or marriage relationship.

• The root characteristic of love is commitment.

• Pray for your child's future spouse.

Ultimately, this entire story is about God's faithfulness. He protected and guided the servant on his journey, and He brought Rebekah along with just the right servant-spirit at just the right time. From our historical perspective, centuries later we can see how God used the remarkable obedience of a few family members to accomplish His purposes. For it was through the union of Isaac and Rebekah that the covenant and its wonderful promises were to be perpetuated.

Several centuries ago, the wise sage, Solomon, penned a familiar passage: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Pro 3:5-6). Let me quickly explain this verse. The word “trust” is used in the Old Testament in a literal, physical sense: to physically lean upon something for support. It is also used in a figurative sense: to rely upon someone or something for help or protection. The verb is often used with false securities, people trusting in things that prove to be worthless. But here the object of the secure trust is the LORD who is a reliable object of confidence. God wants you to lean and rely upon Him. He says that you are to do so with “all your heart.” The word “heart” encompasses mind, emotions, and will. He commands you not to “lean on your own understanding.” Again, the word “lean” is used in a literal, physical sense of leaning upon something for support. It is also used in a figurative sense of relying upon someone or something for help or protection. Here it functions figuratively as an implied comparison. Instead of leaning on yourself, lean upon the Lord (cf. Isa 10:20). The word “understanding” is used elsewhere in this book of insight given by God from the instructions in Proverbs (2:3; 7:4; 8:14; 9:6, 10; 23:23).

Today, God asks a simple question: Will you trust me? When it seems like there is no way I can come through, will you look doubt and fear in the face and say, “I AM trusting the Lord”? This is God’s explicit will for you. As you seek to find God’s will, first find God and stick especially close to Him.

“Passing the Promises” (Gen 25:1-18)

Five years ago, a wonderful man by the name of Gil Woo gave me a very meaningful gift. [Hold up a green aluminum baton.] Gil gave me this baton as a reminder that God’s call upon my life is to finish well and pass the faith on to those who will come after me. I have kept this baton on my office desk for the past five years as a visual, daily reminder of that calling.

I’m sure you’ve heard it said that the Christian faith is always only one generation from extinction. Or as Bruce Wilkinson says, “God has no grandchildren.” Instead, the Christian faith is like a relay race in which one generation passes the baton of God’s truth to another generation. As a father I have a sacred responsibility to see that my faith is passed down to my children and, if I live long enough, to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As a pastor I must earnestly seek to impart God’s truth to you so you will pass the faith on to others. As a Christian I must use every opportunity to spread the Gospel and boldly proclaim Jesus Christ.

Now, I am not accountable for what people do with the truth I give them. I cannot answer for my children; nor can I answer for everyone who hears me preach. But I will be held accountable for doing all I can to ensure that the truth I know is passed along to others, so the Christian faith will continue into the next generation (2Ti 2:2). This applies to you as well. Whatever roles you currently occupy and whatever your stage of life, your mission is to pass the baton of faith to the next generation.

In Gen 25:1-18, Moses pens Abraham’s swan song…his last dance…his final hurrah. In these verses, we will be reminded that our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.

Our story begins in 25:1: “Now Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah.” This is certainly impressive! Sarah died at 127 (23:1). This means Abraham was at least 137 when he married Keturah. But what is even more impressive is what we read in 25:2-4: “She bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and

Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah." In these three verses we discover that Abraham had other children…six more sons to be precise! All I can say to that is, "Get busy, Abe!" Can you imagine beginning parenthood again at about 140 years old? Can you imagine being surrounded with toddlers when you are 60, much less 160? Verse 7 informs us that Abraham died at 175. This means there could have been 38 years for the birth of these six sons. Abe would have been able to identify with the words of Flip Wilson, who said, "If I could live my life over again…I wouldn't have the energy!"

At this point you may be wondering why Moses rattled off the names of Abraham's other sons. When we look at these names we see a bunch of hard to pronounce gobbledygook. Yet, there's a method to Moses' madness. Genealogies tell a story to those who will take the time to read them. They explain the relevant history of cultures. In this context, Abraham's six sons become the descendants of several Far East tribes. Furthermore, listing these sons of Abraham provides a demonstration of God's faithfulness. In 12:2-3, God promised to bless Abraham. In 15:4, He promised Abraham that he would have a son. In 15:15, God promised Abraham that he would live to a ripe old age. In 17:5-6, 16, God promised Abraham that nations, kings, and rulers would come from him. In 17:7, God promised Abraham that the covenant would be passed on to his son. God was making the point that faith will continue to the next generation. When we trust in God, He is faithful to fulfill His promises. That's why we must remember that our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.

In 25:5-6, Abraham divides up his inheritance. Moses writes, "Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east." In this section and the two that follow (25:7-11 and 12-18), those characters who play minor parts in the drama take their curtain calls making way for the chief actors who follow. In 25:5, Abraham gave everything he owned to Isaac, because he was the legal firstborn. He was also the son of the promise. But it is important to notice that in 25:6 Abraham also gave gifts to his other sons. By giving them gifts he honored each of his sons. By sending them away to the east he indicated that Isaac and only Isaac was the son of the promise. Since he is to be the sole heir of the covenant it is important for Moses to indicate that all other heirs have been cared for and have received their due. They have no claims on that which belongs to Isaac. Isaac inherited everything that belonged to Abraham at the time of Abraham's death. Yet, Abraham took responsibility for his other sons and provided for them during his lifetime, so there should be no dispute at the time of his death.

Did you catch that? Abraham passed out an inheritance to his children "while he was still living." He didn't wait until he died to benefit his children. He used what he had to bring joy to others while he was living. If you're a dad or grandpa, how are you currently blessing your children and grandchildren? As you are able, are you seeking to give appropriate gifts? If you were to die before your time would your wife and children be taken care of? Are you planning for the future of your loved ones? More importantly, are you also passing on a spiritual inheritance while you're alive that will go on after your death? Remember, there is no guarantee you will live out a long life; you may not even wake up tomorrow morning. Therefore, if you want to impart a successful legacy be sure to pass the promises.

In 25:7-8, Abraham dies. His epitaph is as follows: "These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people." By Abraham's time the human life span had been so curtailed due to the physical effects of the fall that 175 years was regarded as a "ripe old age" (cf. 11:32). I like how Moses expands the normal genealogical formula: "These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived." He does this for two reasons: First, Abraham is a very important person, second only to

Jesus Christ. Second, I think Moses indicates that Abraham lived those 175 years to the max! He didn't just exist; he truly lived! He didn't merely survive; he thrived! The NASB reads, "Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life" (25:8a). Abraham died "satisfied with life." It is a satisfaction similar to the satisfaction you feel after a delicious dinner when you aren't sick but satisfied. When Abraham pushed back from the table of life at the end of his days he was satisfied. He had no regrets. He had enjoyed the journey.

How many people can say that on their deathbeds? Not too many. Most folks come to the end and look back with regret and remorse-regret for lost opportunities and remorse over foolish mistakes they've made. No doubt Abraham had his share of both, yet as he looked back over 175 years he was satisfied with the life he had lived.

As anyone who has studied his story knows, Abraham didn't have an easy life-just the opposite. Along the way he went through periods of frustration, discouragement, physical privation, and spiritual compromise. He experienced more than his share of personal loss. He saw the glitter of royal Egypt and smelled the smoke rising from the ruins of Sodom. He heard the voice of God and later lied to save his own skin. He had to give up his firstborn son, Ishmael, and send him away-an act that broke his heart. And as far as we know Isaac and Ishmael never really reconciled, nor did his wife and Hagar. He wept when he buried his wife, Sarah, and then had the satisfaction of seeing Isaac take Rebekah into her tent.

Certainly, Abraham lived a full life. He packed a lot into those 175 years. But through it all, even in the worst moments, he remained a man of faith. He never lost sight of the God who called him out of Ur 100 years earlier. For that reason-and that reason alone-he was satisfied with life when he died.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, is quoted as saying, "The art of living well and the art of dying well are one." Abraham lived the truth of this statement-dying well means living well.

Sadly, many are like long-distance runners who sprint three laps only to slow to a stop in the final lap. Let's face it; we spend a good portion of our lives wishing them away.

• When we're young we want to be older so we can drive, date, and set our own rules.

• When we're a little older we want to be older still so we can earn more and buy more.

• In the middle (or productive) years we find ourselves dreading the work we have to do and longing for the week to pass so we can enjoy a weekend.

• Suddenly we find ourselves saying, "Where did the time go?" as our kids move away.

• We then begin to look forward to retirement so we can engage in the activities we enjoy.

• When we retire we wish we had the energy of youth.

• In old age some feel that they have nothing left to give. We move and think slower, we don't hear so well, and our bodies begin to ache.

• Some spend the remainder of their days saying, "I wish I could just go to sleep and not wake up."

Do you see something in common with all of these sentiments? In each of these scenarios we are discontented with life at whatever stage we are. Could these words describe your life? Are you "living" life or enduring it? Are you savoring each moment or are you wishing your life away? Do push back from each day with the satisfied feeling of knowing that you have made the most of your day? Have you stopped living and started merely "existing?" This is no way to live. How differently Abraham lived his life. He lived life to the max!

Here are some ideas how you and I can enjoy the journey more:

• Instead of starting the day with, "Oh no," start it with, "THIS is the day which the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it."

• Make time for God and savor those moments. Read His Word and share your heart with Him every day.

• Talk about yourself and your life in the positive rather than the negative. Focus on the blessings rather than the struggles. Make it a point to look for the silver lining.

• Think and speak well of your health. Focus on what you can do rather than what you can't.

• Give yourself fully and enthusiastically to your various responsibilities.

• Whistle while you work (unless you are in a library).

• Look for new things to try and learn, and then try them and learn them: a new language, a new skill, a new place to visit, reading something different or listening to some music outside of your normal tastes, playing an instrument. Don't focus on the things you used to be able to do, that you can't anymore…focus on the things you wanted to do but didn't have time to do before! Have some fun!

• Take time to notice beautiful things.

• Resolve that the next time things don't go as you planned you won't pout but will view it as an unexpected adventure.

• Begin today to live so that when your life is over people will be able to say that you lived a satisfying life.

What happened after Abraham died? Moses writes, "…he was gathered to his people." Does this phrase simply mean that he took a "dirt nap" in the family grave, end of story? Is it true that there was no thought of an afterlife? Unfortunately, too many carelessly conclude that this is precisely the case. Actually, the expression "he was gathered to his people" cannot mean he was buried with his relatives and ancestors. In 25:8-9 such an analysis is impossible, because we know that none of Abraham's kin, except his wife, was buried at the cave of Machpelah. In the Old Testament those who have already died are regarded as still existing. The event of being "gathered to one's people" is always distinguished from the act of burial, which is described separately (35:29; 49:29, 31, 33). In many cases only one ancestor was in the tomb (1Ki 11:43; 1Ki 22:40), or none at all (Deu 31:16; 1Ki 2:10; 1Ki 16:28; 2Ki 21:18), so being "gathered to one's people" could not mean being laid in the family sepulcher.

Undoubtedly, Old Testament saints didn't have the full revelation of the resurrection of the body. This awaited a later unveiling, in the New Testament. However, it seems certain that these early participants in

the promises of God were fully expecting to enjoy life after death. In the New Testament when Jesus was speaking to the Sadducees (i.e., a political/religious party who did not believe in the resurrection), He used the argument that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not the God of the dead but of the living (Mat 22:32). Thus the patriarchs were not to be counted out of the hope of resurrection.

All of this to say, death is not a period-it's only a comma. The moment a believer closes his eyes in death he is in the presence of Jesus. This is why Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luk 23:43). Jesus promises that there is life beyond the grave. He not only promised…He demonstrated that truth with his own resurrection. Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Php 1:21). With this in mind do you still fear death? Will it not be a true "gathering to your people"? Death is a time of reunion.

In 25:9-10, Abraham is buried. Moses writes: "Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife." The emphasis of the narrative in this section lies in the fact that Abraham was buried in the field that he purchased from Ephron the Hittite. The final resting place of Abraham was in a portion of the Promised Land that he rightfully owned (23:1-20).

This tiny bit of land represented a toehold in the land of promise. It was like a small title deed to the whole land of Canaan. By burying Abraham there alongside his beloved wife Sarah, his sons were saying, "Daddy lived by faith in God's promises. And when he died he still believed in them. We're burying him right here, because someday all this land will belong to us." Thus the torch of truth passed down from one generation to another. Our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.

In 25:11, we have a very important verse in which God blesses Abraham's son, Isaac. Moses writes, "It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi." This final verse gives us two significant facts about Isaac. First, God "blessed" him. This statement must be connected to the initial promise of blessing in 12:1-3 and then traced through the narratives. The blessing was passed on to Isaac; the God of Abraham was to be the God of Isaac as well. Second, the verse also reports that Isaac dwelt near Beer-Lahai-Roi, which means "well of the living One who sees me." Here, God had heard Hagar and delivered her (16:14). And here Isaac had come to meditate as he awaited Rebekah (24:62). In the next section of the book Isaac prays at this same location for his barren wife (25:21). Isaac thus dwelt in a place where prayer was effectual, where God could be found, and God blessed him.

Now notice the phrase "after the death of Abraham." God often uses people in a way that makes them quite famous, but the fact remains-God's men and women die. Fortunately, others take up the task and continue God's program. God's work just keeps rolling on. No one is indispensable in His program. I like to say, "God's program will continue on just fine without me." My guess is: His program will continue even stronger without me. This is one reason why it is so critical for you and me to pass the promises to the emerging church. God's program will go on quite nicely without us, but we are still responsible to pass the promises and ensure a successful legacy.

The last chapter of Deuteronomy closes with these words, in 34:7-8: "Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated. So the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an

end." And then it says in 34:9■12: "Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land, and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel."

Did you catch that? The book of Deuteronomy ends by saying, "Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses" (34:10a). What a legacy! Who could ever live up to that kind of reputation? Joshua was the young understudy of Moses, but what I want you to see is the very next verse. We've come to the end of Deuteronomy. The next verse is the first verse of the book of Joshua. Listen to this: "Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' servant, saying, 'Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel'" (Jos 1:1-2).

Now isn't that interesting! In the final chapter of Deuteronomy there is a big buildup for the reputation of Moses. But the beginning of Joshua just matter-of-factly says, "Okay, Moses is gone. Now, Joshua, get up and get going." God always has people ready when He blesses His work. That's true in our narrative because Abraham has now died, and the focus turns to Isaac. God is blessing Isaac, the son of Abraham. The point is: The death of Abraham made no difference to the faithfulness of God to His promises. Abraham had the responsibility of ensuring that the blessing as God planned it would pass to Isaac. The message in this is straightforward: Believers will die, and so they must ensure that the work begun in them by God will continue, as God desires. It may be through their children or it may be through some other means; but no one may personalize the program so that no thought is given to the next generation.

With 25:11, we have finished the "generations" of Terah (Abraham's father, 11:27). But before the narrator continues with the promised line of Isaac he rounds out the episode with the "generations" of Ishmael (25:12-18). God blesses Abraham's son, Ishmael (25:12-18). Moses writes, "Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham; and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives."

These verses demonstrate that God kept His promises to Ishmael. This too highlights the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His promises concerning Abraham.

In 16:10 and 21:18, God had promised to make Ishmael a great nation and to give him many descendants. Furthermore, the phrase "twelve princes" recalls the promise in 17:20 where it was promised to Ishmael that "twelve princes" would be born to him and become a great nation. God had pronounced that Ishmael would live in hostility toward his brothers (16:12), which finds its fulfillment pattern in 25:18b. Thus, even in the peripheral characters of this great salvation history God is faithful to His Word. This drives the reader to continue with the narrative, since God would certainly bring His promises to fruition for Isaac, just as He did for Ishmael.

What made Abraham's life so great? What was the secret of his enormous influence that persists across the centuries? Why is he revered by billions of Christians, Muslims, and Jews? He was a man of faith! The "hall of faith" in Hebrews 11 normally gives one verse to each hero of faith. Abraham is given 12 verses as the example of faith par excellence. While he was not perfect, his life was characterized by faith!

If you want to follow in Abraham's s footsteps you too must be a man or woman of faith. You too must leave behind a legacy. You can do this in many ways. For our purposes, I will simplify the life of faith.

• Worship God. Be intimate with Him. Let your spouse and children see you pray and read the Word. Practice the disciplines with them.

• Model obedience. Cultivate a teachable, responsive, humble, and obedient spirit. When God tells you to do something, do it! You can ask questions in eternity. For now, simply obey.

• Invest in people. Be sure to fellowship with other believers so you can impact as many lives as possible.

When it comes to relay races, the victory does not necessarily come to the fastest and most impressive runners. The victory goes to the team that was the most successful in passing the baton from runner to runner. You can be the fastest and most impressive individual runner in the world but if you fail to successfully pass the baton to the next runner the race will be lost. When you fumble the baton you lose the race.

Our goal at Emmanuel is different. [Call up four individuals of different ages and have them pass the baton.] One runner finishes his race. Another takes the baton and continues down the track. From Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph and across the generations the baton is passed-all the way from Machpelah 4000 years ago to Emmanuel in the 21st century. You will have a successful legacy as you pass the promises of God on to others.

Chapter 32

\"Passing the Promises\" (Gen 25:1-18)

Study By: Keith Krell

Five years ago, a wonderful man by the name of Gil Woo gave me a very meaningful gift.1 [Hold up a green aluminum baton.] Gil gave me this baton as a reminder that God's call upon my life is to finish well and pass the faith on to those who will come after me. I have kept this baton on my office desk for the past five years as a visual, daily reminder of that calling.

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Our story begins in 25:1: "Now Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah."2 This is certainly impressive! Sarah died at 127 (23:1). This means Abraham was at least 137 when he married Keturah. But what is even more impressive is what we read in 25:2-4: "She bore to him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Ishbak and Shuah. Jokshan became the father of Sheba and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah and Epher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah. All these were the sons of Keturah." In these three verses we discover that Abraham had other children…six more sons to be precise! All I can say to that is, "Get busy, Abe!" Can you imagine beginning parenthood again at about 140 years old? Can you imagine being surrounded with toddlers when you are 60, much less 160? Verse 7 informs us that Abraham died at 175. This means there could have been 38 years for the birth of these six sons. Abe would have been able to identify with the words of Flip Wilson, who said, "If I could live my life over again…I wouldn't have the energy!"

At this point you may be wondering why Moses rattled off the names of Abraham's other sons. When we look at these names we see a bunch of hard to pronounce gobbledygook. Yet, there's a method to Moses' madness. Genealogies tell a story to those who will take the time to read them. They explain the relevant history of cultures. In this context, Abraham's six sons become the descendants of several Far East tribes. Furthermore, listing these sons of Abraham provides a demonstration of God's faithfulness. In 12:2-3, God promised to bless Abraham. In 15:4, He promised Abraham that he would have a son. In 15:15, God promised Abraham that he would live to a ripe old age. In 17:5-6, 16, God promised Abraham that nations,

kings, and rulers would come from him. In 17:7, God promised Abraham that the covenant would be passed on to his son. God was making the point that faith will continue to the next generation. When we trust in God, He is faithful to fulfill His promises. That's why we must remember that our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.

In 25:5-6, Abraham divides up his inheritance. Moses writes, "Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east." In this section and the two that follow (25:7-11 and 12-18), those characters who play minor parts in the drama take their curtain calls making way for the chief actors who follow.3 In 25:5, Abraham gave everything he owned to Isaac, because he was the legal firstborn. He was also the son of the promise. But it is important to notice that in 25:6 Abraham also gave gifts to his other sons. By giving them gifts he honored each of his sons. By sending them away to the east he indicated that Isaac and only Isaac was the son of the promise. Since he is to be the sole heir of the covenant it is important for Moses to indicate that all other heirs have been cared for and have received their due. They have no claims on that which belongs to Isaac.4 Isaac inherited everything that belonged to Abraham at the time of Abraham's death. Yet, Abraham took responsibility for his other sons and provided for them during his lifetime, so there should be no dispute at the time of his death.

Did you catch that? Abraham passed out an inheritance to his children "while he was still living." He didn't wait until he died to benefit his children. He used what he had to bring joy to others while he was living. If you're a dad or grandpa, how are you currently blessing your children and grandchildren? As you are able, are you seeking to give appropriate gifts? If you were to die before your time would your wife and children be taken care of? Are you planning for the future of your loved ones? More importantly, are you also passing on a spiritual inheritance while you're alive that will go on after your death? Remember, there is no guarantee you will live out a long life; you may not even wake up tomorrow morning. Therefore, if you want to impart a successful legacy be sure to pass the promises.

In 25:7-8, Abraham dies. His epitaph is as follows: "These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people."5 By Abraham's time the human life span had been so curtailed due to the physical effects of the fall that 175 years was regarded as a "ripe6 old age" (cf. 11:32).7 I like how Moses expands the normal genealogical formula: "These are all the years of Abraham's life that he lived." He does this for two reasons: First, Abraham is a very important person, second only to Jesus Christ. Second, I think Moses indicates that Abraham lived those 175 years to the max! He didn't just exist; he truly lived! He didn't merely survive; he thrived! The NASB reads, "Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life" (25:8a).8 Abraham died "satisfied with life." It is a satisfaction similar to the satisfaction you feel after a delicious dinner when you aren't sick but satisfied. When Abraham pushed back from the table of life at the end of his days he was satisfied. He had no regrets. He had enjoyed the journey.

How many people can say that on their deathbeds? Not too many. Most folks come to the end and look back with regret and remorse-regret for lost opportunities and remorse over foolish mistakes they've made. No doubt Abraham had his share of both, yet as he looked back over 175 years he was satisfied with the life he had lived.

As anyone who has studied his story knows, Abraham didn't have an easy life-just the opposite. Along the way he went through periods of frustration, discouragement, physical privation, and spiritual compromise.

He experienced more than his share of personal loss. He saw the glitter of royal Egypt and smelled the smoke rising from the ruins of Sodom. He heard the voice of God and later lied to save his own skin. He had to give up his firstborn son, Ishmael, and send him away-an act that broke his heart. And as far as we know Isaac and Ishmael never really reconciled, nor did his wife and Hagar. He wept when he buried his wife, Sarah, and then had the satisfaction of seeing Isaac take Rebekah into her tent.

Certainly, Abraham lived a full life. He packed a lot into those 175 years. But through it all, even in the worst moments, he remained a man of faith. He never lost sight of the God who called him out of Ur 100 years earlier. For that reason-and that reason alone-he was satisfied with life when he died.

The Greek philosopher, Epicurus, is quoted as saying, “The art of living well and the art of dying well are one.”9 Abraham lived the truth of this statement-dying well means living well.

Sadly, many are like long-distance runners who sprint three laps only to slow to a stop in the final lap. Let’s face it; we spend a good portion of our lives wishing them away.

When we’re young we want to be older so we can drive, date, and set our own rules.

When we’re a little older we want to be older still so we can earn more and buy more.

In the middle (or productive) years we find ourselves dreading the work we have to do and longing for the week to pass so we can enjoy a weekend.

Suddenly we find ourselves saying, “Where did the time go?” as our kids move away.

We then begin to look forward to retirement so we can engage in the activities we enjoy.

When we retire we wish we had the energy of youth.

In old age some feel that they have nothing left to give. We move and think slower, we don’t hear so well, and our bodies begin to ache.

Some spend the remainder of their days saying, “I wish I could just go to sleep and not wake up.”

Do you see something in common with all of these sentiments? In each of these scenarios we are discontented with life at whatever stage we are. Could these words describe your life? Are you “living” life or enduring it? Are you savoring each moment or are you wishing your life away? Do push back from each day with the satisfied feeling of knowing that you have made the most of your day? Have you stopped living and started merely “existing?” This is no way to live. How differently Abraham lived his life. He lived life to the max!

Here are some ideas how you and I can enjoy the journey more:

Instead of starting the day with, “Oh no,” start it with, “THIS is the day which the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

Make time for God and savor those moments. Read His Word and share your heart with Him every day.

Talk about yourself and your life in the positive rather than the negative. Focus on the blessings rather than the struggles. Make it a point to look for the silver lining.

Think and speak well of your health. Focus on what you can do rather than what you can't.

Give yourself fully and enthusiastically to your various responsibilities.

Whistle while you work (unless you are in a library).

Look for new things to try and learn, and then try them and learn them: a new language, a new skill, a new place to visit, reading something different or listening to some music outside of your normal tastes, playing an instrument. Don't focus on the things you used to be able to do, that you can't anymore…focus on the things you wanted to do but didn't have time to do before! Have some fun!

Take time to notice beautiful things.

Resolve that the next time things don't go as you planned you won't pout but will view it as an unexpected adventure.

Begin today to live so that when your life is over people will be able to say that you lived a satisfying life.10

What happened after Abraham died? Moses writes, "…he was gathered to his people." Does this phrase simply mean that he took a "dirt nap" in the family grave, end of story? Is it true that there was no thought of an afterlife? Unfortunately, too many carelessly conclude that this is precisely the case. Actually, the expression "he was gathered to his people" cannot mean he was buried with his relatives and ancestors. In 25:8-9 such an analysis is impossible, because we know that none of Abraham's kin, except his wife, was buried at the cave of Machpelah. In the Old Testament those who have already died are regarded as still existing. The event of being "gathered to one's people" is always distinguished from the act of burial, which is described separately (35:29; 49:29, 31, 33). In many cases only one ancestor was in the tomb (1Ki 11:43; 1Ki 22:40), or none at all (Deu 31:16; 1Ki 2:10; 1Ki 16:28; 2Ki 21:18), so being "gathered to one's people" could not mean being laid in the family sepulcher.11

Undoubtedly, Old Testament saints didn't have the full revelation of the resurrection of the body. This awaited a later unveiling, in the New Testament. However, it seems certain that these early participants in the promises of God were fully expecting to enjoy life after death. In the New Testament when Jesus was speaking to the Sadducees (i.e., a political/religious party who did not believe in the resurrection), He used the argument that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not the God of the dead but of the living (Mat 22:32). Thus the patriarchs were not to be counted out of the hope of resurrection.12

All of this to say, death is not a period-it's only a comma. The moment a believer closes his eyes in death he is in the presence of Jesus. This is why Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luk 23:43). Jesus promises that there is life beyond the grave. He not only promised…He demonstrated that truth with his own resurrection. Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Php 1:21). With this in mind do you still fear death? Will it not be a true "gathering to your people"? Death is a time of reunion.

In 25:9-10, Abraham is buried. Moses writes: "Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife." The emphasis of the narrative in this section lies in the fact that Abraham was buried in the field that he purchased from Ephron the Hittite. The final resting place of Abraham was in a portion of the Promised Land that he rightfully owned (23:1-20).13

This tiny bit of land represented a toehold in the land of promise. It was like a small title deed to the whole land of Canaan. By burying Abraham there alongside his beloved wife Sarah, his sons were saying, “Daddy lived by faith in God’s promises. And when he died he still believed in them. We’re burying him right here, because someday all this land will belong to us.” Thus the torch of truth passed down from one generation to another. Our legacy is only successful as we pass the promises.

In 25:11, we have a very important verse in which God blesses Abraham’s son, Isaac. Moses writes, “It came about after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac lived by Beer-lahai-roi.” This final verse gives us two significant facts about Isaac. First, God “blessed” him. This statement must be connected to the initial promise of blessing in 12:1-3 and then traced through the narratives. The blessing was passed on to Isaac; the God of Abraham was to be the God of Isaac as well. Second, the verse also reports that Isaac dwelt near Beer-Lahai-Roi, which means “well of the living One who sees me.” Here, God had heard Hagar and delivered her (16:14). And here Isaac had come to meditate as he awaited Rebekah (24:62). In the next section of the book Isaac prays at this same location for his barren wife (25:21). Isaac thus dwelt in a place where prayer was effectual, where God could be found, and God blessed him.14

Now notice the phrase “after the death of Abraham.” God often uses people in a way that makes them quite famous, but the fact remains-God’s men and women die. Fortunately, others take up the task and continue God’s program.15 God’s work just keeps rolling on. No one is indispensable in His program. I like to say, “God’s program will continue on just fine without me.” My guess is: His program will continue even stronger without me. This is one reason why it is so critical for you and me to pass the promises to the emerging church. God’s program will go on quite nicely without us, but we are still responsible to pass the promises and ensure a successful legacy.

The last chapter of Deuteronomy closes with these words, in 34:7-8: “Although Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated. So the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end.” And then it says in 34:9-12: “Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, for all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land, and for all the mighty power and for all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”

Did you catch that? The book of Deuteronomy ends by saying, “Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses” (34:10a). What a legacy! Who could ever live up to that kind of reputation? Joshua was the young understudy of Moses, but what I want you to see is the very next verse. We’ve come to the end of Deuteronomy. The next verse is the first verse of the book of Joshua. Listen to this: “Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ servant, saying, ‘Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel’” (Jos 1:1-2).

Now isn’t that interesting! In the final chapter of Deuteronomy there is a big buildup for the reputation of Moses. But the beginning of Joshua just matter-of-factly says, “Okay, Moses is gone. Now, Joshua, get up and get going.” God always has people ready when He blesses His work. That’s true in our narrative because Abraham has now died, and the focus turns to Isaac. God is blessing Isaac, the son of

Abraham.16 The point is: The death of Abraham made no difference to the faithfulness of God to His promises. Abraham had the responsibility of ensuring that the blessing as God planned it would pass to Isaac. The message in this is straightforward: Believers will die, and so they must ensure that the work begun in them by God will continue, as God desires. It may be through their children or it may be through some other means; but no one may personalize the program so that no thought is given to the next generation.

With 25:11, we have finished the “generations” of Terah (Abraham’s father, 11:27). But before the narrator continues with the promised line of Isaac he rounds out the episode with the “generations” of Ishmael (25:12-18).17 God blesses Abraham’s son, Ishmael (25:12-18). Moses writes, “Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael,18 Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Abraham; and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.19 They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.”

These verses demonstrate that God kept His promises to Ishmael. This too highlights the faithfulness of God in fulfilling His promises concerning Abraham.

In 16:10 and 21:18, God had promised to make Ishmael a great nation and to give him many descendants. Furthermore, the phrase “twelve princes” recalls the promise in 17:20 where it was promised to Ishmael that “twelve princes” would be born to him and become a great nation.20 God had pronounced that Ishmael would live in hostility toward his brothers (16:12), which finds its fulfillment pattern in 25:18b. Thus, even in the peripheral characters of this great salvation history God is faithful to His Word. This drives the reader to continue with the narrative, since God would certainly bring His promises to fruition for Isaac, just as He did for Ishmael.21

What made Abraham’s life so great? What was the secret of his enormous influence that persists across the centuries? Why is he revered by billions of Christians, Muslims, and Jews? He was a man of faith! The “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11 normally gives one verse to each hero of faith. Abraham is given 12 verses as the example of faith par excellence.22 While he was not perfect, his life was characterized by faith!

If you want to follow in Abraham’s s footsteps you too must be a man or woman of faith. You too must leave behind a legacy. You can do this in many ways. For our purposes, I will simplify the life of faith.

Worship God. Be intimate with Him. Let your spouse and children see you pray and read the Word. Practice the disciplines with them.

Model obedience. Cultivate a teachable, responsive, humble, and obedient spirit. When God tells you to do something, do it! You can ask questions in eternity. For now, simply obey.

Invest in people. Be sure to fellowship with other believers so you can impact as many lives as possible.

When it comes to relay races, the victory does not necessarily come to the fastest and most impressive runners. The victory goes to the team that was the most successful in passing the baton from runner to

runner. You can be the fastest and most impressive individual runner in the world but if you fail to successfully pass the baton to the next runner the race will be lost. When you fumble the baton you lose the race.

Our goal at Emmanuel is different. [Call up four individuals of different ages and have them pass the baton.] One runner finishes his race. Another takes the baton and continues down the track. From Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph and across the generations the baton is passed-all the way from Machpelah 4000 years ago to Emmanuel in the 21st century. You will have a successful legacy as you pass the promises of God on to others.

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2 Ross writes: “There is no way to tell for sure when Abraham married Keturah, but the verb “took” and adjective “another” imply that it was after the death of Sarah.” Allen P. Ross, Creation & Blessing (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 426. Sailhamer writes, “There is little basis in the Hebrew text for the translation ‘Abraham had taken a wife’ (NIV mg.), as though Keturah had been a wife or ‘concubine’ of Abraham in his younger days at the same time he was married to Sarah. Some have suggested that Keturah was one of the ‘concubines’ mentioned in v. 6 and hence these sons were born to Abraham and Keturah while Sarah was alive. Support for that interpretation appears to come from the fact that the Chronicler called Keturah a ‘concubine’ (1Ch 1:32). Though Keturah is called a ‘concubine’ in Chronicles, she is called a ‘wife’ here in v. 1, which would seem to preclude her from being a mere concubine during the time Sarah was alive.” John H. Sailhamer, Genesis: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

With that said, other Hebrew scholars believe that these events are not necessarily in chronological order following the events of the preceding chapter. Rather, they are listed here to summarize Abraham’s other descendants before the narrative of his death. Accordingly, it is suggested that the word “took” is better translated “had taken.” Waltke writes, “In Gen 24:36, Abraham’s servant declares that Abraham has already given everything he owns to Isaac. This statement assumes that he has other children. Also Abraham already judged his body too old to beget children when he was 100 years old (17:1, 17); it is biologically unlikely he fathered six sons when he was 40 years older and “advanced in years” (24:1). It is possible that God rejuvenated his body, but that if he fathered them after 140 years of age, then they are even more supernatural than Isaac, which is theologically unlikely.” Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 335-336. Youngblood says that this section serves as a “flashback.” Ronald F. Youngblood, The Book of Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 200. While I have high regard for these men, I am opting for the choice of all of our English translations.

3 Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Genesis (http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdfhttp://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf, 2005), 178.

4 John H. Walton, Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 535.

5 The expression “to be gathered to one’s people” is similar to another expression, “to go to one’s fathers,” found in Gen 15:15. The former phrase is found frequently-for example, here in Gen 25:8; Gen 25:17; Gen 49:29; Gen 49:33; Deu 32:50; and 2Ki 22:20.

6 Sailhamer notes, “The mention of Abraham’s ‘good [tobah] old age’ also serves as a contrast to Jacob’s years that are characterized in 47:9 as ‘few and difficult’ (ra`im lit., ‘evil’). Thus, within the context of the Book of Genesis, Abraham and Jacob provide a narrative example of the contrast of ‘good’ (tob) and ‘evil’ (ra`), a theme begun in the first chapters of the book and carried through to the end (cf. 50:20). Sailhamer, Genesis, Electronic ed.

7 No doubt these 175 years were measured and metered out by the perfect hand of providence (Gen 50:20; Isa 46:10). See R. Kent Hughes, Genesis: Beginning & Blessing (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 323.

8 The NIV translates this last phrase “he was an old man and full of years.” Unfortunately, this translation makes it easy to miss the significance of these words. The Hebrew word rendered “full of years” literally means “full of, satisfied with.” See HALOT (Gen 35:29; Job 42:17; 1Ch 29:28).

9 See http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/epicurus148954.html.

10 Bruce Goettsche, Living In Between (Gen 25:1-11): http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/080199.html

11 Readers of the text should not infer something special from the use of Sheol in some of these texts. In every one of the sixty-five instances of Sheol in the Old Testament, it refers simply to “the grave,” not to the shadowy region of the netherworld. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament supports the notion that the patriarchs expected an afterlife (Heb 11:13-16).

12 Walter C. Kaiser, Hard Sayings of the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997 [1996]), Electronic ed.

13 See also Sailhamer, Genesis, Electronic ed.

14 Ross, Creation & Blessing, 425-26.

15 Ross, Creation & Blessing, 426.

16 Woodrow Kroll, “When You’re Surrounded by Headline Grabbers,” Back to the Bible: http://www.backtothebible.org/radio/today/24683

17 In between the major sections of Genesis dealing with Abraham (11:27-25:11), Jacob (25:19-35:29), and Joseph (37:2-50:20), there are smaller sections dealing with Ishmael (25:12-18) and Esau (36:1-37:1). Gen 25:12-18 looks briefly at Ishmael before continuing the story.

18 The book of Genesis tends to tidy up the family records at every turning point. Here, before proceeding with the story of Isaac’s family, the narrative traces Ishmael’s family line. Later, before discussing Jacob’s family, the narrative traces Esau’s family line (Gen 36).

19 Like his father, Abraham, Ishmael was also gathered to his people indicating that Ishmael was a believer in God and shared in the spiritual blessings of all who die in the faith. See notes in Gen 25:19-34.

20 This must also be connected to the promises of Abraham, for many nations and kings were to come from him (Gen 17:6). Ross, Creation & Blessing, 431.

21 Bill T. Arnold, Encountering the Book of Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 113.

22 Moses, the runner-up, receives six verses. Waltke, Genesis, 341.

Chapter 33

\"Born to be Wild\" (Gen 25:19-34)

You may have noticed that we live in an “instant” society. We have instant coffee, instant breakfasts, instant soup, instant oatmeal, instant pudding, and microwave popcorn. We also have instamatic cameras, cable Internet and e-mail, universal cell phone coverage, cable TV, iPods, DVDs, Play Stations, and Palm Pilots. We have become conditioned to “fast food,” “Quick-Print,” and “Express Mail.”

As efficient as all this can be, we have become products of an “instant” society. We want everything quicker and faster. We cannot and will not wait for desires to be met. We demand instant gratification. If there is a complication in our lives, we believe there must be an instant solution. What is especially disturbing is that we seem to believe we have an inalienable right to be happy. Thus, no one wants to wait for anything, and for the most part no one has to. Waiting is interpreted as pain. Yet, as Richard Hendrix has said, “Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter.”

In Gen 25:19-34, we will learn that we must accomplish God’s will, God’s way. Make no mistake, God is going to work out His will, in His way, and in His time, but we must wait upon Him to accomplish it.

Our story begins in 25:19 with these words: “Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham became the father of Isaac.” I would encourage you to underline the word “generations.” The title “Genesis” (Gk. Geneseos) means “generations.” Genesis is a record of ten successive “generations.” The point being: generations come and go but the Lord remains and never changes (Psa 90:1). The book of Genesis is a record of the faithfulness and patience of God. He is the star!

Moses goes on to write, “And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife” (25:20). Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah. So Isaac waited a long time to find “Miss Right.” If you are single, don’t lose hope. Don’t worry about looking for the right person. If God’s will is for you to marry, He’ll bring you the right person at the right time. Your responsibility is simply to become the right person yourself and make sure you accomplish God’s will, God’s way.

After waiting 40 years to marry, no doubt Isaac wanted to have children ASAP. Yet, 25:21 states that Rebekah “was barren.” Just as Sarah before her and Rachel after her (29:31; 30:1-2), Rebekah had been unable to provide the all-important male offspring promised by God. Can you imagine how difficult this must have been for Rebekah? She was an intelligent and capable woman. Remember, she was the woman who volunteered to water the ten camels of the bridal caravan (24:15-20). She performed the equivalent to a two-hour Pilates workout! So when Rebekah met Isaac and heard him reiterate the divine promise of offspring-that his seed would be as the stars (cf. 22:16)-she fully expected to soon be pregnant. But it did not happen and now 20 years has passed. Isaac is approaching 60 and Rebekah is still barren. Worse yet, Isaac’s brother, Ishmael, had produced 12 sons to Isaac’s zero (25:12-18).

Fortunately, Isaac prayed. The word translated “prayed” (athar) means “to plead.” The term is used in Exodus to describe Moses’ powerful entreaty of the Lord to remove the plagues (Exod 7-10). Isaac prayed to the Lord “on behalf of his wife…and she conceived.” Husband, the best thing you can do for your wife is

to pray for her. Don't try to solve her problems, just pray! God desires us to pray and not just assume His blessing (Jam 4:2). But He longs for us to pray according to His will and not our wants. While Isaac wanted children, just like every other Jewish couple, he was more concerned about God's plan for fulfilling His covenant and blessing the whole world through the promised Messiah (3:15; 12:1-3). Are you concerned about God's will being done on earth, or your will being done in heaven (see Mat 6:10)? God wants you to pray for those things that are on His heart. As you do so, He will respond.

The entire book of Genesis emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the wisdom of His "delays." Sarah and Abraham had to wait 25 years before Isaac was born; Jacob had to labor for 14 years to obtain his two wives; and Joseph had to wait over 20 years before he was reconciled to his brothers. Our times are in God's hands (Psa 31:15), and His timing is never wrong. Today, maybe you're waiting for something to happen. Perhaps you want to have a baby, to get another job, to have a prayer answered, but you have come to a dead end. You may ask, "Why?" Yet, maybe that which looks bleak is God's way of saying, "Just wait a little while longer and you will see all that I have done. I do everything with a particular strategy in mind." So what is God doing to bring you to the place of prayer? Unanswered prayer is often God's way of getting our attention. You see, when we don't get what we want we are more teachable, whereas when we are blessed we can become more unteachable.

In all of this a question that begs to be answered is: Why did God close the wombs of Sarah, Rebekah, and later Rachel? Answer: So the chosen family would recognize their children as the fruit of His grace rather than simply the fruit of nature. God was teaching His people that the promised blessing, through the chosen seed of Abraham, could not be accomplished by mere human effort. God accomplishes His will, His way.

In 25:22, Moses writes, "But the children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is so, why then am I this way?' So she went to inquire of the LORD." The struggle going on in Rebekah's womb was more than just normal, fetal movement. The Hebrew says the children smashed themselves inside her. Literally, it is used to describe skulls being smashed (Jdg 9:53; Psa 74:14) or reeds being broken (e.g., Isa 36:6). The use of such a term vividly indicates the violence of the struggle within Rebekah's womb. There was "womb warfare" going on! This leads Rebekah to ask a question: "If it is so, why then am I this way?" The sense of her question is, "Why then did I ever become pregnant?" Or, "Why do I go on living?" Now keep in mind, Rebekah is no wilting flower. She is a bad mama-jama! However, there was mayhem in her womb. So she went to "inquire of the Lord." Did you catch that? Rebekah was so puzzled by this internal struggle that she prayed to God for an answer. In the face of infertility, Isaac's response is to pray. In the face of a difficult pregnancy, Rebekah's response is to pray. Isaac and Rebekah both know God and worship Him as God. Their faith is real and they take it seriously. At the key junctures of their lives, what we're told about them is that they went to God. Do you need wisdom for some area of your life? God is just waiting for you to petition Him (Jam 1:5). He wants you to accomplish His will, His way.

In response to her prayers, the Lord offers a prophetic word in 25:23: "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger." The reason for the womb warfare that Rebekah is experiencing is that she is pregnant with two nations. The Lord then informs Rebekah that the older shall serve the younger. There is plenty of biblical precedence for this. The offering of Cain, the older brother, was rejected, whereas the offering of the younger brother, Abel, was accepted. The line of Seth, the younger brother, was the chosen line (4:26-5:8); Isaac was chosen over his older brother, Ishmael (17:18-19); Rachel was chosen over her older sister, Leah (29:18); Joseph, the younger brother, was chosen over all the rest (37:3); and Judah

was chosen over his older brothers (49:8). The intention behind each of these “reversals” was the recurring theme of God’s sovereign plan of grace. The blessing was not a natural right, as a right of the firstborn son would be. Rather, God’s blessing is extended to those who have no other claim to it. They all received what they did not deserve (cf. Mal 1:1-5; Rom 9:10-13).

Significantly, the New Testament is painstakingly clear that God esteems the weak and that Jacob was the underdog. This is a consistent theme in the Bible. God is not neutral. Faced with a choice, He always seems to side with the underdog. He chose the nation of Israel not because they were great, but because they weren’t great, and He promised to help make them great. The greatest king in the Old Testament, King David, was the youngest kid in his family, the one his father didn’t even think of when asked to line up his boys to see which one might become the next king. When Jesus came and talked about the coming of the kingdom of God, it wasn’t the social or religious elite who got it…it was the people on the margins of society. There seems to be a special place in God’s heart for people who are overlooked, for people in low positions. Do we share that heart? Do we share God’s concern for the overlooked, for the downtrodden?

In 25:24-26, our story continues, “When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. 25 Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them.” As was predicted by God, Rebekah gives birth to twins. Esau means “hairy one.” Just how hairy was he? Well, keep in mind that Jacob would later pretend to be Esau by wearing goatskins on his hands and neck! This was one hairy guy! Jacob means “God will protect.” Now while Esau’s name reflects his appearance, Jacob’s name later came to reflect his character. The Hebrew word for “Jacob” is similar to “heel.” From Jacob’s grasping of Esau’s heel, at birth, came the nickname “heel holder” (i.e., one who outwits by trickery). To understand this idea better, you may want to go to your local high school and watch a wrestling match. When high school wrestlers come out onto the mat, the intent is to try to get the opponent down and to pin him on the mat, to trip him up somehow or another. One of the best moves is to fake one way and then move another way, and quickly grab the ankle of the opponent. There’s a bit of a deception, and then as he goes for the heel he’s able to trip his opponent up. That’s really what Jacob’s name came to mean. It isn’t a matter of just coming alongside someone and saying, “Here, can I hold your heel?” You know, we haven’t heard any songs saying, “I want to hold your heel.” It’s nothing like that. It’s more of a wrestling kind of thing, a deceptive move, a reaching out, a grasping of the ankle of the other person, a tripping them up. We must be careful not to follow in Jacob’s trickery. Rather, we must accomplish God’s will, God’s way.

Verses 27-28 provide some interesting background. Moses writes, “When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents.” Well, there’s a contrast right at the beginning between these two twins. Esau was what the world might label as a “man’s man.” He was an outdoors kind of guy who loved to do the things a father could take pride in. He was a skillful hunter, and he knew how to handle himself in the outdoors. He had that sort of rough, fiery nature, liked the wild areas of the country, and liked the adventurous sort of life. I think if Esau were around today, he’d be driving a 4 x 4 with massive tires on it and a gun rack in the back window! If you got in Esau’s truck, you probably had to move things off the seat and wondered where you’d put your feet on the floor, because there’s so much stuff there. And if you went to his house, he’d have a magazine rack filled with Field and Stream type of magazines. That was Esau but not Jacob.

Jacob, on the other hand, was orderly. He was well disposed. He was the kind of man who liked to stay at home. He was a man of peaceful habits. If you got in Jacob’s car, it would be neat and clean and

everything would just be right. And if you'd stop by Jacob's house unannounced, he wouldn't have to worry about dirty dishes in the sink because he was that kind of guy. You just get the impression everything's going to have its place, and it's going to be in its place; he was neat and he was orderly. His house was a quieter sort of place. If you went there maybe you'd have some nice background music. There is a real contrast between these two. Jacob is the homebody; Esau is the hunter.

In 25:28, we come to a red flag that we can't miss: "Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob." Despite Esau's ungodly character, Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob. The only rational we are given in the text is: Isaac had a taste for wild game. And while Isaac knew God's desire to pass on the physical and spiritual blessing of the inheritance to Jacob, Isaac failed to obey God's will and to transfer the birthright on to Jacob. Tragically, Isaac and Rebekah, who had prayed so long and persistently for offspring, chose sides. No doubt each loved both of his/her sons. But they each preferred one over the other. Of course, their favoritism served to further exacerbate the boys' differences. Parents please don't be guilty of this type of favoritism. While a child's interests or disposition may tempt you to be partial, do not succumb. Love each of your children with equal fervor…anything less causes division and disunity.

In 25:29-30, "When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, 'Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.' Therefore his name was called Edom." The incident with the stew appears to take place away from home; otherwise Esau could have appealed to his parents. Jacob is not the hunting type, so it would be unusual for him to be out in the countryside alone. He has been described as a man "staying among the tents," which may indicate he was more closely associated with the shepherding business. The shepherds moved their camps over a broad area of land in order to find water and grazing for the flocks. It is most likely that Jacob would be out supervising some of the shepherds at such a camp when Esau stumbled upon them. Jacob would be the one in charge at the camp, so the decision would be his, and there would therefore be witnesses to the agreement made between Jacob and Esau.

In 25:30, Esau literally demands Jacob's food. The NASB softens the force of the imperative to a request: "Please let me have a swallow." This is no polite request, however; it is a forceful demand. Not only does Esau demand food but he demands to devour it. The word translated "swallow," or better yet, "gulp down," contains a Hebrew verb, which normally describes the feeding habits of cattle. Although lentil stew was a well-known staple, Esau called it literally "this red stuff"-hardly something that a sensitive adult would say. Jacob responds to Esau's demands with a demand of his own: "First sell me your birthright" (25:31). The way Jacob states his demand suggests that he has long premeditated his act and ruthlessly exploited his brother's weakness.

Our story concludes on this tragic note: "Esau said, 'Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?' And Jacob said, 'First swear to me'; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob." (25:32-33). In what he sensed were his dying moments, Esau didn't value his birthright. Again, Jacob sought to take advantage of him. His insistence that Esau swear to him strengthens this impression. One question that must be answered is: What was the birthright, and why did Jacob want it so badly? Deu 21:17 and 1Ch 5:1-2 tell us the birthright involved both a material and a spiritual blessing. The son of the birthright received a double portion of the inheritance, but he also became the head of the family and the spiritual leader upon the passing of the father (Gen 43:33). And, in the case of this family, the birthright determined who would inherit the covenant God made with Abraham, the covenant of a land, a nation, and the Messiah. Rather than showing his brother any mercy or grace, Jacob saw this as an opportunity to

gain the advantage. How many times I have been tempted to take things into my own hands, to make sure that I get my rights, or to make sure that I am not taken advantage of. But God's ways are very different. He wants us to accomplish His will His way.

Despite Jacob's premature longings, his trickery was successful: "Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way" (25:34a). It was just another meal to Esau. It was all so casual. You may be inclined to ask, "How can God allow this deceiver to succeed?" From Jacob's story we can see that God at times allows others to succeed because He has a greater lesson to teach that person at a later time. God's timing is strategic. None of us experience an immediate response from God every time we sin. Rather, at the proper time God brings our sins to our attention or brings the full fruits of consequences into our lives. That inevitably means that sin has the capability of temporary success. God, in His impeccable sovereignty, will bring each sin to light in His time so as to serve His optimum purposes in our lives and in His plan. If you are in sin today, will you come clean with God so that He doesn't have to expose you with His loving discipline?

The final words of our account are these sobering words: "Thus Esau despised his birthright" (25:34b). Explicit moral commentary is rare in the Bible, so the writer's inclusion of it here marks something about Esau that he did not want the reader to miss. The cunning hunter fell into a better hunter's trap, becoming prey to his own appetite. Esau valued his birthright so cheaply that he sold it for a bowl of stew in the same way. He "despised" it. We can understand the word's usage perhaps by looking at how we use the word "contempt." The English verb can refer to a sentiment or mood, but it can also be used in the legal context of being held in "contempt of court," which means that one is not showing the judge and the legal process the respect they deserve.

At the very heart of Esau's demise is the sad reality that he did not believe the word of God. God's promise was, to him, intentional and unreal. Many believers are like Esau. There is a wreckage of lives to prove this. [Hold up a jar of lentils.] There are many people who have traded their blessings for what amounts to a bowl of lentils. When we exchange our purity, our integrity, our family, or our relationship with God or His church, the benefit we receive is nothing more than a pile of beans! Satan is constantly tempting us to forfeit the eternal riches of our spiritual inheritance in Christ for the pleasure of immediate gratification: An evening of watching ungodly programming on the TV, an illicit affair, financial compromise to get ahead, lusting after money or material things, letting loose our anger in abandonment of reason, succumbing to depression without check, or cursing God in despair or disappointment. We are in constant danger of being tempted to give up something very precious in order to indulge a sudden strong desire. The pile of beans that is dangerous to you and to me is any temptation to gratify the "feelings" of the immediate moment in a way that shows we "despise" the promises of the living God for our future. Whatever you do make sure that your life is bent on accomplishing God's will God's way.

Chapter 34

\"From Famine to Feast\" (Gen 26:1-33)

My children and I enjoy playing baseball. [Bring baseball equipment on stage.] My eight-year-old son, Joshua, particularly enjoys the game. We play nearly every day. During our practice sessions I have been trying to teach Joshua certain baseball skills. When he swings the bat I tell him not to “chop wood” (i.e., hack at the ball). Instead, I coach him to have a level and fluid swing. I do this by asking him to imagine there is a crystal vase on the dining room table, and he has my permission to swing right through it. Whether Joshua is batting or fielding, I always urge him to “keep his eye on the ball.” I have repeated this so many times that my four-year-old, Jena, likes to say, “If there’s one thing I know, it’s to keep my eye on the ball.”

Unfortunately, I do not always follow my own baseball advice. On at least one occasion when Joshua was pitching to me, I took my eye off the ball and fouled a pitch back over my head into our neighbor’s yard. Of course, I then had to lift Joshua over the fence into their yard to quickly retrieve the ball before their two salivating dogs could charge him. There are also the infamous episodes when I take my eye off the ball and it goes through my legs. I hate that! Whenever these blunders happen, Joshua regurgitates my own counsel and gives me a hard time. What can I do in response? I just have to smile, look sheepish, and try to do a better job following my own instruction.

My failure to perfectly execute on the baseball diamond does not trouble me too much. In the years I have been playing baseball with my kids, I have never lost sleep over my mishaps. My kids can overcome my baseball blunders. However, if I fail to practice what I preach when I am competing in the game of life, the consequences for my kids and me are staggering. This is also true for you if you are a parent or grandparent. Your children and grandchildren are observing your life, so don’t compromise…remain faithful. You may not have children or grandchildren; nevertheless, you have influence over someone. Be sure you are setting an example worth following.

In Genesis 26, we are going to consider how the life of a father affects his son. This is the only chapter of Genesis devoted exclusively to Isaac. While he is mentioned in other chapters he is not the focus of attention. Here Isaac’s life is summed up in the events described, all of which have a striking parallel in the life of his father, Abraham. These similarities are the key to rightly understanding and applying this passage to our own lives. This section could be titled, “Like Father, Like Son.” As we will see, children tend to inherit much of the behavior of their parents.

Our story begins with this disastrous announcement: “Now there was a famine in the land, besides the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham (26:1a). This was a serious problem for Isaac. He was in danger of losing everything he had. And this famine happened in the “Promised Land,” the land God promised Abraham’s descendants. Even though Isaac’s life was singled out by God for blessing, and even though he’s in the center of God’s will, he has to deal with a famine. What a reminder that we can be in the “Promised Land,” the place of blessing, and still experience hardship.

Unfortunately, many Christians don’t really believe this. We tend to think that God blesses people by giving them pleasant circumstances-that God’s blessing can be discerned by watching which people have it good and which people have it bad. Sometimes, when adversity comes to us who believe, we get discouraged because we think God has abandoned us. We expect the faith we have in God to somehow

deliver us from hardship. But that's not always how it works. You and I can be right where God wants us to be and still suffer hardships. That's how life works. Trials are the normal experience of God's people. God's will isn't always the easy and prosperous path. Often, it is gut wrenching.

Due to the famine, "Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines" (26:1b). In an attempt to preserve his wealth, in the form of many cattle, Isaac went to the land of the Philistines. While in Gerar or perhaps even before, Isaac decided to go down to Egypt just as his father had done (cf. 12:10-20). This seems like the logical thing to do since Egypt is where all the food is. Now Isaac is not wrong for being concerned about the famine or feeding his family, but since we have no indication that God led this decision he was wrong for failing to trust God to provide for his needs (see Isa 31:1). And so the Lord appeared to Isaac with this corrective word of instruction: "'Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.'" (26:2-5). God tells Isaac not to go down to Egypt. Instead, he is to remain in Gerar (26:2). Humanly speaking, to stay in Gerar in time of famine was to court catastrophe. Even so, God promises Isaac, "I will be with you and bless you" (26:3, 24, 28). When God is present we have nothing to fear (see Isa 41:10). God commands Isaac not to go down to Egypt, but to stay in Gerar to teach Isaac and you and me that His presence will always be with us, and He can bless us no matter what the situation. God can bless us in a bad economy, a bad marriage, a difficult ministry, a challenging workplace, and on and on.

Are you in a bad situation right now? Is your spouse threatening to leave? Are your children so disobedient that you could be a contestant on Super Nanny? Does your boss remind you of Attila the Hun? If so, your tendency will be to attempt to escape your situation. Yet, in most situations, that is not God's will for your life. He wants to provide for you in the midst of your impossible circumstances. He wants you to trust Him in the midst of your suffering. The Scriptures teach us again and again that the safest place in the world is in God's will, for God will never lead us where His grace can't provide for us. It has been said, "Unbelief asks, 'How can I get out of this?' while faith asks, 'What can I get out of this?'" Today, in the midst of your challenging circumstance, will you ask God to grant you perseverance? Will you look for His presence and blessing? He's big enough to handle your trial, and He will meet you right in the midst of it.

In these verses, God formally tells Isaac that the blessings of his father, Abraham, will pass to him and his sons (Psa 105:8-11). Why? Two reasons: First, God is a faithful God who gave Abraham an unconditional covenant of grace. Second, Abraham passed down a legacy of obedience. As 26:5 tells us, Abraham did indeed fulfill the law. How did he accomplish that without the law having been written? He lived by faith! The person of faith does not live by the law but keeps the law through faith. The word "because" (26:5) seems to suggest that Abraham received the covenant as a result of works, yet nothing could be further from the truth! Granted, for Abraham and Isaac to enjoy the practical benefits of the covenant obedience was imperative, but the covenant will be upheld despite their unfaithfulness. The point being made here is Isaac became the spiritual beneficiary of a godly parent, but he had the opportunity to increase God's blessing on him through his own obedience to God. This is true for us today. Like the Abrahamic covenant, salvation is a free gift from God (Rom 5:15-17). However, for us to enjoy the earthly benefits of our salvation we must obey God (Joh 14:15; Joh 15:10). But don't try to grit your teeth, clench your fists,

and obey. Simply live by faith and fall in love with Jesus, and obedience will take care of itself. That is the life of faith. Are you seeking to walk in faith? If you walk in faith you'll fulfill God's will for your life. Remember, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham all lived before the law, yet they are men who were exemplary in faith. Moses lived in the midst of the law and he failed to persevere. God wants us to walk by faith.

This section ends with a note of Isaac's obedience: "So Isaac lived in Gerar" (26:6). After his visitation from God, Isaac responded with obedience. He obeyed God even though it didn't make much sense in the natural. He trusted that God would provide for him in the supernatural.

You would think that, after the Lord appeared to Isaac, he would not be ruled by fear but that was not to be. Isaac, so human and so frail, mingled fear with his faith. In 25:7, Moses pens the following: "When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister,' for he was afraid to say, 'my wife,' thinking, 'the men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful.'" Amazing! Like Sarah, even at age 60, Rebekah is such a beautiful woman that just being seen with her was a life-threatening experience. Out of concern for his own safety Isaac caves in to the temptation to pass off his wife as his sister, and as a result, willfully puts Rebekah's purity and safety at risk. Like his father, Isaac chose to fear man rather than God (Pro 29:25; Pro 27:1-3).

It's a common pattern for children to repeat their parents' mistakes. Children of abusers have a stronger tendency to become abusers themselves. Children of alcohol and drug addicts have a stronger tendency to become addicts themselves. Children of greedy people or dishonest people tend to fall into the same traps that their parents did. That's just how it goes. It's sobering to realize that our sin doesn't just affect us; it affects others. If you are a parent, how you live serves better to teach your kids than almost anything else. Someone has said, "Young people never do an adequate job of obeying their elders, but they never fail to emulate them." That's the real issue here: imitation.

Now chronologically, Genesis 26 precedes Gen 25:21-34. If Isaac and Rebekah had Jacob and Esau by this point, the fact that they were husband and wife would have been obvious. Here, the promised seed is with Isaac and Rebekah, but no child has yet been born. Instead of trusting that God will keep him alive to produce descendants, he reasons that he might be killed. Instead of protecting the seed, he endangers it by making Rebekah available to the Philistines. Fortunately, unlike the case with Sarah, Rebekah is never taken into anyone's harem. God makes sure this doesn't happen.

But something does indeed happen in 26:8: "It came about, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out through a window, and saw, and behold, Isaac was caressing his wife Rebekah." King Abimelech is looking out his window one day and spies Isaac "caressing" Rebekah. The KJV quaintly translates it, "sporting with his wife Rebekah." There's a humorous wordplay in the Hebrew. The word translated "caressing" or "sporting" comes from the same root word translated "Isaac," which means, "he laughs." (Lit. "He who laughs was laughing with Rebekah, his wife.") Here it clearly has a sexual connotation. Whatever this "sport" was, it's obvious that you don't play it with your sister. Apparently, Isaac was a real pro at the sport-in fact, the sport was named after him! This wordplay is significant. There is an implication that his lapse of faith in deceiving the men of Gerar made a mockery of the great promise embodied in his name.

"Then Abimelech called Isaac and said, 'Behold, certainly she is your wife! How then did you say, 'She is my sister'?" (26:9) Surely, his first thought was, "Oh, gross!" But then he realizes that this was not Isaac's sister. Isaac was caught in a lie. His reputation was stained, and his character was called into question.

But we must acknowledge that sometimes God is merciful to us in allowing our sin to be exposed. Whether it is anger, alcohol, pornography, or adultery…sometimes being caught is the best thing that could happen to us. It affords us the opportunity to confess our sin and be restored to the Lord and those that we have sinned against. If you are in sin today, will you take the opportunity to confess your sin to God? Will you then confess your sin to those that you have sinned against? And then "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men (Rom 12:18)?

In 26:10-11, the dialogue continues: "And Isaac said to him, 'Because I said, 'I might die on account of her.' [Do you see how utterly puny this sounds?] Abimelech said, 'What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.' So Abimelech charged all the people, saying, 'He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.'" There are three possible motives for Abimelech's anger. First, he regarded marital purity of greater importance than Isaac. This is unlikely. Second, he was afraid of God's judgment. Undoubtedly, he knew how Abraham's lie had led to God's judgment against his people some 100 years earlier. Third, he was holding Isaac to a higher standard because of Isaac's claim to a special relationship with God. It is likely that the later view is correct.

At this point, Isaac should have immediately repented of his sin. But there is no evidence in the text that he did. And, by treating the Philistines in this way, he became a source of stumbling for the people of Gerar, instead of fulfilling his call to be a blessing of God to the nations (12:2-3).

It is right for unbelievers to look at our lives more carefully and with greater scrutiny. Jesus calls believers "the light of the world" and He commands, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mat 5:14-16). Whether we like it or not, we're called to be models. Therefore, when you sin, you may be sure that an unbeliever is watching through some window. And the unbelieving see and never forget!

James says, "We all stumble in many ways" (Jam 3:2). The question is: What should you do if you fail?

1. Admit your sin. Don't justify or excuse your behavior. Instead, take full responsibility for what you have done (1Jn 1:6-9).

2. Confess your sin to God and to the offended party (Pro 28:13).

3. Ask for forgiveness without justification (Mat 5:23-24).

4. Make restitution for what you've done (Mat 18:21-35).

5. Humble yourself and ask for prayer for strength to not re-offend (1Pe 5:5-6).

After this ethical failure, we read these astounding words in 26:12-17: "Now Isaac sowed in that land [the land of famine] and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. [This is a miracle!] And the LORD blessed him, and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. [Psa 112:10] Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines stopped up by filling them with earth. Then Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us, for you are too powerful for us.' And Isaac departed from there and camped in the valley of Gerar, and settled there." These verses tell of God's faithfulness in blessing Isaac as He had promised (cf. 26:3; 24:1; 25:11). In this context the blessings are material, but this is not guaranteed to you and me. God may bless His people

materially, but more often than not the blessings are spiritual (see Eph 1:3-14). Later in the Old Testament, the prophets deal with the problem of why the righteous at times suffer and face poverty and famine. Today, God's blessing in seen in His constant presence.

Maybe you're wondering, "Why did God bless Isaac immediately after Isaac disobeyed God?" There are three answers.

• First, God's grace is greater than our sin (Psa 103:10). This display shows us that God's covenant promises are based on grace, not on works. God wants us to obey Him, and He blesses those who obey. But at the same time, He wants us to remember that His sovereign purposes do not depend on our obedience, but rather on His sovereign grace.

• Second, note that while God blessed Isaac materially, the very blessing was also a source of chastening, because it made the Philistines envy Isaac and stop up his wells (26:14-15). This chastening served to move Isaac back toward Beersheba, where God wanted him.

• Finally, God cuts to the root sin. Deception is sin, and God hates the lying tongue (Pro 6:17). But lying here is a symptomatic sin and not the root sin. God did not smash the red warning light (deception), because He was concerned about getting to the root of the problem. The root sin was unbelief or lack of faith. In each case of deception, Abraham and Isaac lied out of fear (cf. 12:11■13; 20:11; 26:7). This fear was the product of an inadequate concept of God. They did not grasp the sovereignty or the omnipotence of God in such a way as to believe that God could protect them, under any and every circumstance. Having solved the problem of too little faith, the sin of deception will not be an issue any longer. It is my personal opinion that we sometimes become preoccupied with "symptom sins," rushing about trying, as someone in our church has said, to stomp them like roaches. While sin should always be taken seriously, many of our sins will be dealt with by an adequate conception of who God really is. The fundamental sin is that of unbelief, not only for those who are unsaved but also for those who are saved.

In 26:18-22, Moses writes, "Then Isaac dug again the wells of water which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham, for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the same names which his father had given them. But when Isaac's servants dug in the valley and found there a well of flowing water, the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with the herdsmen of Isaac, saying, 'The water is ours!' So he named the well Esek, because they contended with him. Then they dug another well, and they quarreled over it too, so he named it Sitnah. He moved away from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he named it Rehoboth, for he said, 'At last the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.'" Again, God blesses Isaac. Water in the wilderness is a strong symbol of God's supernatural blessing, in spite of nature. However, even in the midst of blessing there can be great conflict. The Philistines repeatedly quarreled over Isaac's wells. Yet, even in the midst of quarreling God was blessing Isaac.

In 26:23-25, Moses hits the key lines of our story: "Then he went up from there to Beersheba. The LORD appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.' So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD, and pitched his tent there; and there Isaac's servants dug a well." In Beersheba, God appeared to Isaac (his second revelation) calming his fears and reviewing the promises He had given previously (26:2-5). Isaac's response was to build an altar, worship the Lord, and settle down there. Up to this time, Isaac's decision as to where he should stay was based upon the

finding of abundant water and the absence of hostilities. But now, having dug a well that was uncontested, we would have expected Isaac to dwell there. Instead, we are told that he moved on to Beersheba (26:23).

I believe that a significant change has occurred in Isaac's thinking. Circumstances had previously shaped most of his decisions, but now something deeper and nobler seems to be giving direction in his life.

If you recall, Abraham "planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God" (21:33). It was also the place where Abraham had gone with Isaac, after they came down from the "sacrifice" on Mount Moriah (22:19). It was a place of worship, a place of God's presence and blessing. Isaac knew that God had promised to give him the land promised to his father, Abraham (26:3■5).

Isaac finally came to see that, through all the opposition over the wells he had dug, God had been guiding him back to the land of promise, back to those places where Abraham had walked in fellowship with God. I believe Isaac went up to Beersheba because he sensed, on a spiritual level, that this was where God wanted him to be. If God had previously been "driving" Isaac through opposition, now Isaac was willing to be led.

Often, God allows adversity of one kind or another to move us physically to where He wants us to be (Act 17:10), or to move us spiritually to "be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (Jam 1:4). In this case, God used conflict to deepen Isaac's confidence and dependence upon Him. Isaac's actions express his trust in the Lord. Isaac was growing in faith. Can you say this? Are you growing in your relationship with God? Are you asking God, "What are you saying to me through this conflict?"

Our story closes with good news in 26:26-33: "Then Abimelech came to him from Gerar with his adviser Ahuzzath and Phicol the commander of his army. Isaac said to them, 'Why have you come to me, since you hate me and have sent me away from you?' They said, 'We see plainly that the LORD has been with you; so we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.' Then he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they arose early and exchanged oaths; then Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace. Now it came about on the same day, that Isaac's servants came in and told him about the well which they had dug, and said to him, 'We have found water.' So he called it Shibah ["oath" or "seven"]; therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day." Abimelech again testified to God's blessing of Isaac and gave God glory (26:28-29). God's people must maintain confident trust in God's promise of His presence and provision, in spite of the envy and hostility of unbelievers that His blessing sometimes provokes. God can bless us despite opposition.

As a parent or grandparent, as a Christian man or woman, do you believe that God wants to bless you with His presence? He does! And He will often bless in spite of your disobedience. But He does ask that you and I provide an example worth following. Wouldn't it be great if the cliché, "like father, like son" had positive connotations? It can-as you learn to walk by faith and follow the Lord despite your fears. My prayer for you is that you will live "like the Father and like the Son."

“Trick or Treat?” (Gen 26:34-28:9)

This past Monday, many Americans celebrated Halloween, or if you prefer “Helloween.” Children who participate in Halloween go door to door and announce, “Trick or Treat.” The hope is that they will receive a piece of candy…or two…or three. Yet, there is always the risk that they will be stiffed by some cheapskate, or worse yet, be poisoned by some sicko. “Trick or Treat” has inevitable consequences, either positive or negative.

In this section of Genesis, we discover that Isaac’s family lived by “Trick or Treat.” Yet, in pursuit of a “treat,” Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob all succumbed to trickery. As a result, the consequences proved devastating. The Scottish novelist and poet, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), wrote in his poem Marmion: “Oh what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive.” How true! In Gen 26:34-28:9, we will learn that faith is living without scheming. Put positively, faith means obeying God no matter how we feel, what we think, or what might happen.

Like many biblical passages, this one has bookends. Two reports of Esau’s pagan marriages (26:34-35 and 28:6-9) frame the major account (27:1-28:5), providing a prologue and epilogue. The main account then centers on Isaac giving the blessing to Jacob. Let’s begin with the first bookend. In 26:34-35, Moses writes, “When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they brought grief [lit. “bitterness of spirit”] to Isaac and Rebekah.” Esau marries at age 40, just as his father Isaac did (25:20). Esau, however, marries two Hittite women from the land of Canaan (36:2). Abraham warned his servant not to take a wife for Isaac from among the wicked Canaanites, who would not give up their gods for their husbands (24:3). Thus, the servant found Rebekah from the country and family of Abraham (24:15f). Esau, who had earlier despised his birthright (25:34), shows that he has no interest in the spiritual dimension of the blessing that Isaac wants to give him. Moses implicates Isaac as well, because he made no arrangements for his son’s marriage. Compare this with his father, Abraham, who sent his servant 500 miles away to get a suitable wife for Isaac (24:1). Fathers, are you praying for future spouses for each of your children? When it comes time for your sons or daughters to marry are you willing and committed to help them make a wise decision?

This lengthy passage is like a theatric play that separates into five scenes. As we work our way through this narrative, follow along as if you’re watching a live, theater play.

Act One (27:1-4). In 27:1-4, Moses writes: “Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, ‘My son.’ And he said to him, ‘Here I am.’ Isaac said, ‘Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.’” Abraham’s life ended with happiness, success, and a strong character. In contrast, physical and spiritual decay marked Isaac’s old age. As Isaac grew older, he “hardened his heart” instead of his arteries. In the willfulness of his old age, Isaac is determined to pass on the blessing to Esau, despite what the Lord has said (25:23) and what the boys have shown with their lives. The fact that he attempted to make this transaction without the knowledge of his wife, Rebekah, and his son, Jacob, compound his sin. Normally the blessing would have been given before the entire family. But here we find that Isaac is doing in secret what should have been a very public transaction. Why? Because he knew he was wrong! Faith is living without scheming. Do you ever scheme when you want your way? Do you make decisions without including your spouse? Are you afraid you will lose out on “getting your way” if you include others?

Beware! It is likely that your heart is set on illegitimate desires.

In Isaac's case, his insistence on a "good meal" before the blessing recalls Esau's own trading of the birthright for a pot of stew, and thus casts Isaac in a similar role to that of Esau (25:27-34). Interestingly, the word "game" is repeated eight times and "savory dish" six times. This emphasis suggests that Isaac is ruled by his senses. Furthermore, a "savory dish" is the object of Isaac's "love." In this story of a fractured family, the word "love" appears only in the context of food. And though it was reported earlier that Isaac loved Esau (25:28), he now seems to love his food more than his sons. How pitiful! Where did Esau get his gluttonous appetite? His dad! Isaac's taste for game is stronger than his taste for the Lord. Isaac is more consumed with his gut than God's glory (Psa 141:4). I think of the Tombstone Pizza commercial: What do you want on your tombstone? Well, Isaac wanted venison on his tombstone. All he cared about was his favorite meal.

Parents, is your taste for food, drink, money, career, hobbies, or the good life stronger than your taste for the Lord? Are these tastes stronger than your love for your children? Do these tastes cause you to value what your children do but not who they are? Do you know who they are? Do you enter into their lives and ask them how they feel? Do you know their hearts? Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mat 6:21). And if you keep pouring it out without respect to God's Word, you may find yourself, even on your deathbed, blessing your children in the wrong way or not blessing them at all. Parents, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psa 34:8), infinitely more satisfying than your other tastes, and you'll value your children in a new way. Seek to know your children and love them for who they are, not for whom you think they are, or for what you'd like them to be.

Parents, are you blessing your children? If so, how are you blessing them? What qualities are you encouraging? Many parents are more drawn to temporary achievements than eternal treasures. They get more excited about straight A's, touchdowns, and prosperity than spiritual growth. In that they bless these to the exclusion of their children's relationship with the Lord, they show their children where they think fulfillment is found. They are more than happy to take responsibility for encouraging these qualities, but they refuse to relate to and teach their children in the ways of the Lord. Often, they are more than willing to take them to church and hand them over to Sunday school teachers and youth staff. But they refuse to enter the place where it matters most. Parents, I encourage you to enter the spiritual lives of your children. It's your responsibility to teach them the Scriptures, pray with them, and point them to Christ. It will be the best investment you ever make in your children.

Act Two (27:5-17). In 27:5-10, our story intensifies: "Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, 'Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.' 'Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death.'" The Hebrew form of the word "listening" suggests that this was a habit, a pattern of behavior, not a happenstance. Her behavior gives us an idea of the level of mistrust and poor communication they had in their family. What should Rebekah have done in this circumstance? She knew Isaac was wrong in what he conspired to do. Jacob was the son whom God had chosen to be the "heir of promise." Thus, the first thing Rebekah should have done was to speak honestly and directly with her husband about his wicked plan. Submission to authority never includes silence toward evil. We are to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15), even to

those in authority over us (cf. Act 16:35-40). Having fulfilled her responsibility to warn her husband of the consequences of the evil he had planned, Rebekah should have been content to leave the matter in God's capable and sovereign hands. Faith is living without scheming.

In 27:11-12, "Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, 'Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.'" Jacob questions the effectiveness of the plan but not its scruples. He was worried about the eleventh commandment: "Thou shall not get caught." He's afraid that Isaac, who can't see, will recognize him by touch and perceive him as a "deceiver." Jacob doesn't seem much concerned about how God perceives him. Yet, the Scriptures teach that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6 a). And faith is living without scheming.

Rebekah responds to Jacob with these words: "But his mother said to him, 'Your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me'" (27:13). Rebekah replies in the words of mothers throughout history, "Just do what I say." In volunteering to absorb any curse that Jacob incurs, Rebekah is heightening the urgency of her case, although any curse incurred by one person could not be transferred to another. So even in this she is deceptive but effective in carrying out her plan.

After his mom's reassuring words, Jacob threw caution to the wind: "So he went and got them, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands [She made him a pair of gloves.] and on the smooth part of his neck. [Apparently, Esau was so hairy that he had dreadlocks on his back. Rebekah must have felt like she was dressing Jacob up for Halloween.] She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob" (27:14-17). Rebekah always has an answer for every question and a solution for every problem. She is strong, resourceful, decisive, and cunning. She has to be, being married to Isaac. He taught her everything he knew about lying and deceiving; and she was a great understudy! She posed as the faithful, loving wife, but under all of this she sought to further Jacob's interests, even at the expense of her husband, Isaac. Rebekah, not Jacob, was the mastermind behind the plot to outwit Isaac and obtain his blessing for Jacob. She informed Jacob of the situation. She devised a plan to deceive Isaac. This plan was far too complex to have been put together on spur of the moment. Obviously, Rebekah had been thinking about this day for years. Many of the props were already prepared and ready: the expertly fashioned goatskin gloves and neck coverings, the garments belonging to Esau, who probably wasn't living in his parent's home but in his own house with his two Hittite wives, and the deceptive recipe available that made goat meat taste like venison.

One question: If this was so brazenly wrong, why did Jacob do it?

• Jacob was under pressure from his mother. Many young men and women strive to please Dad and Mom. While this can be honorable, it can also lead to sin when it is not in faith. Last week, I watched a Michael Jordan interview on 60 Minutes. What stood out the most was the fact that, on national TV, Jordan acknowledged that he was driven to greatness to prove his parents wrong. Jordan's parents didn't believe he would amount to anything so he pushed himself to be the best.

• Jacob wanted the blessing badly. He was ruled by greed. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. He followed Mom's plan. Yet, faith is living without scheming.

• Jacob believed the end justified the means. I think Jacob said to himself, “God wants me to have the blessing, so if I have to cheat a little bit to get it that’s all right. God will understand.” Jacob is half right. God did want him to have the blessing. And God did understand what he was doing. But that didn’t make it right. God wants us to follow His plan, not our own.

• Jacob didn’t respect his father sufficiently. When sons and daughters don’t respect Dad, all kinds of problems erupt. Father, earn respect by living a godly life before your children.

Clearly, Rebekah is the prime mover-and-shaker in this story. She is also the dominant leader in this family. It appears that Isaac has abdicated his position of spiritual leadership in favor of his wife. Husbands, when you relinquish your responsibility to spiritually lead your home, you give up the greatest position and privilege in your life. And when you do so, the family deteriorates…sometimes rather quickly.

Isaac makes important plans without Rebekah (27:1-4), and then Rebekah makes her own plans to usurp his plans (27:5-17). They’ve squared off against each other without even talking about it, and they’ve turned their children into weapons against each other. In Genesis 24, their marriage was seemingly a match made in heaven. Where did this marriage, which had such a promising beginning, get off track? We know at least this much: Isaac drifted away from the Lord, and the two of them failed to communicate. Our marriages often get off track in the same way. The most important thing we can do for our marriage is cultivate our own relationship with the Lord. The second most important thing we can do is to communicate with each other-to share our hearts with one another, to listen to one another, to talk through decisions and differences. If we drift from the Lord and if we fail to communicate, we’ll find ourselves living essentially separate lives, just as Isaac and Rebekah. And our children, like Jacob and Esau, will suffer for it.

Rebekah has denied her husband and her marriage. Her priority should be to become one with and to support her husband. But we see that her child is more important to her than her husband. Spouses, do not ever allow your children to become more important than your marriage. One of the tragedies I see today, in the church and in the world, is that spouses are better parents than they are spouses. And when the kids leave the nest, their marriage disintegrates. Are you building your marriage while your children are still at home? Do you recognize that, apart from sharing Christ with your children, the greatest gift you can offer them is to observe a godly marriage? Spouses, love each other. Build a healthy marriage.

Act Three (27:18-29). The relationship between Jacob and Esau is like a boxing match. The first round occurred at birth (25:21-28) and the second round was over the birthright (25:29-34). Here we have the third round of Jacob’s battle with Esau. In all three rounds Jacob manipulated his brother. Moses writes: “Then he came to his father and said, ‘My father.’ And he said, ‘Here I am. Who are you, my son?’ Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me.’ Isaac said to his son, ‘How is it that you have it so quickly, my son?’ And he said, ‘Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me.’ [This is blasphemy! Notice also he identifies the Lord as “your” God but not “my” God, because he has not yet embraced the Lord. But then his father has given him no good reason to embrace the Lord. Jacob will have to find the Lord on his own, because he’s getting no help from his father.] Then Isaac said to Jacob, ‘Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not.’ So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him. [This blessing is more like a greeting.] And he said, ‘Are you really my son Esau?’ And he said, ‘I am.’ So he

said, ‘Bring it to me, and I will eat of my son’s game, that I may bless you.’ And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, ‘Please come close and kiss me, my son.’ So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said, ‘See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed; Now may God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine [personal prosperity]; May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you [pre-eminence]. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you [protection by God].’”

In this scenario, who is deceiving whom? On one hand Jacob is definitely deceiving his father, Isaac. However, Isaac-because he thinks Jacob is really Esau-thinks he is deceiving Jacob by giving the blessing to Esau. Both intend to deceive the other; only Jacob succeeds. The most amazing point is that through this act of deception, God’s will was done! Why? Because God’s choice (Jacob) did in fact end up with the blessing. That doesn’t justify the deception, but it does demonstrate how God works through the weakness of sinful men to accomplish his purposes. This story, seen in that light, is a story of the sovereignty of God.

Over the years I’ve heard many Christians justify their sin and disobedience to God by making God an accomplice to their sin: “The Lord came to me in a dream and told me to leave my wife and family.” “The Lord showed in the Bible that I don’t have to pay my taxes.” “The Lord has given me a wonderful peace about having sex with my girlfriend or boyfriend. There is nothing wrong with it as long we are monogamous.” These are nothing but pious platitudes to conceal and justify sin! If you’re going to sin, please be honest with yourself and others. Don’t sin in the name of the Lord. Call it what it is. Don’t spiritualize your sin. Be man or woman enough to own up to your sin. God may be sovereign enough to accomplish His will in spite of your sin, but He’s not the author of sin.

Act Four (27:30-45). Moses writes, “Now it came about, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had hardly gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. [Talk about a close call. Jacob missed Esau “by that much.”] Then he also made savory food, and brought it to his father; and he said to his father, ‘Let my father arise and eat of his son’s game, that you may bless me.’ Isaac his father said to him, ‘Who are you?’ [No doubt Isaac is thinking, Déjà vu.] And he said, ‘I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.’ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, ‘Who was he then that hunted game and brought it to me, so that I ate of all of it before you came, and blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed.’ When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, ‘Bless me, even me also, O my father!’ [Can you imagine the emotions that Esau must have experienced at this moment? I’m sure he has probably never been angrier in his entire life.] And he said, ‘Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing.’ Then he said, ‘Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.’ And he said, ‘Have you not reserved a blessing for me?’ But Isaac replied to Esau, ‘Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son?’ Once the blessing was given, it had the force of a legal contract and could not be revoked. The irony of it all was that since Isaac had tried to give everything to Esau, there was nothing left for his favorite son-it had all had been given to Jacob. Esau said to his father, ‘Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.’ So Esau lifted his voice and wept. Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, ‘Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, and away from the dew

of heaven from above. ‘By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve; but it shall come about when you become restless, that you will break his yoke from your neck.’ So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.’ [Esau got mad and was seeking to get even.] Now when the words of her elder son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent and called her younger son Jacob, and said to him, ‘Behold your brother Esau is consoling himself concerning you by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice, and arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban! Stay with him a few days, until your brother’s fury subsides, until your brother’s anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him.

Then I will send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?’” Rebekah feared the loss of both her sons as a result of her plot (27:45). Esau might have killed Jacob, and Esau then might have fled or the avenger of blood might have slain him (cf. 9:6).

Act Five (27:46-28:5). In 27:46, “Rebekah said to Isaac, ‘I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?” Let me interpret this for you, husbands. Rebekah is saying to Isaac, “If my life isn’t worth living, yours won’t be either.” When Rebekah fears for Jacob’s life, she goes to Isaac, and by using a logical reason that Jacob needed a wife, she manipulates Isaac into sending Jacob away. In effect, she’s giving Isaac a cover story. Her real goal is to protect him, not to find him a wife. Isaac agrees, calling Jacob to his side, repeating the Abrahamic blessing, and sending him off to Haran to find a wife. She successfully maneuvered Isaac into telling Jacob to leave. Rebekah’s manipulative language to spare Jacob again displays the poverty of Isaac and Rebekah’s relationship. They do not seem able to communicate honestly with one another on important spiritual matters.

In 28:1-5, Moses writes, “So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, ‘You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother. May God Almighty [El Shaddai, 17:1] bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.’ Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.” Isaac evidently realized that his desire to give the blessing to Esau was not God’s will, so having given it to Jacob (27:27-29), he blessed him further (28:1-4). This account is another remarkable demonstration of God’s ability to use the sins of men and women to accomplish His purposes and at the same time discipline the sinners for their sins.

Our closing bookend is found in 28:6-9 where Moses pens these tragic words: “Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take to himself a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he charged him, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan,’ and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and had gone to Paddan-aram. So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth.” Esau rebelled against his parents’ wishes by marrying another pagan wife. Since he didn’t get his way, he wanted everyone to be miserable (cf. 26:35). How do you respond when you don’t get your own way? Do you make others suffer by pouting or acting out? This is further evidence of scheming. Yet, the message of this story is clear: Faith is living without scheming.

In the end, all four players paid a huge price for their sin.

• Isaac: He lost all credibility as a spiritual leader in his family. His plans backfired. In his effort to give Esau everything, he was able to give him nothing. He never saw his son, Jacob, again. His relationship with his wife was severely damaged.

• Esau: He had led a sexually immoral and godless lifestyle (Heb 12:16-17). He forfeited his birthright and lost his blessing. He had to spend the rest of his life asking, “What if...?”

• Rebekah: Her relationship with her husband, Isaac, was severely damaged. She is forever remembered as a scheming deceiver. She never saw Jacob again-the only son she really loved.

• Jacob: He lived a life of isolation from his family for the next 20 years. He has humiliated his father. He never saw his father or mother alive again. He is homeless. He is fleeing for his life. He is estranged from his brother. He spent the next 20 years looking over his shoulder in fear of his brother. Furthermore, because Jacob left and Esau stayed home, Jacob forfeited all the material prosperity that would have been his through his inheritance from Isaac. Jacob refused to wait on God (Psa 37:15). Faith is living without scheming.

The bottom line is this: Everyone in the family sought the blessings of God without bending the knee to God. And everyone lost! Sin does not pay! Heb 11:25 b tells us that its pleasure is “passing,” “fleeting” (NET, ESV), and only “for a season” (KJV). In the end, sin leads to death (Jam 1:13-15).

Fortunately, man’s sin can never frustrate the will of God, but it can fulfill it. Despite the sin and deceit of this family, the purpose of God, expressed to Rebekah in 25:23, was fulfilled exactly! God loves to work in spite of people. He can and will always accomplish His purposes, with our without our help. But we should exercise faith in the midst of our lives so we will experience God’s blessings instead of His discipline. Faith is living without scheming. I challenge you today to exercise faith by obeying God, no matter how we feel, what we think, or what might happen.

Chapter 35

\"Trick or Treat?\" (Gen 26:34-28:9)

Study By: Keith Krell

This past Monday, many Americans celebrated Halloween, or if you prefer “Helloween.”1 Children who participate in Halloween go door to door and announce, “Trick or Treat.” The hope is that they will receive a piece of candy…or two…or three. Yet, there is always the risk that they will be stiffed by some cheapskate, or worse yet, be poisoned by some sicko. “Trick or Treat” has inevitable consequences, either positive or negative.

In this section of Genesis, we discover that Isaac’s family lived by “Trick or Treat.” Yet, in pursuit of a “treat,” Isaac, Rebekah, Esau, and Jacob all succumbed to trickery. As a result, the consequences proved devastating. The Scottish novelist and poet, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), wrote in his poem Marmion: “Oh what a tangled web we weave / When first we practice to deceive.”2 How true! In Gen 26:34-28:9, we will learn that faith is living without scheming. Put positively, faith means obeying God no matter how we feel, what we think, or what might happen.3

Like many biblical passages, this one has bookends. Two reports of Esau’s pagan marriages (26:34-35 and 28:6-9) frame the major account (27:1-28:5), providing a prologue and epilogue. The main account then centers on Isaac giving the blessing to Jacob.4 Let’s begin with the first bookend. In 26:34-35,5 Moses writes, “When Esau was forty years old he married Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they brought grief [lit. “bitterness of spirit”] to Isaac and Rebekah.”6 Esau marries at age 40, just as his father Isaac did (25:20). Esau, however, marries two Hittite women from the land of Canaan (36:2). Abraham warned his servant not to take a wife for Isaac from among the wicked Canaanites, who would not give up their gods for their husbands (24:3).7 Thus, the servant found Rebekah from the country and family of Abraham (24:15f). Esau, who had earlier despised his birthright (25:34), shows that he has no interest in the spiritual dimension of the blessing that Isaac wants to give him. Moses implicates Isaac as well, because he made no arrangements for his son’s marriage. Compare this with his father, Abraham, who sent his servant 500 miles away to get a suitable wife for Isaac (24:1). Fathers, are you praying for future spouses for each of your children? When it comes time for your sons or daughters to marry are you willing and committed to help them make a wise decision?

This lengthy passage is like a theatric play that separates into five scenes.8 As we work our way through this narrative, follow along as if you’re watching a live, theater play.

Act One (27:1-4). In 27:1-4, Moses writes: “Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, ‘My son.’ And he said to him, ‘Here I am.’9 Isaac said, ‘Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death.10 Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul11 may bless12 you before I die.’”13 Abraham’s life ended with happiness, success, and a strong character. In contrast, physical and spiritual decay marked Isaac’s old age. As Isaac grew older, he “hardened his heart” instead of his arteries.14 In the willfulness of his old age, Isaac is determined to pass on the blessing to Esau, despite what the Lord has said (25:23) and what the boys have shown with their lives. The fact that he attempted

to make this transaction without the knowledge of his wife, Rebekah, and his son, Jacob, compound his sin.15 Normally the blessing would have been given before the entire family. But here we find that Isaac is doing in secret what should have been a very public transaction. Why? Because he knew he was wrong!16 Faith is living without scheming. Do you ever scheme when you want your way? Do you make decisions without including your spouse? Are you afraid you will lose out on "getting your way" if you include others? Beware! It is likely that your heart is set on illegitimate desires.

In Isaac's case, his insistence on a "good meal" before the blessing recalls Esau's own trading of the birthright for a pot of stew, and thus casts Isaac in a similar role to that of Esau (25:27-34). Interestingly, the word "game" is repeated eight times and "savory dish" six times. This emphasis suggests that Isaac is ruled by his senses. Furthermore, a "savory dish" is the object of Isaac's "love." In this story of a fractured family, the word "love" appears only in the context of food.17 And though it was reported earlier that Isaac loved Esau (25:28), he now seems to love his food more than his sons. How pitiful! Where did Esau get his gluttonous appetite? His dad! Isaac's taste for game is stronger than his taste for the Lord. Isaac is more consumed with his gut than God's glory18 (Psa 141:4).19 I think of the Tombstone Pizza commercial: What do you want on your tombstone? Well, Isaac wanted venison on his tombstone. All he cared about was his favorite meal.

Parents, is your taste for food, drink, money, career, hobbies, or the good life stronger than your taste for the Lord? Are these tastes stronger than your love for your children? Do these tastes cause you to value what your children do but not who they are? Do you know who they are? Do you enter into their lives and ask them how they feel? Do you know their hearts? Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mat 6:21). And if you keep pouring it out without respect to God's Word, you may find yourself, even on your deathbed, blessing your children in the wrong way or not blessing them at all. Parents, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psa 34:8), infinitely more satisfying than your other tastes, and you'll value your children in a new way. Seek to know your children and love them for who they are, not for whom you think they are, or for what you'd like them to be.

Parents, are you blessing your children? If so, how are you blessing them? What qualities are you encouraging? Many parents are more drawn to temporary achievements than eternal treasures. They get more excited about straight A's, touchdowns, and prosperity than spiritual growth. In that they bless these to the exclusion of their children's relationship with the Lord, they show their children where they think fulfillment is found. They are more than happy to take responsibility for encouraging these qualities, but they refuse to relate to and teach their children in the ways of the Lord. Often, they are more than willing to take them to church and hand them over to Sunday school teachers and youth staff. But they refuse to enter the place where it matters most. Parents, I encourage you to enter the spiritual lives of your children. It's your responsibility to teach them the Scriptures, pray with them, and point them to Christ. It will be the best investment you ever make in your children.20

Act Two (27:5-17). In 27:5-10, our story intensifies: "Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, 'Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.' 'Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death.'"21 The Hebrew form of the word "listening" suggests that this was a habit, a pattern of behavior, not a happenstance. Her

behavior gives us an idea of the level of mistrust and poor communication they had in their family. What should Rebekah have done in this circumstance? She knew Isaac was wrong in what he conspired to do. Jacob was the son whom God had chosen to be the “heir of promise.” Thus, the first thing Rebekah should have done was to speak honestly and directly with her husband about his wicked plan. Submission to authority never includes silence toward evil. We are to “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15), even to those in authority over us (cf. Act 16:35-40). Having fulfilled her responsibility to warn her husband of the consequences of the evil he had planned, Rebekah should have been content to leave the matter in God’s capable and sovereign hands. Faith is living without scheming.

In 27:11-12, “Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, ‘Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.’” Jacob questions the effectiveness of the plan but not its scruples. He was worried about the eleventh commandment: “Thou shall not get caught.”22 He’s afraid that Isaac, who can’t see, will recognize him by touch and perceive him as a “deceiver.” Jacob doesn’t seem much concerned about how God perceives him. Yet, the Scriptures teach that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6 a). And faith is living without scheming.

Rebekah responds to Jacob with these words: “But his mother said to him, ‘Your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me’” (27:13). Rebekah replies in the words of mothers throughout history, “Just do what I say.” In volunteering to absorb any curse that Jacob incurs, Rebekah is heightening the urgency of her case, although any curse incurred by one person could not be transferred to another. So even in this she is deceptive but effective in carrying out her plan.

After his mom’s reassuring words, Jacob threw caution to the wind: “So he went and got them, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands [She made him a pair of gloves.] and on the smooth part of his neck.23 [Apparently, Esau was so hairy that he had dreadlocks on his back. Rebekah must have felt like she was dressing Jacob up for Halloween.] She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob” (27:14-17). Rebekah always has an answer for every question and a solution for every problem. She is strong, resourceful, decisive, and cunning. She has to be, being married to Isaac. He taught her everything he knew about lying and deceiving; and she was a great understudy! She posed as the faithful, loving wife, but under all of this she sought to further Jacob’s interests, even at the expense of her husband, Isaac. Rebekah, not Jacob, was the mastermind behind the plot to outwit Isaac and obtain his blessing for Jacob. She informed Jacob of the situation. She devised a plan to deceive Isaac. This plan was far too complex to have been put together on spur of the moment. Obviously, Rebekah had been thinking about this day for years. Many of the props were already prepared and ready: the expertly fashioned goatskin gloves and neck coverings, the garments belonging to Esau, who probably wasn’t living in his parent’s home but in his own house with his two Hittite wives, and the deceptive recipe available that made goat meat taste like venison.

One question: If this was so brazenly wrong, why did Jacob do it?

Jacob was under pressure from his mother.24 Many young men and women strive to please Dad and Mom. While this can be honorable, it can also lead to sin when it is not in faith. Last week, I watched a Michael Jordan interview on 60 Minutes. What stood out the most was the fact that, on national TV, Jordan acknowledged that he was driven to greatness to prove his parents wrong. Jordan’s parents didn’t

believe he would amount to anything so he pushed himself to be the best.

Jacob wanted the blessing badly. He was ruled by greed. He wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. He followed Mom's plan. Yet, faith is living without scheming.

Jacob believed the end justified the means. I think Jacob said to himself, "God wants me to have the blessing, so if I have to cheat a little bit to get it that's all right. God will understand." Jacob is half right. God did want him to have the blessing. And God did understand what he was doing. But that didn't make it right. God wants us to follow His plan, not our own.

Jacob didn't respect his father sufficiently. When sons and daughters don't respect Dad, all kinds of problems erupt. Father, earn respect by living a godly life before your children.

Clearly, Rebekah is the prime mover-and-shaker in this story. She is also the dominant leader in this family. It appears that Isaac has abdicated his position of spiritual leadership in favor of his wife. Husbands, when you relinquish your responsibility to spiritually lead your home, you give up the greatest position and privilege in your life. And when you do so, the family deteriorates…sometimes rather quickly.

Isaac makes important plans without Rebekah (27:1-4), and then Rebekah makes her own plans to usurp his plans (27:5-17). They've squared off against each other without even talking about it, and they've turned their children into weapons against each other. In Genesis 24, their marriage was seemingly a match made in heaven. Where did this marriage, which had such a promising beginning, get off track? We know at least this much: Isaac drifted away from the Lord, and the two of them failed to communicate. Our marriages often get off track in the same way. The most important thing we can do for our marriage is cultivate our own relationship with the Lord. The second most important thing we can do is to communicate with each other-to share our hearts with one another, to listen to one another, to talk through decisions and differences. If we drift from the Lord and if we fail to communicate, we'll find ourselves living essentially separate lives, just as Isaac and Rebekah. And our children, like Jacob and Esau, will suffer for it.

Rebekah has denied her husband and her marriage. Her priority should be to become one with and to support her husband. But we see that her child is more important to her than her husband. Spouses, do not ever allow your children to become more important than your marriage. One of the tragedies I see today, in the church and in the world, is that spouses are better parents than they are spouses. And when the kids leave the nest, their marriage disintegrates. Are you building your marriage while your children are still at home? Do you recognize that, apart from sharing Christ with your children, the greatest gift you can offer them is to observe a godly marriage? Spouses, love each other. Build a healthy marriage.

Act Three (27:18-29). The relationship between Jacob and Esau is like a boxing match.25 The first round occurred at birth (25:21-28) and the second round was over the birthright (25:29-34). Here we have the third round of Jacob's battle with Esau. In all three rounds Jacob manipulated his brother.26 Moses writes: "Then he came to his father and said, 'My father.' And he said, 'Here I am. Who are you, my son?'27 Jacob said to his father, ' I am Esau your firstborn;28 I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me.' Isaac said to his son, 'How is it that you have it so quickly, my son?' And he said, ' Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me.' [This is blasphemy! Notice also he identifies the Lord as "your" God but not "my" God, because he has not yet embraced the Lord. But then his father has given him no good reason to embrace the Lord. Jacob will have to find the Lord on his own, because he's getting no help from his father.] Then Isaac said to Jacob, 'Please come close, that

I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not.' So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.' He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. [This blessing is more like a greeting.29] And he said, 'Are you really my son Esau?' And he said, ' I am.' So he said, 'Bring it to me, and I will eat of my son's game, that I may bless you.' And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, 'Please come close and kiss me, my son.' So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said, 'See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed; Now30 may God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine [personal prosperity]; May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you [pre-eminence]. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you [protection by God].'"31

In this scenario, who is deceiving whom? On one hand Jacob is definitely deceiving his father, Isaac. However, Isaac-because he thinks Jacob is really Esau-thinks he is deceiving Jacob by giving the blessing to Esau. Both intend to deceive the other; only Jacob succeeds. The most amazing point is that through this act of deception, God's will was done! Why? Because God's choice (Jacob) did in fact end up with the blessing. That doesn't justify the deception, but it does demonstrate how God works through the weakness of sinful men to accomplish his purposes. This story, seen in that light, is a story of the sovereignty of God.32

Over the years I've heard many Christians justify their sin and disobedience to God by making God an accomplice to their sin: "The Lord came to me in a dream and told me to leave my wife and family." "The Lord showed in the Bible that I don't have to pay my taxes." "The Lord has given me a wonderful peace about having sex with my girlfriend or boyfriend. There is nothing wrong with it as long we are monogamous." These are nothing but pious platitudes to conceal and justify sin! If you're going to sin, please be honest with yourself and others. Don't sin in the name of the Lord. Call it what it is. Don't spiritualize your sin. Be man or woman enough to own up to your sin. God may be sovereign enough to accomplish His will in spite of your sin, but He's not the author of sin.

Act Four (27:30-45). Moses writes, "Now it came about, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had hardly gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. [Talk about a close call. Jacob missed Esau "by that much."] Then he also made savory food, and brought it to his father; and he said to his father, 'Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me.' Isaac his father said to him, 'Who are you?' [No doubt Isaac is thinking, Déjà vu.] And he said, 'I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.' Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, 'Who was he then that hunted game and brought it to me, so that I ate of all of it before you came, and blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed.' When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, ' Bless me, even me also, O my father!' [Can you imagine the emotions that Esau must have experienced at this moment? I'm sure he has probably never been angrier in his entire life.] And he said, 'Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing.' Then he said, 'Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.' And he said, 'Have you not reserved a blessing for me?' But Isaac replied to Esau, 'Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son?' Once the blessing was given, it had the force of a legal contract and could not be revoked.33 The

irony of it all was that since Isaac had tried to give everything to Esau, there was nothing left for his favorite son-it had all had been given to Jacob. Esau said to his father, 'Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.' So Esau lifted his voice and wept. Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, 'Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, and away from the dew of heaven from above. 'By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve; but it shall come about when you become restless, that you will break his yoke from your neck.' So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.' [Esau got mad and was seeking to get even.] Now when the words of her elder son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent and called her younger son Jacob, and said to him, 'Behold your brother Esau is consoling himself concerning you by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice, and arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban! Stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury subsides, until your brother's anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him.

Then I will send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?'" Rebekah feared the loss of both her sons as a result of her plot (27:45). Esau might have killed Jacob, and Esau then might have fled or the avenger of blood might have slain him (cf. 9:6).34

Act Five (27:46-28:5). In 27:46, "Rebekah said to Isaac, 'I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?"35 Let me interpret this for you, husbands. Rebekah is saying to Isaac, "If my life isn't worth living, yours won't be either." When Rebekah fears for Jacob's life, she goes to Isaac, and by using a logical reason that Jacob needed a wife, she manipulates Isaac into sending Jacob away. In effect, she's giving Isaac a cover story. Her real goal is to protect him, not to find him a wife. Isaac agrees, calling Jacob to his side, repeating the Abrahamic blessing, and sending him off to Haran to find a wife. She successfully maneuvered Isaac into telling Jacob to leave. Rebekah's manipulative language to spare Jacob again displays the poverty of Isaac and Rebekah's relationship. They do not seem able to communicate honestly with one another on important spiritual matters.

In 28:1-5, Moses writes, "So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, 'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. May God Almighty [El Shaddai, 17:1] bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.' Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau." Isaac evidently realized that his desire to give the blessing to Esau was not God's will, so having given it to Jacob (27:27-29), he blessed him further (28:1-4).36 This account is another remarkable demonstration of God's ability to use the sins of men and women to accomplish His purposes and at the same time discipline the sinners for their sins.37

Our closing bookend is found in 28:6-9 where Moses pens these tragic words: "Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take to himself a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he charged him, saying, 'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan,' and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and had gone to Paddan-aram. So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth." Esau

rebelled against his parents' wishes by marrying another pagan wife.38 Since he didn't get his way, he wanted everyone to be miserable (cf. 26:35). How do you respond when you don't get your own way? Do you make others suffer by pouting or acting out? This is further evidence of scheming. Yet, the message of this story is clear: Faith is living without scheming.

In the end, all four players paid a huge price for their sin.

· Isaac: He lost all credibility as a spiritual leader in his family. His plans backfired. In his effort to give Esau everything, he was able to give him nothing. He never saw his son, Jacob, again. His relationship with his wife was severely damaged.

· Esau: He had led a sexually immoral and godless lifestyle (Heb 12:16-17). He forfeited his birthright and lost his blessing. He had to spend the rest of his life asking, "What if...?"

· Rebekah: Her relationship with her husband, Isaac, was severely damaged. She is forever remembered as a scheming deceiver. She never saw Jacob again-the only son she really loved.

· Jacob: He lived a life of isolation from his family for the next 20 years. He has humiliated his father. He never saw his father or mother alive again. He is homeless. He is fleeing for his life. He is estranged from his brother. He spent the next 20 years looking over his shoulder in fear of his brother.39 Furthermore, because Jacob left and Esau stayed home, Jacob forfeited all the material prosperity that would have been his through his inheritance from Isaac.40 Jacob refused to wait on God (Psa 37:15). Faith is living without scheming.

The bottom line is this: Everyone in the family sought the blessings of God without bending the knee to God. And everyone lost!41 Sin does not pay! Heb 11:25 b tells us that its pleasure is "passing," "fleeting" (NET, ESV), and only "for a season" (KJV). In the end, sin leads to death (Jam 1:13-15).

Fortunately, man's sin can never frustrate the will of God, but it can fulfill it. Despite the sin and deceit of this family, the purpose of God, expressed to Rebekah in 25:23, was fulfilled exactly!42 God loves to work in spite of people. He can and will always accomplish His purposes, with our without our help. But we should exercise faith in the midst of our lives so we will experience God's blessings instead of His discipline. Faith is living without scheming. I challenge you today to exercise faith by obeying God, no matter how we feel, what we think, or what might happen.43

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2 For a brief biography of Sir Walter Scott see http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/95aug/scott.html (11/4/05).

3 Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Authentic: Genesis 25-50 (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997), 26-27.

4 Ross sees a chiastic structure in this account:

A Isaac and the son of the brkh/bkrh (=Esau) (27:1-5).

B Rebekah sends Jacob on the stage (27:6-17).

C Jacob appears before Isaac and receives blessing (27:18-29).

C' Esau appears before Isaac and receives antiblessing (27:30-40).

B' Rebekah sends Jacob from the stage (27:41-45).

A' Isaac and the son of brkh/bkrh (=Jacob!) (27:46-28:5) See Ross, Creation & Blessing, 474.

5 Gen 26:34-35 is best read as an introduction to Genesis 27. They cast quite a different light on the events of that chapter. Just before the account of the mischievous blessing of Jacob, we are told that Esau, from whom the blessing was stolen, had married Hittite women and that they were a source of grief to both Isaac and Rebekah. These verses, then, take their place along with 25:29-34 as background to the central event of chapter 27, the blessing of Jacob. These preliminary notices put into perspective the cunning deed of Jacob and Rebekah. They demonstrate that Esau was not fit to inherit the blessing. John H. Sailhamer, Genesis: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.

6 Constable writes, "We can identify three purposes for this brief section. First, Moses explains and justifies the reason for Jacob's later departure for Paddanaram (27:46-28:2). Second, Moses identified the ancestors of the Edomites who later played a major role in Israel's history. Third, Moses revealed Esau's carnal character again. Esau showed no interest in the special calling of his family but sought to establish himself as a great man in the world by marrying Canaanite women (cf. 11:4). These were evidently the daughters of Canaanite lords. The Canaanites were, of course, under God's curse (9:25-27)." Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Genesis (http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdfhttp://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf, 2005), 191.

7 Later in this passage, Isaac also warns Jacob against marrying a Canaanite (Gen 28:1).

8 Some commentaries break the scenes down differently. Allen P. Ross, Creation & Blessing (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 473-74 and J.P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 101.

9 Isaac's dim eyes match his dim spiritual sensitivities. The words "my son" and "here I am," which also appear along with the words "my father" in Gen 27:18 set this story up as a parody of Gen 22:1-19, where the same words are used. In the Genesis 22 story, both Abraham and his young son, Isaac, employ the words, "here I am" to convey trusting availability. In the Genesis 22 story, Abraham obeys God, and Isaac obeys Abraham. In this story Isaac takes the role of God but orders not a holy sacrifice but an unholy dish of food. Esau is the obedient son in Isaac's ill-conceived plan, which blows up in both of their faces.

10 Isaac is 100 years old here (Gen 25:26; Gen 26:34) and lived to be 180 (35:28). Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 376. Other commentators suggest Isaac was 137 years old at this time.

11 Isaac's desire that his "soul" would bless Esau indicates how intensely passionate he was about it. This is more than saying, "I desire with all my heart." It was with his whole being. Ross, Creation & Blessing,

476. Even on what he thinks is his deathbed, he is pouring out his soul without respect to the Word of God.

12 The Hebrew noun “bless” (barak) occurs seven times and its verbal form 21 times.

13 The blessing concerns fruitfulness, dominion, and protection (Gen 27:27-29). The birthright, which Esau sold to Jacob, concerns inheritance. In this family, both the birthright and the blessing are connected to the Lord; however, from Isaac and Esau’s perspective, they are separate. They think that the blessing is up for grabs. However, because both the birthright and the blessing are connected to the Lord they cannot be so easily separated. The writer of Hebrews sees a connection between the birthright and the blessing, for he says that after Esau sold the birthright, God, through Isaac, rejected him when he sought the blessing (Heb 12:16-17).

14 Gene A. Getz, Jacob: Following God Without Looking Back (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 41.

15 Isaac ignores the fact that Esau is spiritually unqualified for the blessing. Isaac ignored the irresponsible behavior of Esau. Esau was irresponsible, the kind of guy who just lived for today, the kind of guy who had little interest in God. He married two women who were pagans and not worshippers of God. We’re told at the end of chapter 26 that this brought untold disappointment to Isaac and Rebekah. But now Isaac puts all that out of his mind. Denial.

16 Before selling his birthright, Esau exaggerated his condition and said he was so hungry that he was about to die. Now Isaac, wondering if he is about to die, exaggerates his condition in order to bless the wrong son. Again, like son, like father.

17 The word “love” is usually used for personal relationships, such as a man’s love for a woman (Gen 24:67; Gen 29:18; Gen 29:20; Gen 29:30; Gen 29:32; Gen 34:3). Waltke, Genesis, 377.

18 See also Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16-50, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 206.

19 Someone has well said, “The end of life reveals the ends of life.” Wiersbe, Be Authentic, 25.

20 Scott Grant, “A Son Unloved: Wrestling with God: The Jacob Narrative” (Gen 26:34-35; Gen 27:1-29): http://www.pbc.org/dp/grant/jacob/4867.html

21 The law, which later came through Moses, said, “Cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road” (Deu 27:18).

22 Wiersbe, Be Authentic, 27.

23 The plan is carried out with garments and the skins of goats. Jacob himself would later be deceived when his sons dipped the garment of Joseph, his favorite son, in the blood of a goat to make him think that Joseph had been killed (Gen 37:31-33).

24 Hamilton comments, “He who is later capable of wrestling with God wrestles little with his mother or with his conscience.” Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 217.

25 We don't have to look very far in Genesis to find dysfunctional family relationships. Consider the very first family-Adam and Eve who blamed each other for their own disobedience. Consider their children-Cain murdered his brother Abel. Consider Noah's three sons-Ham disgraced his father by uncovering his nakedness. Consider Abraham and Sarah-He lied about his wife, calling her his sister. His nephew Lot turned out to be a major disappointment.

26 If course, in light of God's promise this was completely unnecessary (see Gen 25:23).

27 When Abraham was ordered by God to sacrifice Isaac, Isaac approached Abraham with the words, "My father." Abraham responded, "Here I am, my son." Isaac wanted to know the whereabouts of the sacrificial lamb. Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22). Although the words of greeting are the same in Genesis 27, the beautiful story of a son's trust for a father and a father's trust in the Lord is replaced by the tragic story of familial deceit and favoritism. Isaac, the son who trusted a father who trusted the Lord, has now become a father who fails to trust the Lord and is deceived by a son.

28 Jacob calls himself the "firstborn." Later, he himself will be deceived and be stuck with a "firstborn" wife that he doesn't want (Gen 29:26).

29 Or as Constable suggests, "The response to Isaac's blessing in Gen 27:23 is proleptic; it refers to the blessing in 27:27-29, not another blessing that preceded this one. Isaac uttered his blessing (27:27-29) in poetic language and God's Spirit doubtless inspired it since it proved to be prophetic (cf. 49:1-27; Deut 33; et al.). It was an oracle." Constable, Notes on Genesis, 195.

30 The Genesis 22 story culminated with a substitution. Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac when the angel of the Lord stopped him. Immediately thereafter, Abraham found a ram to offer in place of Isaac. The Genesis 27 parody of Genesis 22 culminates when Jacob substitutes himself for Esau.

31 Jacob had already received the blessing of the Promised Land through the birthright that he obtained. In Gen 27:28, Isaac blesses Jacob with fruitfulness in the Promised Land (Deu 7:13). The dew of heaven provides irrigation. The fatness of the earth is rain. Grain and new wine evoke the image of a banquet, overflowing with joy (Psa 4:7). In 27:29, Isaac blesses Jacob with dominion over the nations and his family. "Peoples" and "nations" are in parallel construction, as are "brothers" and "your mother's sons." "Peoples" and "nations" would be the Gentile peoples and nations. "Brothers" and "your mother's sons" would be Rebekah's descendants through Esau, who would also become Gentiles. Finally, the curses and blessings called for equate with God's protection and are particularly linked to dominion (Num 24:9).

32 This reminds me of the words Joseph utters many years later: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). Both Isaac and Jacob had less than noble motives, but God overruled their bad motives to insure that His will was ultimately done.

33 The point of these reiterations of the effect of the blessing is primarily to underscore the irretrievability of the lost blessing and hence the certainty of the fulfillment of the blessing itself. By showing that the blessing was irrevocable, even by the father who gave the blessing, the writer underscores an important feature of the blessing. It is out of man's hands. It cannot even be revoked. It will come to pass, just as it was given. Sailhamer, Genesis, Electronic. Ed.

34 Waltke, Genesis, 382. Several scholars think Rebekah means that when Isaac dies Esau will kill Jacob, and she does not want to mourn the loss of two family members at the same time. But Isaac is not a near antecedent to “you.”

35 Rebekah used her dislike for Esau’s wives as an excuse to gain Isaac’s permission for Jacob to go to Paddan-aram. Evidently Rebekah had kept Esau’s hatred for Jacob from his aged father because she believed Isaac was near death (Gen 27:41).

36 Besides in that culture a paternal blessing, much more a divine oracle, such as the one Isaac had uttered, was irrevocable. By showing that the blessing was irrevocable, even by the father who gave the blessing, the writer underscores an important feature of the blessing-its fulfillment is out of human hands. John H. Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 191.

37 Many years later the aged Jacob blessed Joseph’s younger son Ephraim rather than his older brother Manasseh (Gen 48:14-19). He must have remembered how he had deceived his father Isaac to get his blessing. Joseph’s approach to Jacob on that occasion was honorable by contrast, and his life was free of the consequences of deceit. This was not true of Jacob’s life. Jacob reaped what he sowed (Gal 6:7). Laban later deceived him, and later still his own sons (in the case of the sale of Joseph) did so even more cruelly than he deceived Isaac.

38 See also Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative, 192.

39 This was Rebekah’s reward for her meddling. This is not a close-knit family. There are definite problems in the relationships. Notice that Esau and Jacob do not interact. Notice that Esau and Rebekah do not interact. It looks like we have Isaac and Jacob interacting, but remember that Isaac thinks its Esau. And finally and perhaps most importantly: Isaac and Rebekah do not interact until the whole thing is over and she wants Isaac to send Jacob away. So Genesis 27 shows us again that Jacob could not wait on God to fulfill His promise to Rebekah.

40 Pritchard, “Portrait of a Dysfunctional Family.”

41 R. Kent Hughes, Genesis: Beginning & Blessing (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 354.

42 See Pro 16:9; Pro 19:21.

43 Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Authentic: Genesis 25-50 (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1997), 26-27.

Chapter 36

\"Runaway Bribe\" (Gen 28:10-22)

In 1995, Focus on the Family aired the amazing story of Frank W. Abagnale. At the age of 16, Abagnale's parents divorced. This so devastated him that he ran away and became a con man that circled the globe living the high life and passing bad checks. One of his favorite schemes was impersonating airline pilots so that he could pass fake airline payroll checks as well as "ride the jump seat" for free, to anywhere in the world. From age 16-19, Abagnale also impersonated a medical doctor, a BYU sociology professor, and a lawyer. His story has been called "the true story of a real fake." His life is so fascinating that Steven Spielberg turned it into a film. In the end, an FI agent caught Abagnale. He now serves as a world-renowned consultant and lectures at the FBI's Financial Crimes Unit.

In Genesis 28, Jacob runs away from home. The plot to receive the blessing from Isaac was a great success…in one sense. However, in another sense it was a terrible failure. Jacob was forced to leave home to escape being killed by his furious brother. So Jacob gets the blessing but he has to leave the inheritance with Esau. He is a runaway. Fortunately for Jacob, and for us, God loves to chase down runaways. This is God's defining feature-He comes to rebellious people to be with them and to save them. In fact, when God finally chose to become a person [Jesus], He came to "seek and to save the lost" (Luk 19:10, NET). This story, in 28:10-22, gives us a picture of how heaven comes down to earth.

Our story begins in 28:10: "Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran." This was a journey backward in time for Jacob; backward because he was retracing the steps of his grandfather Abraham, who came from Haran to the Promised Land many years ago. But Abraham left behind him a settlement of people that grew and prospered over the years. So it was natural that his mother, Rebekah, would think of Haran when she cast about for a safe haven for her wayward, youngest son. The trek from Beersheba to Haran was far enough away that Esau wouldn't follow Jacob there. Yet, there was family at Haran, so Jacob wouldn't be alone. All in all, Haran was a sensible suggestion. Rebekah's plan was simple. By sending Jacob to Haran, she was putting him in a safe place for a few months until Esau's anger subsided. Then she would send word for Jacob to come home. In the meantime, she hoped that her son would marry one of his relatives in Haran and eventually return home, bride in hand. It was a good plan, and in fact it came to pass, but not exactly as Rebekah envisioned.

In 28:11, "He [Jacob] came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place." The journey from Beersheba to Haran was a long one (approx. 550 miles). When he was about 70 miles from home, he reached the town of Luz (cf. 28:19). It is surprising that we find Jacob outside the city, apparently sleeping in the wilderness. It was ancient custom not to allow a visitor to brave the elements out of doors or overnight (19:1-3; Jdg 19:11-21). So, either Jacob arrived after the gates were closed, or he was so depressed that he didn't want to be sociable. Whatever his thoughts must have been, I believe that Jacob was finally at the end of himself. I believe that he came to realize he would never prosper on the basis of his schemes and struggles. His self-assurance was probably at an all-time low. This was the ideal time for God to break into his life; for now Jacob knew how much he needed God in order to be blessed as his father had been.

The setting of God's encounter with Jacob matches Jacob's psychological condition. The security of the son has been replaced by the dangers of the night. The comfort of his parents' tent has been replaced by a rock. Behind him lays Beersheba, where Esau waits to kill him; ahead of him is Haran, where Laban waits to exploit him. He is situated between a death camp and a hard-labor camp. Back in Beersheba, Esau lies in wait like an angry lion. Ahead in Haran, Laban waits with his spider web to trap and suck the life from his victims.

I imagine he had a hard time sleeping that night…and not just because he was sleeping on the ground with a rock for a pillow. As he reminisced in his mind, I wonder if he thought about his family. Did he worry about his aging father? Did a silent tear slip down his cheek as he remembered waving goodbye to his mother? Did his face turn crimson in the darkness as he replayed his shameful deceit? Did a bullet of fear strike his heart as he thought about Esau's pledge to kill him?

In 28:12, Moses elaborates the scene: Jacob "had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." It's worth noting that Jacob, whose entire life could be summed up as a life of striving and grabbing, finally had an encounter with God, in his sleep. When did Jacob receive this revelation? When he was working? When he was scheming? No, when he was sleeping (see Isa 30:15-16). The two most significant events in the life of Jacob were visitations from God, both while he was sleeping. The first was this dream at Bethel when he was fleeing from the land of Canaan, which ironically was his by virtue of the blessing. The other was his fight at Peniel when he was attempting to return to the land (32:24-32). Each divine encounter was a life-changing event.

Another observation is worth noting: Where was Jacob when he received this vision?

• Physically: He was in a barren, rocky wasteland, in the middle of nowhere.

• Socially: He was separated from his family and fleeing for his life.

• Materially: He had nothing but the shirt on his back.

• Spiritually: He was distant from God and alone and without hope.

God loves to intervene and meet us when we are empty, lonely, and running away from Him. Heaven comes down to earth when we are the most in need of God. That is the story of Christmas! If you have placed your faith in Christ, it is also the story of your life.

Ironically, many people today are content to have us stop with this verse. Why? "Angels!" Angels are big business and many people get excited about them. Angels have been on the cover of every major news magazine; they have infatuated the American public. It is assumed that our interest in angels is good. But the Bible tells us that we must test the spirits (1Jn 4:1-3), "for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2Co 11:14). Everything that is "spiritual" is not good!

I will say this though: Not many people in the Bible ever saw angels. Most people lived their entire lives without ever seeing one. But here and there, at certain critical moments in history, God allowed a few people this privilege. It's as if God would draw back the curtains at a crucial moment to let someone see the angels of God at work behind the scene. Jacob is one of the few.

What are the angels doing? They are going up and down the stairs. They are taking messages from earth up to heaven and messages from heaven down to earth. They are heavenly couriers who report to God concerning the situation on the earth (Heb 1:14). They also carry out God's will-answering prayers, giving guidance, providing protection, fighting for the people of God, and fending off the attacks of Satan.

Fortunately, 28:13-15 tells us who God is. Why get caught up with the servants of God when you can have the Master Himself? Moses writes, "And behold, the LORD stood above it [or "stood beside him, NRSV] and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'" The "ladder" evidently resembled a stairway with steps that reached to heaven. Jacob at the bottom, God at the top, a stairway filled with angels in between. What does it mean? This ladder, with its "top" reaching to heaven, was literally "placed toward the earth." Remember the tower of Babel in which rebel humanity attempted to build a tower with a "top" that reached "into heaven" (11:4)? The ladder in Jacob's dream, by contrast, brings heaven to earth. The point being: Humanity's efforts to reach heaven are never effective. Led Zeppelin got it wrong in their song Stairway to Heaven. Men and women can access heaven only when it comes to earth or when God takes them to heaven.

The Bible tells us that the ladder is Jesus. Jesus said in Joh 1:51, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is our stairway to heaven. He makes this clear, in Joh 1:51, that He is the access to heaven. He is the means by which heaven comes down to us and by which we can go to heaven. He is the "ladder." He does not show us a way, He is the way. In Joh 14:6, Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." In 1Ti 2:5, Paul wrote, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Ultimately, it was Jesus Christ who bridged the gap between heaven and earth. It is through Him that God has come down to man. It is through Him that man will have access to God. The religions of man teach that we must rise up to God. Yet, the message of the Bible is that God comes down to man. Therefore, if you want to have a relationship with God, you must come to Him on His terms…and that means going through Jesus! You can do this today. Simply acknowledge your sin to God, cease trusting in your own good works, church membership, baptism, or world view, and trust in Christ alone.

For all the years of Jacob's life, God had never before spoken directly to him. To his grandfather Abraham-yes. To his father Isaac-yes. But to Jacob-no. For his whole life he had lived on the borrowed faith of his father and grandfather. He was raised in their faith, was taught their faith, knew their faith, and even believed their faith, but he had never had a personal experience with the God of his father and grandfather. To Jacob it was all second-hand reality.

Interestingly, God does not rebuke Jacob for the shameful way he has treated his brother or father. What a gracious God. We often think God is discontented with us, yet the truth is He loves us and wants to speak words of encouragement and grace to us. Think for just a moment about how much you love your children or grandchildren. Do you think a perfect and loving God loves you any less? Of course not!

In 28:13-15, God gives Jacob several precious promises. While the promises of Jacob do not apply directly, across the board to us, it is amazing what we can learn about God's character through these

promises. Think of all the needs that these words address:

• Shame: “I am the God of your father Abraham.” Jacob, even though you feel like you have blown it (and you have), I can take away the embarrassment of your life and use you.

• Betrayal: “I am the God of Isaac.” Jacob, I know you’re feeling like you betrayed your dad (and you did). Nevertheless, I am your dad’s God and I will not fail him, even when you do. I’m a big God and I can be trusted.

• Loss of his homeland: “I will give you this land.” Jacob, I know you’re a runaway, but one day I’m going to give you and your descendants the Promised Land.

• Loss of his family: “Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth.” Jacob, I know your family relationships are strained but I will give you many other descendants.

• Insignificance: “All peoples on the earth will be blessed through you.” Jacob, right now you may feel very small and insignificant, but your life is going to count for me. It may not seem that way right now, but I will use you.

• Fear of the future: “I am with you…wherever you go.” Jacob was the first person in the Bible to hear the assurance “I am with you” (28:15). It was a promise that God later repeated to Moses (Exo 3:12; Joshua (Jos 1:5), Gideon (Jdg 6:16), regarding Immanuel (Isa 7:14; Mat 1:23), and to all disciples (Mat 28:20; Heb 13:5). As we look at Jacob’s experience, I want you to see that God is also with you. You may be on the verge of a mental collapse; but although you cannot sense it, God is with you right now. You may be quite ill. You may be misunderstood by your friends. You may be abandoned by a husband, a wife, or your children. You may have lost a job. You may be discouraged. You may feel that you have so little self-worth that no one will ever care for you again. I want you to hear God speaking. He speaks when you need Him most.

• Fear of Failure: “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Jacob, I know it seems life is unpredictable (and it is) but I’m in control. And I am faithful even when you are unfaithful. My life for you is everlasting and I will make good on my promises.

God speaks all of these promises to Jacob, of all people. Why Jacob? He steals well; he rips off his old, blind father; he has never really worshipped God. He is the last guy that you or I would choose. Why does God choose Jacob? God loves to use the weak and foolish people of this world (1Co 1:27-29). He does this to shame the wise and strong.

The amazing point is that God now speaks to Jacob at the moment of his desperation. All that has happened is prologue. Even his deception and trickery was used by God to bring him to this precise moment in life. Now that he is running for his life, now that he is leaving the Promised Land, now that he has disgraced himself, now that he has finally reached the bottom, at that exact moment, God speaks to Jacob. C.S. Lewis said that God whispers to us in our pleasure and shouts to us in our pain. Pain, he said, is God’s megaphone to rouse a sleeping world. Now God moves to rouse Jacob, even while he sleeps.

In 28:16-17, “…Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.’ He [Jacob] was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’” Can you imagine what it must have been like to wake up after having a dream of this magnitude? Think back to the last surreal dream you had. If you’re like me, when you wake

up and rub the sleep from your eyes, you immediately question the reality of what you dreamed. I have had some dreams that were so real that when I woke up I had to remind myself they were just dreams. Jacob is probably in the same state of mind. Quickly though, he recognizes that he has just had a personal encounter with the living God…so he gets excited. As our African American brethren like to say, "He had some "church"! He is overwhelmed with God's presence. In his euphoria and fright, Jacob utters some confused theology. The truth is: Everywhere God is present is sacred. Now the question is, "Where is God?" He is everywhere! He rules over all creation.

On Friday, I was able to talk to my neighbor about my spiritual pilgrimage. During our conversation, I told him of an experience I had in June of 1993. After graduating Bible college with a degree in theology, God met me in a poolroom at Neptune Swimming Pool Company in Clackamas, OR. One month before I was married, God graciously convinced me, once and for all, that He was real, the Bible was real, heaven and hell were real, and I would give an account for my life. Why was this necessary and why did this mark me so? I grew up in the church yet always had nagging questions and doubts. Occasionally, the following thoughts would pop into my mind: "What if this is all a joke?" "What if I have believed in the wrong God?" "What if the Bible is not true?" I acknowledge that these thoughts can be fairly typical. God understands that we are dust and that our minds can be mush. Nevertheless, God directly met me and persuaded me of His truth. That was a momentous occasion. It shaped me into who I am today. However, I don't need to return to the poolroom at Neptune and visit it like it is a shrine. God could have met me anywhere and reveal Himself to me. Therefore, I am to worship God, not where God met me.

It has been my observation that relatively few people meet God on Sunday morning. You are much more likely to meet God on the bed of affliction, or when you lose your job, or when your children are sick, or when your friends betray you, or when your marriage collapses. You are much more likely to meet Him after an accident than during the coffee hour on Sunday morning. You're much more likely to meet Him in the hospital than in the sanctuary. Not because God is not here; He is here and not just on Sunday either. Our problem is, God speaks but we don't listen. It takes tragedy, it takes failure, it takes financial setback, it takes heartache, it takes illness, it takes the collapse of our dreams-then at last we look up to heaven and say, "Surely the Lord was in this place, and I knew it not" (Gen 28:16).

Our story concludes in 28:18-22: "So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel [the "house of God"]; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.'" Jacob set the stone up as a memorial to God's revelation and promises (28:18). His pillow becomes a pillar. Why does Jacob raise a pillar and not just build an altar like his grandfather, Abraham? Both a pillar and a stairway have a "head" that points upward. Jacob is acknowledging God. Pouring oil on the pillar constituted an act of consecration. Oil was used throughout the Old Testament as a symbol (type) of the Holy Spirit.

This pillar becomes a monument of remembrance. Jacob wants to memorialize the event. Many of you are familiar with the old hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. The second verse of this song begins with these words: "Here I raise my Ebenezer." Well, you may remember a couple of months ago when we sang this song and Paco introduced a video with people from our church trying to figure out what an Ebenezer was. It sounds like an old man that we are ticked at. At the end of the video, Andy Schwartz finally bailed

us out and explained that an Ebenezer is a monument, a memorial. It is a means of remembering who God is. Examples of this are journaling, our first Bible, a special date, a significant picture. We need to be reminded of the grace of God. We need to have something to pass on down to our children and grandchildren. We need to build a legacy of faith through generational stories.

In 28:20-22, Jacob makes a vow that also includes his finances. The tithe is not a debt paid to God. Rather, it is a tangible acknowledgment that everything we have belongs to Him. In the Old Testament, the tithe was an obligation before God. In the New Testament, the requirement of tithing has been swallowed up in the privilege and joy of being a faithful steward of God's resources. God's expectation for each one of us is to give cheerfully, regularly, and sacrificially. Jacob swore that the Lord would be his God, if God proved faithful to him. Jacob's vow (28:20-21; cf. 31:13; 35:1-3, 7) can be translated "Since…" rather than "If…" Jacob was asking no more than the fulfillment of God's self-imposed obligations delivered in the dream. However, many pastors and commentators understand Jacob's vow to be an example of his scheming carnality. A casual look at his dedicatory comments may appear that his response was conditional because of the word "if" (28:20-21). In other words, "If God blesses me, then I'll serve Him." To interpret Jacob's response in this way is to misread his words and his heart. Rather, Jacob was simply saying, "If God will help me, I'll fulfill my commitment." In other words, Jacob was acknowledging the fact that he could not do it alone. He needed God's help. God would have to make it possible for him to carry out his commitment. Jacob wasn't making a bargain with God; he was affirming his faith in God. He was promising his life, his worship, and his possessions. This is God's expectation of us as well.

At some point in time, all of us must claim the great promises of God for ourselves and step out in faith, making our own commitment to Him. God has no grandchildren! You may be able to relate to Jacob. Like Jacob, you may have grown up in a Christian home; however, you've spent your fair share of time running away from God. Like Jacob, you have to find your own faith. Most people leave the church and then come back when they have children, with the hope that their children get religion.

The assurance of God's presence should bring about, in every believer, the same response of worship and confidence it prompted in Jacob. This is the message from the beginning: God, by grace, visits His people and promises them protection and provision so that they might be a blessing to others. They in turn were to respond in faith, fearing Him, worshipping Him, offering to Him, vowing to Him, and making memorials for future worshippers at such places.

An atheist and a Christian were engaged in an intense public debate. On the blackboard behind the podium the atheist printed in large capital letters, "GOD IS NOWHERE." When the Christian rose to offer his rebuttal, he rubbed out the W at the beginning of where and added that letter to the preceding word no. Then the statement read, "GOD IS NOW HERE."

Chapter 37

\"What Goes Around Comes Around!\" (Gen 29:1-30)

Our story begins, in 29:1-3, with an introduction: “Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east. He looked, and saw a well in the field and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.” The phrase, “Then Jacob went on his journey” is literally translated, “Then Jacob lifted up his feet.” This unusual expression suggests that Jacob had a new lease on life now that God had promised him the blessing he had so desperately tried to gain by his own efforts. Before his dream at Bethel (28:10-22), Jacob’s heart was filled with fear; now he walks with a new spring in his step. Before, he felt the weight of his past; now, he looks with excitement to the future. Before, he was running for his life; now, he is running to find a wife.

While there appears to be no gap between 29:1 and 29:2, don’t be fooled. For the sake of ink, Moses is fast-forwarding this story. Jacob is traveling to Haran, 400 miles away from Bethel. This is a major journey for him, that didn’t happen overnight. After many days of traveling, Jacob arrives in Haran. He plans to stay there for a few months, find a wife, and then return home to Beersheba. Little does he know that Haran is going to be his home for 20 long years, or that what awaits him is hard times in Haran.

In 29:4-9, Jacob has a conversation with some local shepherds. Jacob says, “‘My brothers, where are you from?’ And they said, ‘We are from Haran.’ He said to them, ‘Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?’ And they said, ‘We know him.’ And he said to them, ‘Is it well with him?’ And they said, ‘It is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep’” (29:4-6). Now before we go any further, it is important to understand that Rachel is very attractive (cf. 29:17). Furthermore, she has sheep and is a shepherdess (29:9). In biblical times, sheep were a sign of wealth. It might be the equivalent to a nice car. Immediately, Jacob is impressed! He is like most men who notice the appearance of a woman first and then the car that she drives. In this case, Jacob notices Rachel’s appearance and the sheep that she was herding. So what does he do? In 29:7, he slyly says to the shepherds, “Don’t you guys need to take those sheep somewhere? I see Rachel coming and I want to talk to her. Why don’t you guys just take the sheep and baa-moose?” Look at this obvious request: “Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.’ But they said, ‘We cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep” (29:7-8). For some reason, the shepherds who are tending their flocks by the well are waiting for some unspecified group of people, (“they”) to roll back the stone from the surface of the well. They are unable to roll back the stone themselves to water their flocks. I think they’re messing with Jacob and just want to be able to gaze upon Rachel themselves.

Now this is where things get really amusing. Jacob pretends he has not seen Rachel and does not know who she is (although he has been told she is about to arrive and he does know who she is!). Verse 10 tells the tale: “When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother.” Isn’t it amazing how strong a guy can be when he wants to impress a woman? This task should have taken several men but once Jacob sees Rachel coming with her flock of sheep he single-handedly rolls back the stone. He wants her to know how wonderful he is. What a

dashing, strong, helpful man he is-when Rachel is watching! He removes the stone before he greets her, although it would have been normal to greet someone before you do anything else. But Jacob was pretending he was involved in rolling away the stone before she arrived! He then even feeds Rachel's sheep. All I have to say is, "Jake, you're a sly ole' dog!"

We must ask the question: Why does Mr. Lazy Bones turn into Mr. Overnight Sensation? Why does he go to all this work? The answer is obvious: He has to make a good first impression. So Jacob tries to fool Rachel into thinking he's really a man's man, instead of some pantywaist momma's boy. Men, does this sounds familiar? You did the same thing when you were dating. You tried to get that woman to believe you were someone you're not! Then, once you hooked her, you showed her your true colors.

My first job was working at Target. I worked on the 5:00 AM stock team. This team was made up of some hilarious young men. To pass the time and keep ourselves awake, we would make all kinds of noises (grunts, groans, screams) as we stocked both heavy and light items. We nearly laughed ourselves to death-always on the verge of dropping some of the heavy items on our toes. This is Jacob. He's never really worked hard. Instead, he's been the schemer, who now has to pump it up. I'm sure he made some noise. If he's like most men, I'm sure he was sporting a pose the whole way. After he moved the rock, I bet he even moved right into a bodybuilding crab flex, topping off with a double bicep kiss.

Jacob then struts over to Rachel and plants one on her. Verse 11a states, "Then Jacob kissed Rachel." This kiss may not have been what we necessarily envision. It wasn't like he dipped her down and kissed her lips. More likely, he kissed her on both cheeks. However, it is worth adding that this appears to be the only case in the Bible of a man kissing a woman who is not his mother or wife. So it is possible that this was more than just a "holy" kiss. By the way, this is the first recorded instance of "kissing cousins." This is one of those rare cases of "love at first sight." But then, after the kiss, Jacob "lifted his voice and wept" (29:11b). Not exactly your normal pickup strategy! Jacob was emotionally spent, physically exhausted, and spiritually overwhelmed. While he wept for joy, he did not praise God. He had ended his journey, was now in the right place, and had met the right person, he thought.

In 29:12, "Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father." After a nice smooch, Jacob decides to have a conversation with Rachel, knowing that women value conversation. Rachel was the daughter of Laban, and Laban was the brother of Jacob's mother, Rebekah. So Jacob and Rachel were actually first cousins-"kissing cousins." In any case, apparently Rachel enjoyed the conversation and the kiss so much that she ran home to tell her father what had happened.

In 29:13-15, our story continues: "So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. Laban said to him, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh.' And he stayed with him a month. Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?'" Laban appears to be the perfect uncle. But it is worth observing that Jacob worked for Laban for a full month before they even discussed compensation for his labor. This is a tough gig for a guy who is penniless and desperate for money.

In 29:16-17, Moses provides a parenthetical statement: "Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah ["cow"], and the name of the younger was Rachel ["ewe lamb"]. And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face." There is some mystery regarding Leah's eyes. A few

English translations understand Leah's eyes to be her best quality, so they translate the Hebrew word for "soft" (rak) as "lovely" (NRSV), "pretty" (NLT), or "delicate" (NKJV). However, most scholars suggest that Leah's eyes had no fire or sparkle, a quality much prized in the East. She was not, to use James Taylor's lyric, "a pretty señorita with fire in her eyes." The point is that, physically, she did not measure up to her gorgeous sister. Rachel was "beautiful of form and face." This is the Bible's way of saying that Rachel had it going on. She was drop-dead gorgeous-a knockout.

So what do we do with this??? First of all, we must acknowledge that not all women are created equal in form and face. Some are more attractive than others; however, there is nothing wrong with being beautiful. In the 80's, Pantene shampoo had a series of TV commercials that used the expression, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." Sadly, some people are prone to detest those who are good-looking. In the Bible, Sarah (12:11), Rebekah (24:15-16), and Rachel were all beautiful. This is just how God made them! Young people, there is a Christian myth going around today that suggests that you don't need to be physically attracted to your spouse. That's not true. You're going to be looking at that face and that body for a long time. It is wise to ensure that you are attracted to the person you marry.

Second, we must prioritize inner beauty over outer beauty. Outward beauty must not be the basis upon which a person's worth is measured. One of the dangers that beautiful people face is that there is the constant temptation to further cultivate what is already being praised-outward beauty, and give short shrift to the important issues of character and godliness (1Pe 3:3-5). This is one reason why it is so important to affirm the inner beauty of our daughters and young women. Yesterday, Jena dressed up as a princess and came in to see me. I was stunned by how adorable she looked. But I was careful to say, "Jena, you look so beautiful. But your real beauty comes from within." It is worthwhile to continually affirm the beauty of your family members. (Men, this even includes your mother-in-law.) The women in our life need to know that we think they are beautiful, regardless of what our society may say. This is especially important for husbands and fathers of daughters. For example, if a man wants to have a truly beautiful wife-begin by treating her like one! Tell your wife, "I'm glad to be home. There's no other place I'd rather be. I'm thinking about you." Remember men, the greatest thing you can do for your wife is to love her. And remember that the greatest thing you can do for your children is to love their mother.

In 29:18-20, we learn that Jacob is, indeed, a real man. Moses records these words: "Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me.' So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her." Verse 20 is often misunderstood. It need not mean that the time passed quickly. More likely it means that the price seemed insignificant when compared to what he was getting in the bargain. The right woman is the greatest motivator for a guy. Jacob was willing to work for seven years to be able to marry Rachel. He was willing to demonstrate patience and commitment. His love for her was real. Ladies, if the man you want to marry doesn't want to work hard for you, he needs to be told he doesn't really love you. This truth applies to married men as well. In most cases, our wives work their tails off. They cook, clean, take care of the kids, work outside the home, and offer their bodies to us. Now in my mind, if they did any one of those things it would be impressive. But there are some of you men who have a wife who does all of those things. My question is: Can you be a man and go to work for her? Instead of complaining about your job, can you come home and say, "Baby, one of my joys in life is putting bread on the table for you!"

After seven years of remarkable dedication and devotion, Jacob approaches Laban and says, "Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her" (29:21). How would you like to lay that line on

your future father-in-law? WOW! Jacob is not thinking about romance; he's not seeking to have a conversation with Rachel; he wants to lie with her. Now ladies, before you think ill of Jacob, please note that he waited seven years to marry Rachel before he slept with her. In our day and age, many couples don't want to wait seven days before sleeping together. Yet, this story teaches a valuable principle: True love can be tested with time. Jacob waited seven years, 364 weeks. If he was paid every two weeks, that's 182 paychecks. Now, lest you men lose the impact of this, Jacob worked 2,555 days for his bride.

This demonstrates the reality of Jacob's love for Rachel. Any man who can love a woman like this is not a true scoundrel-he is a man!

Now back to our story. In 29:22-24, "Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast. Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her." Laban is a dirty dog! This is about one of the meanest pranks ever played on a man. It is soap opera Jerry Springer, Howard Stern ugly. Why would any father do such a cruel thing? Greed! Laban was motivated by his greed to keep Jacob working for him for nothing (1Ti 6:9-10). Imagine the impact her father's decision would have on Rachel. She had been looking forward to this day for seven years. How would you feel if, on your wedding day, someone else took your place? (In hindsight, some of you might wish that had happened!)

There are many questions we would like to ask at this point, the main one being: How in the world could something like this happen? The answer is: It couldn't, if you are following modern American, wedding customs. No man could be fooled in this way. But weddings in the ancient Near East followed different patterns. The most likely explanation is that when Laban brought his daughter, Leah, to Jacob, it was late and very dark, and she was veiled from head to toe. It seems that the wedding feast hosted by Laban was an intentional ploy to dull Jacob's senses with wine (29:22). The text also includes lexical hints that inebriation was part of the story. In the darkness, somehow Jacob didn't realize that the woman next to him was Leah and not Rachel. So the marriage was consummated…but with the wrong woman! Other questions: Where was Rachel that night? The text doesn't tell us. Did she know about the swap? Why did Leah go along with this? Was it a case of two sisters competing for the same man? Did Leah feel jealous of her younger, more beautiful sister? We don't know for sure, but Genesis 30 may lead one to conclude that sisterly jealousy was part of this deception.

In 29:24, Moses writes, "Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid." Moses may have added this parenthetical statement to lift the reader up off the floor. Call it a half-time intermission. In 29:25, "So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?'" Verse 25 tells us the whole story: "When morning came, there was Leah!" In the Hebrew, that phrase contains two words: "Behold, Leah!" He wakes up a contented man. He rolls over to kiss Rachel. But the face smiling back at him is not Rachel-it's Leah! I'm surprised he didn't have a heart attack. Then it hits him: He's slept with the wrong woman. How could this have happened? Then the second thought hits him: Laban! It had to be Laban, because Laban was the one who brought his "bride" to his chambers. Interestingly, the Hebrew verb translated "deceived" is cognate to the noun used in 27:35 to describe Jacob's deception of Esau. Jacob is discovering what goes around comes around.

In 29:26, Laban responds, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn." Laban rather coolly replies that he was forced by custom to give Leah in marriage first because she was the firstborn. This is the second direct hit by God. Jacob had dishonored the principle of the firstborn by

cheating his brother out of the birthright and the blessing. Now God forces him to honor the principle he had violated by marrying Leah first. And who had Jacob deceived? His father, Isaac. Now the deceiver is deceived by his father-in-law! Everything that goes around comes around.

Knowing a sucker when he's got one on the line, in 29:27, Laban moves in for the kill. "Complete the week of this one, [Leah] and we will give you the other [Rachel] also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years." Laban offers to let Jacob marry Rachel as well, but with one tiny condition: He must serve Laban for another seven years. That's 14 years altogether! Uncle Laban is going to change Jacob's life forever. Up until this point, Jacob has lived by his wits. He has survived by relying on his native intelligence and his shrewd ability to take care of himself in any situation. True, things haven't always worked out for him, but even when things have gone bad, Jacob has somehow managed to land on his feet. Like a cat with nine lives, Jacob has been getting into and out of tough spots all his life. Sometimes he's left the playing field with a black eye, but no matter, at least he always walks off under his own power.

All of that is about to change because in Uncle Laban, Jacob is finally going to meet his match. Jacob has lived as a penny-ante con man, pulling the wool over his brother's eyes, and deceiving his father with that ridiculous goatskin routine. Kid stuff, you might say. But, unfortunately, Jacob has been playing in the Little League. When he meets Laban, he is joining the NFL of con men. Laban is about to take Jacob to the cleaners. And there's nothing Jacob can do about it. In the providence of God, Jacob is about to be enrolled in the oldest school known to man-the School of Hard Knocks. And Uncle Laban is about to give his nephew, Jacob, 20 years of free post-graduate education.

God trains Jacob by allowing him to meet his own sins in someone else. Soon he will know what Esau felt when he was tricked out of something that was precious to him. It is almost a case of "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth." Jacob is being made to see just how despicable his tricky ways are. It is all a part of the training in his life. If Jacob hadn't stolen Esau's blessing and had patiently waited for God's intervention and timing, he would have had the financial resources to acquire Rachel immediately, rather than having to invest 14 years of his life, laboring for Rachel's hand in marriage. Lesson: Taking short cuts and failing to trust God is costly! It can often cost years of a person's life. What a heavy price sin requires!

In 29:28, "Jacob did so and completed her week, and he [Laban] gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife." Jacob agreed to Laban's contract and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. [The bridal week was the week of feasting that followed a marriage (29:27; cf. Jdg 14:12; Jdg 14:17). Jacob received Rachel seven days after he had consummated his marriage to Leah (cf. 29:28, 30). Jacob married two women in eight days.] "Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years" (29:29,30). From Jacob's perspective, he had been ripped off and cheated by Laban. However, from God's perspective, those fourteen years saved Jacob from the murderous intentions of his brother, Esau. Jacob's rejection had to hurt Leah deeply. No one likes rejection! How would you feel if, after your weeklong honeymoon, your husband married someone else... much less your sister?

Parallels

• As Jacob had deceived Isaac by taking advantage of his inability to see, due to poor eyesight, so Laban deceived Jacob by taking advantage of his inability to see in the dark tent.

• Earlier, Jacob had deceptively pretended to be the older brother, and now Laban tricked him by replacing the younger with the older sister. Leah deceived Jacob as Jacob had deceived Isaac.

• Jacob was behaving like his parents, who each favored one son above the other, by favoring one of his wives above the other. In both cases, serious family problems followed.

• Esau was forced to live with the results of Jacob's deception; now Jacob is forced to live with the results of Laban's deception.

Is this episode a case of polygamy? Or did the special circumstances excuse Jacob or Laban or both? If it is polygamy, what is the case for or against polygamy? Polygamy was never lawful for any of the persons in the Bible. There never existed an express biblical permission for such a deviation from the ordinance of God. God made the institution of marriage in the garden of Eden (2:21-24). There are at least four passages that conceivably could be construed as giving temporary permission from God to override the general law of marriage found in Gen 2:24. They are Exo 21:7-11; Lev 18:18; Deu 21:15-17; and 2Sa 12:7-8. But each one falls far short of proving that anything like divine permission was being granted in these passages. Scripture does not always pause to state the obvious. In many cases, there is no need for the reader to imagine what God thinks of such states of affairs, for the misfortune and strife that come into the domestic lives of these polygamists cannot be read as a sign of divine approval. It is true that Jacob was deceived by Laban, on Jacob's wedding night, but that did not justify Jacob in agreeing to Laban's crafty plan to get him to stay around for another seven years to ensure continued prosperity. Two wrongs in this case did not make a right. Gal 6:7 says, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap." Jacob has been sowing for a long, long time. Reaping day has come. He's been sowing the seeds of deceit, and the harvest is about to come.

Why did God take Jacob through this time of testing?

1. So That Jacob Would Have Plenty of Time to Think About the Way He Had Lived. For all those years in the Promised Land, Jacob had richly earned the title "deceiver." Now God puts Jacob in a spiritual "time-out" chair in Haran. For 20 years Jacob had lots of time to consider the course of his life.
All parents understand this. Most of us use the "time-out" chair because it gives our children time to think quietly about what they have done. Or perhaps you send your children to their room. That serves several purposes-including the prevention of homicide!-but foremost among them is giving your children a chance to slow down, cool off, and begin to think.
As long as Jacob was in Beersheba, he could get away with almost anything. But in Haran, Jacob is in foreign territory. God's got him in a place far removed from his comfort zone, a place where Jacob is forced to think about his life. That's what God does with us. From time to time he just sits us down and says, "You don't need that job anymore. You need some time to think." Or He says, "I'm going to put you in the hospital for a couple of weeks so you'll have time to think." "I'm going to let your dreams crumble so you'll have time to consider the way you've been living."

2. So That God Could Humble Jacob at the Point of His Perceived Strength. If you had asked Jacob, "What's your strong point?" he would have no doubt said, "I know how to cut a deal. I know how to handle people. I know how to negotiate a contract." Then he would have said, "I'm always in control. No one ever gets the best of me." Yet, when he meets Uncle Laban, all his boasting comes to nothing. Suddenly he's no longer in control. He's not on top anymore. He cut a deal, and ended up losing. He negotiated a contract, and Uncle Laban snookered him.

Do you see what God has done? He has touched Jacob at the point of his strength and humbled him. God does that to you and me-touching us at the point where we feel strongest. He brings us down so that we will understand our confidence must be in God alone. He wants us to know that even our strength must come from him.

3. So That Godly Character Would be Developed Through Unjust Treatment. Was Jacob treated unfairly here? Yes. Without question, Laban took advantage of his nephew from Beersheba. Was it fair for Laban to switch sisters on Jacob? No, it wasn't. What was the price Jacob had to pay? An extra seven years working for uncle Laban. Was that unjust? Yes. Then why did God allow it? Because God knew that was the only way He could develop godly character in Jacob's life.
So many people go through life saying, "It's not fair." True, but God never promised to be fair with you. He never promised that the world would treat you justly. If God would let His Son be crucified while He was innocent of any wrongdoing, do you think He will exempt you from unjust treatment? No way. The great danger for us is that in reacting to unjust treatment, we will become perpetual victims. First we get angry, then we get bitter, then we victimize ourselves. I know some people-even some Christians-who go through life as perpetual victims. Someone is always mistreating them, always misusing them, and always taking advantage of them. And they are angry with God for allowing it to happen.

For the most part, godly character is not developed in the good times of life, but in the bad. Godly character is developed in your life as you respond positively and creatively to unjust treatment. Isn't that what Rom 5:3-4 tells us? "We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." One thing leads to another-and what begins as injustice leads to perseverance which leads on to character which leads on to hope in God. But if you say, "Nobody can mistreat me," then what you are saying is, "I will not allow God to develop His character in my life." When you are in trouble and you feel circumstances piling up against you, the key to survival is: Be a student, not a victim. A victim says, "Why is this happening to me?" A student says, "What can I learn from this?"

4. So That His Plans For the Future Might Be Worked Out Through Human Weakness. When Jacob comes to Haran, he is penniless, homeless, and alone. When he leaves 20 years later, he is a rich man, with two wives, two maidservants, eleven sons, a host of servants, and an abundance of cattle, sheep, and donkeys. He comes with nothing, but leaves as a man of means. In between, however, he suffers repeated humiliation at the hands of Laban.

What's going on here? On one hand, God is using Laban to teach Jacob valuable lessons. On the other hand, God is keeping his promise to prosper Jacob and to raise up descendants who will carry on his name. Through adversity-and in spite of much personal difficulty-God is keeping His promise. In the wisdom of God, Jacob is being prospered by God at the very same time he is being disciplined by God. The result? Jacob has nothing to boast about when he leaves Haran. God has done it all. He has kept His promise and has allowed His servant to experience great hardship. Jacob will never be able to say, "I did it." He will only be able to say, "God did it in spite of me." As 1 Corinthians 1 says, God chooses the weak things of the world in order that he might confound the strong; He chooses the foolish to shame the wise, "so that no one may boast before him" (1:29).

Whatever it is that God wants to do in your life, let Him do it. My goal is to give everything I hold near and dear to me to the Lord so He doesn't have to take it from me, as He lovingly disciplines and molds me. The Lord knows that the only time we will be fulfilled in this life is when He is our all in all. He uses all kinds

of things to shape us and discipline us so that we will be all that He created us to be. Hebrews chapter 12 teaches that God disciplines those He loves. God will take us to Haran, for a day, a week, or a year. Whatever it takes for us to become the people He wants us to be.

Chapter 38

\"Desperate Housewives\" (Gen 29:31-35; Gen 30:1-24)

If you are old enough, you may remember the old television program, ABC's Wide World of Sports. It used to air on the weekends, in the days before ESPN. It would showcase sports like skiing, ice-skating, and track and field. What I remember most is its opening sequence. As the announcer declared that the program covered the globe in search of sports excellence, it showed us "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," with accompanying film clips of a guy winning a marathon for the victory part, and some poor guy wiping out on a ski slope during the agony part. Of course, what I recall most vividly from this show is the man wiping out on the ski slope.

It always seems that the agony of defeat is what is most memorable. Every year champions are crowned, yet we tend to forget who won last year's trophy. But we never seem to forget a memorable failure. Thus far in the book of Genesis, we have encountered a lot of defeat and failure. Even in the midst of apparent victory, there is failure. In the last few chapters, Isaac lost his eyesight, Esau lost his birthright, and Rebekah lost her favorite son. Most recently, Rachel lost to her older sister Leah who was able to marry Jacob first, and Leah lost to Rachel because Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Everyone seems to be losing. However, we must remember that, for the person who trusts in God, defeat is never final. In Gen 29:31 f, we will learn how God overcomes human sin and failure and turns them into something beautiful.

In 29:31, Moses writes, "Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." Our story begins with two desperate housewives. One is desperate for love; the other is desperate for children. These women are sisters and both are married to the same man. Ladies, can you imagine this scenario-you and your sister married to the same man? To make matters worse, your husband prefers one of you over the other. Furthermore, each of you is desperate for what the other has. From the start of this story, the tension is so thick you can cut it with a knife.

Moses records that Leah was "unloved" (lit. "hated"). This does not mean that Jacob hated her or didn't love her; rather he loved her less than Rachel. He simply wasn't "in love" with Leah; he was in love with her sister, Rachel. As a result, the God who favors the underdog caused Leah to bear children first. He opened her womb while He kept the womb of Rachel closed. God intervened in Leah's life because He "is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psa 34:18). Leah becoming a mother ensured that her stock would rise in Jacob's estimation, as well as the estimation of her family and society in general. This was God's protection plan for the less-loved Leah.

In the next four verses, Leah bears four consecutive sons! Beginning in 29:32, "Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, 'Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.'" Leah's first-born son was Reuben, which means "see, a son." His name actually shows what was going through Leah's mind. She is saying, "I have a son! My position is secure!" Leah saw Reuben's birth as confirmation that the Lord loved her and she made the assumption that now Jacob would love her as well. But this was not to be the case. Jacob was so much in love with her sister, Rachel, that he could never love her.

In 29:33, Leah "conceived again and bore a son and said, 'Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.' So she named him Simeon." Leah names her second son Simeon, whose name means "hear or listen." Now, obviously, she desperately wants to get Jacob's

attention. So she's saying, "Listen up man, here's another son. I'm going to name him "Listen" so you will pay attention to me. But, of course, Jacob still doesn't love her. Interestingly though, Leah credits the Lord for the births of both Reuben and Simeon. She understands that God is sovereign over the womb, so she acknowledges His hand in the births of her first two children.

In 29:34, Leah "conceived again and bore a son and said, 'Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.' Therefore he was named Levi." The name Levi means "attached or associated." Leah desperately wants to win her husband's love. She thinks that by giving him three sons he will become emotionally attached to her. But in this particular instance, three times is not the charm. Nonetheless, Levi was an influential child. The book of Leviticus, the tribe of Levi, and Israel's priesthood would come through Levi. Finally, in the last verse of chapter 29, Leah conceived again and bore her fourth son and said, "This time I will praise the LORD.' Therefore she named him Judah" (29:35a). Judah's name means, "praise." Praise is the perfect name for this son because the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come through the line of Judah.

The last phrase of 29:35 reads, "Then she stopped bearing." This is rather strange. In quick order, Leah gives birth to four boys. After delivering her fourth child, she attributes praise to the Lord. One would think the Lord would have given her more children. Why did He close her womb? The answer seems to be that, at this moment of her life, Leah came to terms with the fact that Jacob wasn't going to love her. She was hoping for his love but in absence of that the Lord said, "I love you-will I do?" It seems that, for this season, Leah became content with the Lord being her husband, so the Lord didn't add to her number. Instead, He allowed her to concentrate on Him.

Ladies, many of you have difficult marriages, at best. Maybe you can relate to Leah because your husband doesn't really love you. Oh, he may say he loves you, but he doesn't love you as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25). For others, your husband may be emotionally distant, verbally abusive, or sexually unfaithful. Maybe your husband has abandoned you, with children to raise. The Lord wants you to know that He is enough for you. When you feel discouraged and defeated, He will be there for you like no one else can. In this narrative of desperate housewives, God seeks to teach both sisters this valuable lesson.

Now before moving on, there are two extreme paradigms related to married couples and children.

• The first extreme is the mistaken notion that having children will strengthen weak marriages, or that having children will keep a marriage from falling apart. Within this paradigm are individuals who believe that by having children, they themselves will be made complete individuals. The Scripture does teach that children are a blessing from God (Psa 127:3); it does not, however, guarantee that those children will be the resolution to all or any of the personal problems of their parents. Having children is not absolutely essential to a happy marriage or relationship to the Lord. Our ultimate joy is in the Lord, not in our children. This needs to be shouted from the rooftops, because many of us have prioritized our children over our spouse and over our God. We may not want to admit this, but deep down we know it's true. Many married couples determine to stay together for their children. Now don't get me wrong, that's very admirable. What's not so admirable is failing to devote time to your spouse to build a healthy marriage.

• The second extreme is the selfish idea that having children will weaken strong marriages. Many couples believe that if children enter their lives their marriage will suffer. I would argue that this does not have to be the case. My marriage has actually grown stronger with the addition of children. I find that Lori and I appreciate and respect each other more and more as we observe the other as a dad or mom. I can tell you

that nothing makes me love Lori more than when I see her loving our children. It's a beautiful thing!

Chapter 30 begins with a bang: "Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or else I die.'" Rachel lets Jacob have it with both guns loaded! She is conveying her feminine emotions. She expresses to Jacob, "I have to have children. That's where my identity comes from. I'm hurting right now." Naturally, this is hyperbole for extreme grief (see 25:32; 27:46). Although loved by her husband, Rachel does not consider her life worth living without children (cf. 1Sa 1:7-12). Ironically, she dies in the process of bearing Benjamin (35:16-19). Rachel's response is natural, but God calls for our response to be supernatural. Instead of rejoicing with those who rejoice (Rom 12:15), Rachel became jealous of God's favor upon her older sister. This destroyed her from the inside out. Rachel's response was wrong; it immediately put Jacob on the defensive. Most men don't respond well to a strong-willed woman. It can turn the best of men passive.

In 30:2, Moses records Jacob's response to Rachel: "Then Jacob's anger burned against Rachel, and he said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'" The word "anger" (anaph) literally means "to breathe hard, be enraged, flare the nostrils." In Hebrew the phrase reads, "and the anger of Jacob was hot." He is steamed! Notice Jacob responds with a correct theological truth, acknowledging that he is not God, and hence cannot control Rachel's womb (cf. 2Ki 5:7). In his hot reply, Jacob seems to be implying, "It's not my fault you have no children. Don't go after me; go after God. I have kids everywhere." Obviously, this is not the way that a husband should respond to his wife.

Guys, have you ever noticed that when we don't have answers and can't easily fix things, we can have a tendency to get impatient and angry? I've had at least one occasion when my wife brought a problem to me and I immediately went into problem-solving mode, only to discover she didn't want her problem solved! She just wanted me to commiserate and empathize with her. And I'm like, "WHY?" Isn't the point to fix the problem? The answer is "No!"

At this moment in our story, Rachel didn't need a lecture on theology or gynecology. She needed the gentle and loving understanding of her husband and the encouragement that only his love could provide. Jacob should have followed the example of his father, Isaac, when Rebekah had been barren. He prayed for his wife and God blessed her with children (25:21). No such prayers are mentioned here. Instead, Jacob, in turn, became angry with Rachel. Guys, take it from me, this is always a bad move. Pro 15:1 says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Peter tells us that we are to "live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered" (1Pe 3:7).

After reflecting on Jacob's words, apparently Rachel realized that he was right, so she said to him: "'Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.' So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her" (30:3-4). You may be saying to yourself, "Déjà vu." In 16:1-4, when Sarah couldn't get pregnant, she told Abraham to sleep with Hagar. Rachel is following the example of Sarah. Now, I know what you may be thinking: Are we watching the Jerry Springer Show? The answer is, "yes and no." Ancient documents reveal that when a woman could not provide her husband with a child, she could give her female slave as a wife and claim the child of this union as her own. So this was culturally acceptable and completely legal. However, just because something is culturally and legally acceptable doesn't make it right for the believer. Abortion is both culturally and legally acceptable, yet it is dead wrong! Jacob should have been an example of faith and godliness to Rachel. He should have immediately rejected her suggestion and turned to the Lord in prayer.

Instead, with little or no protest, he passively agreed to Rachel's plan.

In 30:5-8, our story continues: "Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, 'God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.' Therefore she named him Dan ["vindicated"]. Rachel falsely assumes that God is pleased with her schemes by attributing Dan's birth to God. Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. So Rachel said, 'With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.' And she named him Naphtali" ["mighty wrestlings"]. Rachel adopts both of Bilhah's sons as if they are her own. Yet, God still hasn't given Rachel a son of her own. God doesn't reward jealous spirits. Rachel has only added to the conflict. With Bilhah's second child, Rachel's true heart is revealed in her response. In 30:8, Rachel says, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed." Can't you just hear the anger? Can't you just feel the venom between these two women? Rachel says, "Look, I haven't had children of my own but due to Bilhah I now have two children."

This is a classic example of "the end justifying the means." Sometimes when we sin and things work out, we justify it. We even attribute it to God! If we date an unbeliever and eventually the unbeliever gets saved, we think, "Yes, this was God's will all along." When we compromise our convictions and get a job promotion, we quote Rom 8:28 : "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." But God is not party to sin! Can He use us in spite of our sin? Of course! Can He still accomplish His purposes in the midst of our sin? You better believe it! But He would prefer not to…and He'll hold us accountable for our sin.

Now this is where the war of the womb intensifies. Since Rachel now has two surrogate children, Leah gets back into the jealousy game. Up until now, Leah has produced her own children. But now that she is no longer conceiving, she resorts to the same tactics as Rachel. Her motto is, "Anything you can do, I can do better." In 30:9■13, Moses writes, "When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, 'How fortunate!' So she named him Gad. [Gad means "fortune." This is like naming your kid "Vegas, Reno, or Lotto."] Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, 'Happy am I! [She sounds like Yoda here.] For women will call me happy.' So she named him Asher." Asher means "happy." Leah had temporarily turned Jacob's attention away from her sister and this made her happy. However, Leah seems to have lost her focus. She is now intent on her own happiness and what other women think and say. Obviously, this is not what God would have us to seek. Rather, He wants us to seek the approval of God not men (cf. Joh 5:44; Joh 12:42-43).

Our story shifts gears in 30:14-21. And it's a wild one! In 30:14, the scene begins: "Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah." Little Reuben comes upon some mandrakes. What are mandrakes, you ask? They are a plant that bears bluish flowers in winter and yellowish, plum-size fruit in summer. In ancient times, mandrakes were famed for arousing sexual desire (cf. Son 7:13) and for helping barren women conceive. The Hebrew word for mandrakes is almost identical to the word for "love," so many ancients called them "love apples." As we'll see, both sisters had their reasons for wanting these plants.

Our story continues in 30:15: "Then Rachel said to Leah, 'Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.' But she said to her, 'Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son's mandrakes also?' So Rachel said, 'Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.'" Rachel commands Leah to give her some of the mandrakes. Well, Leah's not about to help

Rachel, so she refuses her demand. Next, Leah levels a charge of husband stealing against Rachel. Now, this is beginning to sound like one of those afternoon soap operas, isn't it? Rachel, the favored wife, makes all of the bedtime appointments for Jacob, so she schedules Leah, in exchange for the mandrakes. I know-this is really sick! Fortunately, I don't write this material, I just preach it!

In 30:16, we see what happens: "When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him [this is an eager woman] and said, 'You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son's mandrakes.' So he lay with her that night." Most men don't require a wife to say, "You have to sleep with me." Most men are all too happy to oblige. However, Jacob has no passion for Leah. Another point also seems to be clear: Jacob lacks spiritual leadership. He is addressed once by Rachel ("Give me children") and once by Leah ("I have surely hired you"). Both statements reveal his passivity. Moses is revealing a home without a spiritual leader.

In 30:17-21, Moses writes, "God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, 'God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband.' So she named him Issachar ["wages" or "reward"]. Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. Then Leah said, 'God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.' So she named him Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah" [This is going to be one spoiled little girl. Dinah's name means "justice." It is a prophetic name. In 34:1-31, Dinah is raped and her brothers seek justice.]

Can you imagine how shocking all of this must have been for Rachel? Rachel, who has the mandrakes, remains barren for three more years; Leah, who doesn't have the mandrakes, has three more kids. She has a total of seven children-the number of perfection. This is more than all the other three women in this story. However, she never received what she desired most-Jacob's love. How sad! Leah spent all of these years trying to win her husband's approval, but it never happened. She spent the rest of her life in a loveless marriage, even though she had born half of the sons who would be the fathers of half the tribes of Israel.

It appears, in this brief account, that both sisters were initially caught up in the mandrake factor and were not seeking the Lord for their children, or anything else. That sounds a lot like us. Why is it that we are willing to trust in everything but the Lord? We'll spend hours on the phone with friends, but we won't spend five minutes on our knees before God. We'll read self-help books, but we won't read the Bible. We'll listen to Dr. Laura and Dr. Phil, but we won't inquire of the Lord.

In this story, both women wanted what the other had. Leah felt that having sons for Jacob would somehow earn his love, while Rachel was as desperate for children as Sarah had been before her. Giving birth degenerated into competition. I find it interesting that, despite their unique role in the kingdom of God, both Rachel and Leah were unhappy with their circumstances: Rachel: "If only I had sons like my sister!" Leah: "If only I had my sister's beauty and the love of Jacob." Have you ever met an "if only …" Christian? "If only I had a better husband or better wife." "If only I had a better job and more money." "If only I had a newer house and nicer furniture." "If only I didn't have these kids!" We would do well to remember the words of the apostle Paul: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation…I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Php 4:12-13 NIV).

Our story concludes in 30:22-24: "Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. So she conceived and bore a son and said, 'God [Elohim] has taken away my reproach.' She

named him Joseph, saying, 'May the LORD [Yahweh] give me another son.'" God remembered Rachel (cf. 8:1). Apparently, Rachel began to pray and God "gave heed to her." As a result, Joseph was born. Joseph became the son who saved his family (the Israelites) during the time of famine. He has been used as a type (an illustration) of Christ throughout the Bible.

The stress of the entire narrative is the movement from barrenness (29:31) to birth (30:22). For all the maneuverings of the sisters, it is still God who opens the womb. The point that God is making is this: Birth was not accomplished by human action but by God remembering Rachel. Rachel had to wait 14 years before she had her first child. Yet, we see that God came through for her.

God is faithful to accomplish His purposes, even through the deceitful actions of Laban and Jacob, and the jealous hatred of Jacob's two wives. God is a God of grace. He used these sinful people. If God can work in and through these wicked and impatient individuals, He can work in and through you! But to receive God's best results, He expects you to exercise patience and trust in Him.

The Children Of Jacob In Chronological Order By Wife And Wife's Maid

LEAH | BILHAH (Rachel's Maid) | ZILPAH (Leah's Maid) | RACHEL

Reuben (Gen 29:32)

Simeon (Gen 29:33)

Levi (Gen 29:34)

Judah (Gen 29:35)

Dan (Gen 30:4-6)

Naphtali (Gen 30:7-8)

Gad (Gen 30:9-11)

Asher (Gen 30:12-13)

Issachar (Gen 30:16-18)

Zebulun (Gen 30:19-20)

Dinah (Gen 30:21)

Joseph (Gen 30:22-24)

Benjamin (Gen 35:16-18)

"Turning the Tables" (Gen 30:25-43)

Coming home from work, a woman stopped at the corner deli to buy a chicken for supper. The butcher reached into a barrel, grabbed the last chicken he had, flung it on the scales behind the counter, and told the woman its weight. She thought for a moment. "I really need a bit more chicken than that," she said. "Do you have any larger ones?" Without a word, the butcher put the chicken back into the barrel, groped around as though finding another, pulled the same chicken out, and placed it on the scales. "This chicken weighs one pound more," he announced. The woman pondered her options and then said, "Okay. I'll take them both."

This humorous account reminds us that honesty is still the best policy. Unfortunately, in our world there are very few truly honest people. In Gen 30:25-43, we are going to read a story about Laban dishonestly turning the tables on Jacob. Fortunately, God has Jacob's back and He is able to protect and provide for Jacob in the midst of challenging times. The narrative can be divided into two sections. The first section

(30:25-34) is entirely dialogue; the second section (30:35-43) is entirely narrative report.

Our story begins in 30:25-26: “Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you.’” After the birth of Joseph, Jacob recognized that it was time to leave town. So Jacob called up all his courage and approached Laban, asking to be released from his authority. Unlike today, Jacob could not simply pack his bags and leave. The authority structure in this Eastern, extended family was far more complex and restrictive-as it is even today, some places in the Eastern culture. There was a shared ownership even of Jacob’s wives and children. To leave without his father-in-law’s permission and blessing could lead to outright war within the family clan.

Jacob had been living with Laban in Paddam Aram for 20 years (cf. 31:38). For 14 years he had worked for Laban, keeping his agreement in exchange for Laban’s two daughters (cf. 29:30; 31:41). Then another six years had elapsed before Jacob finally made the break. During this time, eleven sons and one daughter were born. It was time to leave. This town had become too small for both Jacob and Laban. Besides, Jacob is anxious to see God provide for his family. He was looking forward to the promised blessing of land. This flawed man has always had faith and been committed to the promise of land and to the God of Abraham (see 28:4, 13; 31:13).

At any rate, you’ve got to hand it to Jacob. He waited until God moved him (31:13). He was willing to hang in there with Laban. This points to the inner strength of Jacob. Most of us would have left town in a huff a long time before Jacob did. He persevered for 20 long years. Many of us would have persevered for 20 months, at most.

Today, like Jacob, you may be in a difficult work environment. Have you ever considered praying that the Lord might give you greater patience to endure your circumstances? Since you can’t change your boss or your coworkers, why not pray for the Lord to change you? This principle can also apply to your marriage. Only God can change your spouse; so why not let Him do His work in your loved one? Instead of worrying about your spouse, worry about yourself. There is plenty in each one of us that needs to be improved. I also see this principle as applicable in our commitment to the local church. Many Christians are dropping out of the local church because of disappointment or frustration. Those that remain devoted to the local church are all too comfortable leaving their home church at the drop of a hat. They do not take seriously God’s call on them to remain at the church He led them to. Some even become members and sign church covenants only to leave when their needs are not met or they become disillusioned with the decisions of the leadership.

All of these examples are quite tragic. When we opt for the easy way out by leaving our work environment, marriage relationship, or church, we’re never able to fully develop patience and endurance in ourselves. God sovereignly uses trying circumstances and exasperating people in our lives to make us into the people He wants us to be (Rom 8:29; 1Pe 1:6-7). If your work environment, marriage relationship, or home church is not what you want or expect them to be, that’s not necessarily a bad thing. God may be refining you and growing you in your dependence upon Him. I challenge you today to suck it up and persevere. May the Lord grant you grace to look to Him to see what He is teaching you.

In 30:27-31a, Laban responds to Jacob, “‘If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined that the LORD has blessed me on your account.’ He [Laban] continued, ‘Name me your wages, and I will give it.’ But he

[Jacob] said to him, 'You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?' So he [Laban] said, 'What shall I give you?'" In 30:27, Laban says, "If now it pleases you, stay with me." Literally, he says, "If I have found favor in your eyes, stay with me." Laban is kissing up to Jacob. Why? Laban claims to have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed him because of Jacob. Of course, the means were not proper but the truth was correct. Crafty Laban could see that he had a good thing going for him. He knew where his bread was buttered, so he wasn't all that anxious for Jacob to go. Sadly, Laban was averse to Jacob's leaving not because he loved his nephew, or son-in-law, but because he knew his prosperity was dependent on Jacob's presence. He observed that the blessing of heaven rested on Jacob and that his stock was significantly increased under Jacob's management. So Laban says to Jacob, "What will it take for you to stay? Just give me a price." What a typical business tactic! Laban was all about money and manipulation.

Amusingly, in 30:29-30, Jacob let Laban know rather candidly that it didn't call for an act of divination to discover why he had experienced material prosperity. Rather, it was fairly obvious that it was a combination of factors-Jacob's faithfulness and hard work and, I would add, especially God's favor and blessing resting upon him.

Before we go on, this principle deserves some elaboration. Clearly, Laban was an ungodly, ruthless man. And Jacob, for all his moral weakness, is a man of deep faith in God. Both men agree on a remarkable fact: God has blessed a bad man because he had a good man working for him (cf. 12:3; 39:2-6). Laban's increase came on Jacob's account. This concept occurs several times in the Bible. We see it when God promised to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous men could be found in the city (Gen 18:16-33). We see it when God prospers Potiphar because Joseph is part of his household (Gen 39:1-6). Even 1Co 7:12-14 contains a fascinating discussion of the problem of mixed marriages, where one partner is a believer and the other is not. In such a case, the unbelieving partner and any children that may be involved are "sanctified" through the believing partner. This means that the unbeliever(s) is blessed on account of the believer. The unbeliever experiences God's protection and provision because he/she is yoked with the believing partner. The same thought is also behind Jesus' allusion to believers as "the salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Mat 5:13-16). Salt purifies, preserves, and slows the process of decay, while light illuminates, dispels darkness, and uncovers reality.

Taken together, these passages illustrate the concept that Jacob and Laban are discussing in Gen 30. God blesses the people of the world because the people of God are nearby. If you are a believer, your marriage is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your workplace is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your school is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your family is different (and better) because you are there. The truth is: God wants to bless His children so much that He will even bless the deceitful people of the world through them. Truly our God is a gracious God. "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jam 1:17).

So how would your family describe you? Your boss? Your neighbors? Your fellow students? As believers, we should be a blessing wherever we go and in whatever we do! Is your world a better place because you're in it? Seriously, is Emmanuel a better church because you're a member? Is your family a better family because you're in it? Is your workplace better because you work there? Is your school better because you're enrolled? Lord willing, your life exudes blessing.

In 30:31b-33, Jacob responded to Laban's open-ended offer with these words: "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen." It's obvious that Jacob had thought carefully about what to say and how to say it. It seems clear that he spent time going over the possible responses and counter responses. Jacob asked for the speckled, spotted, and dark sheep. Why the speckled and spotted? It was a foolproof way to distinguish between the flocks of Laban and Jacob. It appeared to favor Laban since goats in the Middle East are generally black or dark brown (Son 4:1 b) and the sheep were nearly always white (cf. Psa 147:16; Son 4:2; Son 6:6; Dan 7:9). It gave Jacob an opportunity to put his trust in God. And as we'll discover in Gen 31, Jacob selected the spotted and speckled because of the Lord's instruction (31:10). Furthermore, Jacob's dream from God ensured him that the Lord would protect him from the dishonesty of Laban. This was a fine act of faith on Jacob's part. He cast himself wholly upon God's mercy.

From every angle it was a great deal for Laban. There were no loopholes. He could not lose! So in 30:34, "Laban said, 'Good, let it be according to your word.'" Likely, when he got out of Jacob's sight he began to smile, then chuckle, and then roar with laughter. He tried not to look smug but he could not help it. He inwardly sneered at the fool Jacob. He then stacked the deck against Jacob (30:35-36). Moses writes, "So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons. And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks." Laban makes sure that Jacob does not cheat. However, in doing so, he also gives God the perfect opportunity to shine in an impossible situation.

In 30:37-43, Jacob counters with a plan from God: "Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white which was in the rods. He set the rods which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the gutters, even in the watering troughs, where the flocks came to drink; and they mated when they came to drink. So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban; and he put his own herds apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Moreover, whenever the stronger of the flock were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the sight of the flock in the gutters, so that they might mate by the rods; but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's." Jacob is the first genetic engineer in history. I realize the first technique he utilized cannot be found in the Journal of Modern Agriculture. It was generally believed that by placing such "visual aids" before the animals as they were mating, it was possible to influence the appearance of their offspring. Interestingly, the Hebrew words for "poplar" and "white" are puns on the name Laban, which means "white." Jacob is practicing some "white magic" (pardon the pun), but it all comes from the Lord. The second technique-mating the stronger stock with weaker stock in order to produce a stronger stock-makes sense. But Jacob eventually had to admit that his success was not due to his brilliance as a genetic engineer, it was simply due to the goodness of God in his life (cf. 32:10).

Our story closes in 30:43, with these words: "So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys." Again, the blessings that Jacob has

received have everything to do with God. It was all due to God's good hand upon him. God blessed Jacob because God is committed to fulfilling His promise (cf. 31:9). As He often likes to do, God used seemingly foolish means to bring about His sovereign purposes. There was nothing magic in the striped sticks. Jacob acted in faith by doing what God told him to do, no matter how absurd it seemed to the natural mind (31:9-13). This wouldn't be the last time God would instruct his servants to do unusual things: e.g., putting a bronze serpent on a pole to heal people of snakebites; defeating Jericho by having the people march around the city seven times; and having men and women be forgiven of their sins simply by putting their faith in Jesus Christ who died on the cross 200 years ago to pay the penalty for sin. This passage reminds us that God uses the weak and foolish things of this world (1Co 1:20-21). Thus, it's very important that you and I recognize that when God blesses us, when things go right in our lives, when in our ministry there is success, it's not because of our planning, not because of our brilliance; it's because of God's grace.

This concluding verse reminds us that God can overrule wicked people and the "normal" course of events. When God wants to bless a man, He will bless him regardless of the circumstances! If God is on your side, it doesn't matter if the deck is stacked against you. If God is on your side, it doesn't matter if you are dealing with unscrupulous people. If God is on your side, He can take the solids of life and turn out a thousand speckled sheep. He can do it because He is God!

There are essentially two ways to approach life as a believer: with a superficial belief in God that requires you to take control of your life or with a deep faith in God that permits you to yield absolute control of your life to God. Everyday we are faced with a decision: the decision to enjoy God's peace, joy, and contentment or to experience anxiety, anger, and disillusionment. We must daily make a choice.

Do you remember the movie The Karate Kid? In that movie Mr. Miyagi (played by Arnold, of Arnold's Drive-in in the Happy Days TV series) is asked to teach Daniel Larusso karate. Daniel has been the victim of the bullies in the neighborhood. He wants revenge so he is eager to learn. So, in their first lesson Mr. Miyagi has Daniel paint the fence. In the next lesson, he has him wax his car ("wax on, wax off"). Daniel gets frustrated. While others are learning kicks and jabs, Daniel has painted a fence, waxed a car, swept a floor, and tried to catch a fly with chopsticks. Daniel feels that he is being cheated. "It's not fair!" he says. But, as we learn, Mr. Miyagi had a plan. He was teaching Daniel basic Karate moves by these exercises and was teaching him to concentrate. In the end (it is Hollywood), Daniel comes out the champion.

We sometimes face situations like Daniel Larusso. And we may feel that God has turned a deaf ear to us. We cry for justice and God tells us to "paint a fence." "It's not fair!" we cry. And we mope around and complain. Yet, God is up in heaven saying, "Remember, my son or my daughter, don't draw conclusions until the story is over." The reality is that our pain and frustration comes from our inability to see the big picture. In those 'unfair' times we must trust that the hand of God is working in unseen ways for our ultimate good! He is shaping us so that we will be more useful to Him and others.

Chapter 39

\"Turning the Tables\" (Gen 30:25-43)

Study By: Keith Krell

Coming home from work, a woman stopped at the corner deli to buy a chicken for supper.1 The butcher reached into a barrel, grabbed the last chicken he had, flung it on the scales behind the counter, and told the woman its weight. She thought for a moment. “I really need a bit more chicken than that,” she said. “Do you have any larger ones?” Without a word, the butcher put the chicken back into the barrel, groped around as though finding another, pulled the same chicken out, and placed it on the scales. “This chicken weighs one pound more,” he announced. The woman pondered her options and then said, “Okay. I’ll take them both.”

This humorous account reminds us that honesty is still the best policy.2 Unfortunately, in our world there are very few truly honest people. In Gen 30:25-43, we are going to read a story about Laban dishonestly turning the tables on Jacob. Fortunately, God has Jacob’s back and He is able to protect and provide for Jacob in the midst of challenging times. The narrative can be divided into two sections. The first section (30:25-34) is entirely dialogue; the second section (30:35-43) is entirely narrative report.3

Our story begins in 30:25-26: “Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you.’” After the birth of Joseph, Jacob recognized that it was time to leave town. So Jacob called up all his courage and approached Laban, asking to be released from his authority. Unlike today, Jacob could not simply pack his bags and leave. The authority structure in this Eastern, extended family was far more complex and restrictive-as it is even today, some places in the Eastern culture. There was a shared ownership even of Jacob’s wives and children. To leave without his father-in-law’s permission and blessing could lead to outright war within the family clan.4

Jacob had been living with Laban in Paddam Aram for 20 years (cf. 31:38). For 14 years he had worked for Laban, keeping his agreement in exchange for Laban’s two daughters (cf. 29:30; 31:41). Then another six years had elapsed before Jacob finally made the break. During this time, eleven sons and one daughter were born. It was time to leave. This town had become too small for both Jacob and Laban. Besides, Jacob is anxious to see God provide for his family. He was looking forward to the promised blessing of land. This flawed man has always had faith and been committed to the promise of land and to the God of Abraham (see 28:4, 13; 31:13).5

At any rate, you’ve got to hand it to Jacob. He waited until God moved him (31:13). He was willing to hang in there with Laban. This points to the inner strength of Jacob. Most of us would have left town in a huff a long time before Jacob did. He persevered for 20 long years. Many of us would have persevered for 20 months, at most.

Today, like Jacob, you may be in a difficult work environment. Have you ever considered praying that the Lord might give you greater patience to endure your circumstances? Since you can’t change your boss or your coworkers, why not pray for the Lord to change you? This principle can also apply to your marriage. Only God can change your spouse; so why not let Him do His work in your loved one? Instead of worrying

about your spouse, worry about yourself. There is plenty in each one of us that needs to be improved. I also see this principle as applicable in our commitment to the local church. Many Christians are dropping out of the local church because of disappointment or frustration. Those that remain devoted to the local church are all too comfortable leaving their home church at the drop of a hat. They do not take seriously God's call on them to remain at the church He led them to. Some even become members and sign church covenants only to leave when their needs are not met or they become disillusioned with the decisions of the leadership.

All of these examples are quite tragic. When we opt for the easy way out by leaving our work environment, marriage relationship, or church, we're never able to fully develop patience and endurance in ourselves. God sovereignly uses trying circumstances and exasperating people in our lives to make us into the people He wants us to be (Rom 8:29; 1Pe 1:6-7). If your work environment, marriage relationship, or home church is not what you want or expect them to be, that's not necessarily a bad thing. God may be refining you and growing you in your dependence upon Him. I challenge you today to suck it up and persevere. May the Lord grant you grace to look to Him to see what He is teaching you.

In 30:27-31a, Laban responds to Jacob, "'If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined6 that the LORD has blessed me on your account.' He [Laban] continued, 'Name me your wages, and I will give it.' But he [Jacob] said to him, 'You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?' So he [Laban] said, 'What shall I give you?'" In 30:27, Laban says, "If now it pleases you, stay with me." Literally, he says, "If I have found favor in your eyes, stay with me." Laban is kissing up to Jacob. Why? Laban claims to have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed him because of Jacob. Of course, the means were not proper but the truth was correct. Crafty Laban could see that he had a good thing going for him. He knew where his bread was buttered, so he wasn't all that anxious for Jacob to go. Sadly, Laban was averse to Jacob's leaving not because he loved his nephew, or son-in-law, but because he knew his prosperity was dependent on Jacob's presence. He observed that the blessing of heaven rested on Jacob and that his stock was significantly increased under Jacob's management. So Laban says to Jacob, "What will it take for you to stay? Just give me a price." What a typical business tactic! Laban was all about money and manipulation.

Amusingly, in 30:29-30, Jacob let Laban know rather candidly that it didn't call for an act of divination to discover why he had experienced material prosperity. Rather, it was fairly obvious that it was a combination of factors-Jacob's faithfulness and hard work and, I would add, especially God's favor and blessing resting upon him.

Before we go on, this principle deserves some elaboration. Clearly, Laban was an ungodly, ruthless man. And Jacob, for all his moral weakness, is a man of deep faith in God. Both men agree on a remarkable fact: God has blessed a bad man because he had a good man working for him (cf. 12:3; 39:2-6). Laban's increase came on Jacob's account. This concept occurs several times in the Bible. We see it when God promised to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous men could be found in the city (Gen 18:16-33). We see it when God prospers Potiphar because Joseph is part of his household (Gen 39:1-6). Even 1Co 7:12-14 contains a fascinating discussion of the problem of mixed marriages, where one partner is a believer and the other is not. In such a case, the unbelieving partner and any children that may be involved are "sanctified" through the believing partner. This means that the unbeliever(s) is blessed on account of the believer. The unbeliever experiences God's protection and provision because he/she is

yoked with the believing partner. The same thought is also behind Jesus' allusion to believers as "the salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Mat 5:13-16). Salt purifies, preserves, and slows the process of decay, while light illuminates, dispels darkness, and uncovers reality.

Taken together, these passages illustrate the concept that Jacob and Laban are discussing in Gen 30. God blesses the people of the world because the people of God are nearby. If you are a believer, your marriage is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your workplace is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your school is different (and better) because you are there. If you are a believer, your family is different (and better) because you are there. The truth is: God wants to bless His children so much that He will even bless the deceitful people of the world through them.7 Truly our God is a gracious God. "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jam 1:17).

So how would your family describe you? Your boss? Your neighbors? Your fellow students? As believers, we should be a blessing wherever we go and in whatever we do! Is your world a better place because you're in it? Seriously, is Emmanuel a better church because you're a member? Is your family a better family because you're in it? Is your workplace better because you work there? Is your school better because you're enrolled? Lord willing, your life exudes blessing.

In 30:31b-33, Jacob responded to Laban's open-ended offer with these words: "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen." It's obvious that Jacob had thought carefully about what to say and how to say it. It seems clear that he spent time going over the possible responses and counter responses. Jacob asked for the speckled, spotted, and dark sheep. Why the speckled and spotted? It was a foolproof way to distinguish between the flocks of Laban and Jacob. It appeared to favor Laban since goats in the Middle East are generally black or dark brown (Son 4:1 b) and the sheep were nearly always white (cf. Psa 147:16; Son 4:2; Son 6:6; Dan 7:9). It gave Jacob an opportunity to put his trust in God. And as we'll discover in Gen 31, Jacob selected the spotted and speckled because of the Lord's instruction (31:10). Furthermore, Jacob's dream from God ensured him that the Lord would protect him from the dishonesty of Laban. This was a fine act of faith on Jacob's part. He cast himself wholly upon God's mercy.8

From every angle it was a great deal for Laban. There were no loopholes. He could not lose! So in 30:34, "Laban said, 'Good, let it be according to your word.'" Likely, when he got out of Jacob's sight he began to smile, then chuckle, and then roar with laughter. He tried not to look smug but he could not help it. He inwardly sneered at the fool Jacob.9 He then stacked the deck against Jacob (30:35-36). Moses writes, "So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons. And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks." Laban makes sure that Jacob does not cheat. However, in doing so, he also gives God the perfect opportunity to shine in an impossible situation.

In 30:37-43, Jacob counters with a plan from God: "Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white which was in the rods. He set the rods

which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the gutters, even in the watering troughs, where the flocks came to drink; and they mated when they came to drink. So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban; and he put his own herds apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Moreover, whenever the stronger of the flock were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the sight of the flock in the gutters, so that they might mate by the rods; but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's." Jacob is the first genetic engineer in history. I realize the first technique he utilized cannot be found in the Journal of Modern Agriculture.10 It was generally believed that by placing such "visual aids" before the animals as they were mating, it was possible to influence the appearance of their offspring.11 Interestingly, the Hebrew words for "poplar" and "white" are puns on the name Laban, which means "white." Jacob is practicing some "white magic" (pardon the pun), but it all comes from the Lord.12 The second technique-mating the stronger stock with weaker stock in order to produce a stronger stock-makes sense. But Jacob eventually had to admit that his success was not due to his brilliance as a genetic engineer, it was simply due to the goodness of God in his life (cf. 32:10).13

Our story closes in 30:43, with these words: "So the man became exceedingly prosperous,14 and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys." Again, the blessings that Jacob has received have everything to do with God. It was all due to God's good hand upon him. God blessed Jacob because God is committed to fulfilling His promise (cf. 31:9).15 As He often likes to do, God used seemingly foolish means to bring about His sovereign purposes. There was nothing magic in the striped sticks. Jacob acted in faith by doing what God told him to do, no matter how absurd it seemed to the natural mind (31:9-13). This wouldn't be the last time God would instruct his servants to do unusual things: e.g., putting a bronze serpent on a pole to heal people of snakebites; defeating Jericho by having the people march around the city seven times; and having men and women be forgiven of their sins simply by putting their faith in Jesus Christ who died on the cross 200 years ago to pay the penalty for sin. This passage reminds us that God uses the weak and foolish things of this world (1Co 1:20-21). Thus, it's very important that you and I recognize that when God blesses us, when things go right in our lives, when in our ministry there is success, it's not because of our planning, not because of our brilliance; it's because of God's grace.16

This concluding verse reminds us that God can overrule wicked people and the "normal" course of events. When God wants to bless a man, He will bless him regardless of the circumstances!17 If God is on your side, it doesn't matter if the deck is stacked against you. If God is on your side, it doesn't matter if you are dealing with unscrupulous people. If God is on your side, He can take the solids of life and turn out a thousand speckled sheep. He can do it because He is God!

There are essentially two ways to approach life as a believer: with a superficial belief in God that requires you to take control of your life or with a deep faith in God that permits you to yield absolute control of your life to God. Everyday we are faced with a decision: the decision to enjoy God's peace, joy, and contentment or to experience anxiety, anger, and disillusionment. We must daily make a choice.

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2 Preaching Today Citation: Clark Cothern, Tecumseh, Michigan. Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 4.

3 Allen P. Ross, Creation & Blessing (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 518.

4 Gene A. Getz, Jacob: Following God Without Looking Back (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 103.

5 Bruce K. Waltke, Genesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 418.

6 Davis notes, “This verb occurs on only eleven occasions in the Hebrew Scriptures. In its strongest sense, the word indicates the practice of supernatural divination with the assumption being that the practitioner has the power to be able to learn secret things. The method of divination implied by this word is that of hydromancy, i.e., the discernment of hidden things by the appearance or motion of water (usually in a cup). The term also refers simply to the observation of signs and omens. Whichever meaning that Laban intends the word to mean, the practice of divination is strongly condemned in Scripture (Lev 19:26; Deu 18:10).” Barry C. Davis, Genesis (Portland, OR: Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class Notes, 2003).

7 Ray Pritchard, God’s Catfish: Genesis 29-31: http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=332.

8 Jacob trusted God for his prosperity. There were no retirement programs in these pre-Christian centuries. There were no Social Security taxes or benefits. But Jacob had something better than either of those. Jacob had God, and God is faithful to His promises. James Montgomery Boice, Genesis 12-36 Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1998]), 797.

9 R. Kent Hughes, Genesis: Beginning & Blessing (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 384.

10 By crossing the heterozygotes among themselves, Jacob would produce, according to the laws of heredity, twenty-five percent spotted sheep. Thus he multiplies his flock. Jacob has displayed ingenuity; he has not practiced deception. Jacob's knowledge of zoology is far from primitive. But perhaps such knowledge has been given him by God, just as his son's capacity to interpret dreams was a gift from God. Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 284. Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16-50, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 257.

11 See NET Study Notes.

12 Contra to this view, Youngblood suggests Jacob's scheme was saying, in effect, "I'll give Laban some of his own medicine!" Jacob had tricked his brother Esau (Edom, "red") by offering him some red stew; he would now attempt to trick his uncle Laban ("white") by making use of white branches. He writes, "In many ways, Jacob and Rachel were two of a kind. She had bargained for some mandrakes, superstitiously hoping that by eating them she would become pregnant (30:14-15). God honored her desire-but in spite of, not because of her foolish superstition (30:22-23). Similarly, God honored Jacob's desire for large flocks, but-again-in spite of his superstitious maneuvering and not because of it (31:4-10)." Ronald F. Youngblood, The Book of Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 226. Whether Jacob sinned or not is disputable.

13 Woodrow Kroll, Getting Ready to Leave Town: http://www.backtothebible.org/radio/today/24734.

14 The Hebrew verb means "to break out," the same verb used in God's promise at Bethel (see 28:14), showing that the promise has been fulfilled. Waltke, Genesis, 420.

15 Sailhamer writes, "Although the writer does not specifically state it within the narrative, the passage is surely to be read as an example of the Lord's promise in chapter 28 to be with Jacob during his sojourn in the East. Jacob's clever use of the peeled poplar branches was not so much intended to demonstrate his resourcefulness as it was to further the theme of God's continued faithfulness to his word. The clue to the meaning of the passage is the last verse of the chapter (v. 43), where a summary of the whole narrative is given. The summary recalls quite clearly God's blessing of both Abraham (12:16) and Isaac (26:14) and thus puts the events of this chapter within the larger context of the themes developed throughout the book, namely, God's promise of blessing and his faithfulness to that promise. Jacob's wise dealings with Laban then are an example of the way God caused him to prosper during this sojourn. Further confirmation that such is the sense of the narrative comes from the words of Jacob himself in the next chapter. Looking back he told his wives that it was God who had taken Laban's herds and given them to him (31:9)." John H. Sailhamer, Genesis: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed. Cf. Ross, Creation & Blessing, 518.

16 Ross writes, "Success comes from God. How a believer competes with a nonbeliever is important to the faith. It is not a matter of fighting fire with fire, playing his or her game, or turning the tables. Rather, it is a matter of the acknowledging that the true source of success is God and then engaging in practices that are compatible with that belief." Ross, Creation & Blessing, 522.

17 Pritchard, God's Catfish.

Chapter 40

\"Between a Rock and a Hard Place\" (Gen 31:1-55)

A pastor was walking down the street one day when he noticed a very small boy trying to press a doorbell on a house across the street. The boy wasn't very tall and the doorbell was too high for him to reach. After watching the boy's efforts, the pastor walked across the street, stepped up behind the little fellow, and placed his hand kindly on the child's shoulder. He then leaned over and gave the doorbell a solid ring. Crouching down to the child's level, the pastor smiled and asked, "And now what, my little man?" To which the boy replied, "Now we run!"

The reason I find this story so funny is because I did plenty of this when I was a little boy. In fact, I performed these antics into my teenage years (just kidding!). Obviously, this prank contains elements of adrenalin, deceit, and fear. Fortunately, the consequences are usually minimal…at least for me they were. Other acts of deceit can have great consequences. In Genesis 31, Jacob and Rachel are guilty of exercising deceit and fear, yet through it all, God shows Himself faithful, despite their shortcomings.

Our story begins in 31:1-2: "Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, 'Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth.' Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly." Both Laban and his sons were unhappy with Jacob's success. Essentially, Laban's sons were accusing Jacob of stealing their inheritance. And from their perspective, it was disappearing right before their very eyes. As a result, they became envious and bitter toward Jacob. Laban also treated Jacob differently. Six years earlier, Laban was willing to pay any price to have Jacob stay and care for his flocks (30:28, 31). But now Laban's attitude was quickly changing.

God's blessings upon a believer can illicit one of two responses in those around them: a hunger for God or an ungodly envy. Sadly, when a Christian experiences blessings, it is often common for other believers to become envious (Pro 14:30; Jam 4:1-3). When a church experiences numerical growth, other churches can become envious and critical of that church. This should not be! In Rom 12:15 a, Paul tells us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice." We should always seek to celebrate the success of others. As we learn to do this, God is pleased and we remain spiritually healthy.

In 31:3, the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." The last recorded revelation that Jacob had received from God was 20 years earlier, while he was still in the land of promise (28:10-22). But now Jacob receives a divine directive to return to the Promised Land (cf. 28:15). He was directed and assured by God. This was an impressive revelation. Yet, we must remember that there was a 20-year gap. Although many of the events we read about in the OT are captivating and miraculous, the truth is, we live in the most exciting days this world has ever seen. The primary reason for this is that we have all 66 books of the Bible. This is God's full revelation to man and He will reveal Himself through His Word whenever we will take the time to listen. Will you do so today?

In 31:4-13, Jacob laid out the facts to Rachel and Leah about Laban and God's divine providence. First, he describes the tension with Laban. "So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, and said to them, 'I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times" (31:4-7a). Obviously, this is an unhealthy work

environment. Yet, Jacob sought to persevere and honor God (1Pe 2:18-23). You may be in a difficult situation with your boss-God would have you honor him or her and seek to endure until He brings about a change in your environment.

Fortunately, despite Jacob's challenges, God proved Himself faithful. In 31:7b-13, Jacob testifies: "However, God did not allow him to hurt me. If he spoke thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped. Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me. And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled, and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.'" Jacob was the kind of guy who follows you into a revolving door and comes out ahead of you. But it wasn't his own scheming that brought him prosperity and protection. It was the blessing of God! Psa 118:6 "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (NIV) It is also worth noting that God told Jacob to go back to Bethel, back to the place where he first encountered the Lord in a personal way. Sometimes the way forward is to go back! (See Rev 2:4-5)

In 31:14-16, we see that Rachel and Leah agreed with Jacob's assessment. The sisters said to him, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you." Seven times in 31:4-16, Jacob and his wives mention God by name. Clearly, He is the One that is behind every scene. This may be the first time in quite a while when the sisters Leah and Rachel agreed on anything. They can agree in uniting against a common adversary: their father, Laban! Why? Because Laban had stolen their inheritance, treated them like foreigners, sold them, and used up the money from their dowry. They submitted themselves to Jacob's leadership. The sisters responded with these words: "Do whatever God has said to you." By their submission, they were ultimately coming under the safety net of God's leadership and authority. Men, we need to be hearing from God. And women need to submit to their husbands, as to the Lord (Eph 5:22).

In 31:17-18, Moses writes, "Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac." It was nearly 300 miles from Haran to the mountains of Gilead. The journey must have been exhausting for Jacob, knowing that Laban might be pursing him from behind in order to kill him, and Esau, his brother, might be waiting ahead, also in order to kill him. Talk about between a rock and a hard place.

In 31:19-21, Jacob and Rachel deceived Laban in their departure. "When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. And Jacob deceived [lit. "stole the heart of"] Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead." Rachel stole Laban's household idols while Laban was busy at work shearing his sheep. These "idols" (teraphim) were small figurines (two to three inches long) used in divination and to bring good luck. The question is: "Why did Rachel take these idols?" There are several possibilities: (1) To guarantee fertility. (2) For divination and protection during the journey to Canaan, possibly to prevent Laban from using them to catch them (cf.

30:27). (3) In order to establish a future claim on Laban's family inheritance. While we cannot be sure of the exact reason, it seems likely that Rachel simply took them for her own protection and blessing. This is confirmed in 35:2 when God commanded Jacob to "get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves." It seems more than likely that Rachel may well have been attached religiously to these false gods as she left her father's house.

It is curious that Rachel, and not Leah, almost always turned out to be Jacob's greatest hindrance in life. In spite of the fact that Rachel had a growing trust in God, she was reluctant to make a complete break from her idolatrous past. We aren't really any different. We may not be putting our trust in idols, but we still struggle at times with putting our full confidence in God and His Word.

Jacob left without informing Laban. Jacob was doing God's will by returning to the land of promise, but he was not doing it in God's way. He was acting in the flesh rather than being led by the Spirit. We can get so caught up in doing God's will that we forget to ask how we are to do God's will. Our methods must always be consistent with God's Word if our actions are to be honoring to God and rewarded by God (cf. Heb 11:6). Jacob was afraid of Laban when he should have been afraid of God. Pro 29:25 says, "The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted." Who are you afraid of today? What circumstances are causing you anxiety? God wants you to release this to Him.

Our story continues with a confrontation between Laban and Jacob (31:22-55). In 31:22-24, Moses writes: "When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, then he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days' journey, and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead. God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, 'Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad.'" Catching up with Jacob was not so easy; he had a three-day head start. It took Laban and his men seven days to finally overtake Jacob. But before he did, the Lord appeared to Laban in a dream and warned him "not speak to Jacob either good or bad." This is rather astonishing! God Himself appeared to Laban, a wicked unbeliever, and provided him counsel and direction (31:29; cf. Abimelech in 20:3). Indeed, God is a gracious and sovereign God.

In 31:25-42, the tension builds to a high point. Moses writes, "Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead. Then Laban said to Jacob, 'What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? [Laban accuses Jacob of deceiving him. If this isn't the pot calling the kettle black!] Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.' Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?'" Laban plays the part of the offended father and grandfather whose deep affection for his daughters and grandchildren caused him great emotional pain when he found they had secretly left without any good-byes. Then he really overplays his hand when he says that if he'd only known, he would have thrown a big going-away party. Right! Of course the big issue with Laban is, "Why did you steal my gods?" As par for the course, Laban is concerned about himself, his wealth, and his false gods.

In 31:31-42, Jacob responds to Laban: I left town…'because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself.' For Jacob did not know

that Rachel had stolen them. So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel's saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them. She said to her father, 'Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me.' So he searched but did not find the household idols." Now I've heard of having someone under your thumb, but under your seat??? Rachel was sitting on Laban's gods! What a comical indictment against idolatry! The idols were already nothing gods, but they became unclean and suffered humiliation when Rachel, who claimed to be unclean, sat on them while menstruating (31:34-35; cf. Lev 15:20).

After the search comes up empty, Jacob unleashes 20 years of pent-up frustration. Beginning in 31:36: "Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, 'What is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night." In this section (31:31-42), Jacob shows himself to be a faithful man.

• Jacob defended his integrity (31:31-37). In response to Laban's accusations, Jacob asked: "What is my transgression? What is my sin?" He had confidence that he was above reproach in his integrity. This is reminiscent of 1Pe 2:12 : "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

• Jacob defended his character (31:38-41). (1) He served Laban for 20 years (cf. Col 3:22-24). (2) He was a source of blessing to Laban's flocks. (3) He bore the cost of lost or stolen animals. It was customary for a shepherd to bring the carcass of a sheep to the owner as proof that the animal was actually killed by wild animals. Having provided proof, the shepherd would be freed from personal responsibility for the loss. But Jacob says he didn't even do this. Instead, he went the extra mile-he replaced any lost or stolen animals from his own flock. Jacob was the model worker. He took care of the sheep, absorbed losses, and withstood terrible weather. Notice something here: Laban does not disagree with Jacob. He can't argue with the integrity and example of Jacob's life (cf. Tit 2:9-10). (4) He more than paid for his wives and flocks:14 years for Leah and Rachel and 6 years for the flocks. Jacob was a man of integrity and character. Even in difficult, unfair, and trying times he faithfully kept his word. He did his best in whatever he had to do. And God was pleased.

• Jacob testified to the sovereignty of God (31:42). (1) God protected Jacob from Laban. (2) God saw Jacob's hardship and hard work (cf. 2Ch 16:9). (3) God rebuked Laban in a dream. Jacob's words in 31:42 summarize his whole life in Harran: God has been especially gracious and sovereign.

God often sends difficult people to us who have the peculiar gift of bringing out the worst in us. Those difficult people force us to come to grips with our hidden weaknesses. Jacob had lived his life relying on

trickery and deceit to get what he wanted. Uncle Laban turned the tables on Jacob, forcing him to take a dose of his own medicine. After Haran, Jacob would at least think twice before cheating someone else. He now knows how Esau felt. God is now ready to use Jacob's life in a greater fashion.

Our story concludes in 31:43-55: "Then Laban replied to Jacob, 'The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me.' Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. Jacob said to his kinsmen, 'Gather stones.' So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. [Galeed ("witness heap") is the name from which Gilead came.] Laban said, 'This heap is a witness between you and me this day.' Therefore it was named Galeed, and Mizpah ["The witness or watchtower"], for he said, 'May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.' [It is impossible to avoid noticing the curious misconception of the term "mizpah" which characterizes its use today. As used for a motto on rings, Christmas cards, and even as the title of an organization, it is interpreted to mean union, trust, fellowship; while its original meaning was that of separation, distrust, and warning. Two men, neither of whom trusted the other, said in effect: "I cannot trust you out of my sight. The Lord must be the watchman between us if we and our goods are to be kept safe from each other."] Laban said to Jacob, 'Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.' So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac. [Laban had two deities in mind when he said "The God of Abraham and the god of Nahor," as the Hebrew plural verb translated "judge" indicates. Jacob swore by the "fear of his father Isaac," which indicates that he was worshipping the God of his fathers. Laban swore by the pagan god his fathers worshipped.] Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain. Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place."

The long and stormy relationship between Laban and Jacob had finally come to an end! This is the last mention of Laban we have in the Bible. Laban is an unfortunate example of a worldly, covetous man-one who knows about the true God. He had seen the reality of God in the life of Jacob, along with the power of God in His blessing and protection of Jacob. He himself had even enjoyed many of the blessings of God, through his relationship to Jacob. In spite of all this, he chose to continue in his idolatry and self-centered, self-absorbed lifestyle. Rather than seeking to follow the truth of God's plan, as witnessed by Jacob, he merely resented and coveted the blessing of God on Jacob. In his vigorous pursuit of worldly success, he lost his family, his wealth, and his hope of eternal life in Christ. He chose poorly!

In a study in Cleveland, Ohio, coroners examined the hearts of 15 assault victims who died after being attacked, even though their wounds were not life threatening. Charles Hirsch, one of the researchers, concluded that 11 of the 15 victims had torn fibers and lesions in their hearts, most likely caused by mortal fear. They died because of what they feared might happen, but didn't.

That study proved that "scared to death" is more than a casual expression. If fear can put a stop to life, think what else it can put a stop to. It can cancel out opportunities that God sets before us. God opens a door in front of us and we freeze-we're afraid to walk through. We are afraid of being alone, afraid we'll

have no resources, and afraid we'll look foolish when we fail. But even if we do fail, God has promised to cause even our failures to be for our good. When God promises to be with us wherever we go, there should be no fear that keeps us from walking through His open doors. Is there an open door that you're afraid to walk through? Don't be. Trust God-you have nothing to fear with Him by your side.

Chapter 41

\"Unfinished Business\" (Gen 32:1-32)

What would you say is the greatest victory in the world? Would you think of some military victory with some famous general, or would you think of D-Day, or when Germany finally surrendered to the Allied Forces? Would you think of the Gulf War? Would you think of a political victory or sporting achievement such as the Seahawks winning the Super Bowl? Maybe you are thinking in terms of a financial success or of an emotional breakthrough? What would you think in terms of personal achievement that would be a great victory?

Everyone enjoys a great victory because everyone wants to be a winner. But very few people want it badly enough to endure the discipline and struggle that is required. In Genesis 32, Jacob experiences the greatest victory of his life. But it occurs in a most unusual fashion. The great schemer comes to the realization that in order to truly win you must lose.

Our story begins in 32:1-2: “Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them, ‘This is God’s camp.’ So he named that place Mahanaim.” Jacob left Laban and went on to Canaan. He did this in obedience to God’s command (see 31:3). As he was traveling along, “the angels of God met him.” These angels must have resembled the angels Jacob had seen at Bethel (28:12) for him to have recognized them as angels. They joined Jacob’s company of travelers for his protection (cf. Psa 34:7). This is the reason for the name “Mahanaim” (i.e., “double host” or “double camp”). These angels were apparently intended to reassure Jacob of God’s protective presence.

As a result of this angelic encounter, Jacob becomes aware of his need to make things right with Esau. For 20 years he has lived with the memory of how he cheated his brother-not once, but twice. For 20 years he has wondered whether Esau still plans to kill him (cf. 27:41). For 20 years he has dreamed of going home, but each time his dream becomes a nightmare when he thinks of Esau. But now Jacob’s conscience is awakened and the wrong he did is made clear. It is time to mend the relationship that has been torn through his deception.

Through various circumstances, followers of Christ are driven by God’s Spirit to make right relationships that are wrong. It may involve an apology, an act of restitution, or a simple phone call. Is there a name that has popped into your head again and again? Is this someone with whom you have a fractured relationship? If so, I suggest that God is giving you an assignment…He is calling you to attempt to be reconciled with this person.

In Mat 5:23-24, Jesus told his disciples, “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” Jesus is suggesting that our fellowship with God can never be complete until we have done what we can to be reconciled with people we have wronged.

Paul fleshes this principle out further in Rom 12:18, where he writes, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” Our attempts at reconciliation are usually successful when both parties are seeking to be aligned in Christ. But not everyone we’ve offended is a believer. Sometimes there will be people who will not be satisfied until they have made us “pay.” They don’t want a renewed

relationship…they want revenge. In these cases we can only do what God has called us to do. We can seek reconciliation, we can admit our wrongdoing, and we can seek to make restitution where it is appropriate, and if that is not enough we must go on and entrust that person to God. We will be set free even if the other remains in bondage.

In 32:3-21, Jacob makes preparations for meeting Esau. In 32:3-8, Jacob focuses on physical concerns. Moses writes, “Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He also commanded them saying, ‘Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.’” In seeking to reconcile himself to his brother, Jacob first humbles himself by calling himself Esau’s “servant.” He also calls Esau “lord.” Jacob also hopes to impress Esau with his greatness. He wants it made known that he is wealthy and is not returning for the inheritance.

In 32:6-8: “The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, ‘We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.’ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; for he said, ‘If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape.’” In spite of the angels of God traveling with Jacob and serving as his bodyguards, Jacob falls back into fear. So he divides his people into two groups as a precaution when he hears Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob’s reaction to Esau’s apparently hostile advance against him was to try to protect himself. This was Jacob’s standard response to trouble. Up until now, Jacob has been able to handle his problems himself by hook or by crook. But now God has brought him to the end of his natural resources. Jacob recognizes that this time his scheming ways would not be enough. So, he calls on God for help.

In 32:9-12, we move from Jacob’s physical concerns to his spiritual concerns. In these four verses, Jacob offers up one of the greatest prayers in the Bible. “Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,’ I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. For You said, ‘I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.’” Reflecting on Jacob’s prayer, I see four elements for us to implement in our prayer lives.

1. Acknowledge God. Jacob addressed the Lord as the God of his “father Abraham” and his “father Isaac” (32:9a). This is significant. Jacob was beginning to understand more fully his place in God’s divine plan. His prayer is the divine pattern of many biblical prayers-to acknowledge who God really is! When Nehemiah prayed about the sad condition of his people in Jerusalem, he lifted up his voice to God and said, “I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God” (Neh 1:5 a). When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He said, “Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name’” (Mat 6:9). Whenever we pray, we ought to acknowledge God for who He is! To glibly walk into His presence demonstrates that we lack an understanding of His greatness. He is a king to be honored. Therefore, we must acknowledge Him as such.

2. Pray God's Word. Jacob prays on the basis of two things:1) God told him to return to his homeland, and 2) God promised to bless him (32:9b). He isn't appealing to God on the basis of his own performance, but solely on the basis of God promises (cf. Rom 4:20-21). Jacob stands on the promises of God because he knows that God keeps His Word. Many of our prayers fall short because there is none of God's Word within them. This is because there is so little of God's Word in us. Yet, both prayer and God's Word are essential. Would you ever fly on an airplane with one wing? Of course not! The two wings of the Christian life are prayer and God's Word. God speaks to me through the Scriptures; I speak to Him through prayer. Today, will you make a commitment to pray through the Scriptures as you read them? You may have to read less but your prayer life will grow. You will become a dual-weapon in the spiritual realm.

3. Admit your unworthiness and God's goodness. Jacob's arrogant self-confidence is gone and he finally acknowledges that he is completely unworthy of God's lovingkindness and faithfulness (32:10). This is a big step for Jacob. He has come to the point of recognizing that he stands by God's mercy alone. Sometimes we have to hit bottom before we can see our true condition. Only as we recognize that we stand by mercy will we be prepared to act mercifully toward others. When you pray to the Lord, it is critical that you confess your sin, keep short accounts with Him, and acknowledge that you are undeserving and nothing without Him.

4. Pray specifically. Jacob asks God to save him from the hand of his brother (32:11). He doesn't mince words…he's clear and specific. Unlike his actions before going to live with Laban, when he took matters into his own hands to wrest away Isaac's blessing from Esau (27:1-29), Jacob now realizes that he must depend totally on God in order to secure his own well-being. It is worth noting that Jacob requests God's protection for himself and his family. He's showing some semblance of concern for someone other than himself. We must follow Jacob's example and learn to pray specific requests. When we do so, God tends to respond with specific answers.

Before moving on, we should take note of two more things. First, Jacob prays to God in the midst of an interpersonal conflict. Often, strained relationships can drive us to our knees in prayer. When this happens, we are changed and often the individual that we are in conflict with is also changed. Prayer softens our heart and can soften the heart of another. Prayer can change sour attitudes and dissolve resistance. Prayer has been called the oil that makes the engine of reconciliation run. Prayer brings God's power into our lives and the lives of those around us. Second, Jacob should have turned to prayer earlier in this process. It seems Jacob prayed as a last resort. Thus, Jacob fears Esau (32:11) and is "greatly afraid and distressed" (32:7). This did not have to be! Prayer diminishes anxiety. Many of us worry because we have chemical or emotional problems, but most of us worry because we don't pray. Today, will you make a commitment to pray for yourself and the person you are in conflict with? Will you also pray first, instead of as a last resort? As you do, it will go well with you.

In 32:13-21, Jacob sends presents before meeting Esau. Moses records these words: "So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys." [A total of 550 animals.] He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, 'Pass on before me, and put a space between droves.' He commanded the one in front, saying, 'When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?' then you shall say,

‘These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.’ Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, ‘After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; and you shall say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.’ For he said, ‘I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.’ So the present passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp.”

Jacob assigned a servant to each herd. This was a very generous gift! He wasn’t going to skimp in his effort to be reconciled with Esau. He truly wanted to make things right with his brother. He instructed them in what to do and say. After praying a Godly, exemplary prayer only a short time ago, Jacob reverts to his cowardly and self-serving ways. He sends his servants, his children, and his wives before him. He wants them to protect him when he should have been the one at the head of the procession protecting them and putting his trust in God.

Why did Jacob send such an impressive gift to Esau? As a bribe or payoff for his sin of deception and theft? Possibly (Pro 21:14), but it could also have been an act of restitution and reconciliation (Eze 33:14-16). Restitution is critical for reconciliation. It is the surest evidence of a truly changed heart. A person who wants to reconcile but does not want to make restitution for sin is not really repenting. In Luke 19, we read the story of Zacchaeus. One of the evidences of his sincerity was when he said, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luk 19:8-9 a).

Becoming a believer does not get you “off the hook” for making restitution. Like Zacchaeus, restitution was evidence that his repentance was sincere. A person who does not want to make the past right is not a mature believer. Do you need to make some kind of restitution? Apologize to a former spouse? Pay for or return something that was stolen? Correct slanderous statements you made? Admit a wrong you committed? Ask forgiveness from your children that you treated poorly? Restitution shows that we are serious about our apology. It shows that we recognize the wrong done to another. Restitution is often the foundation on which the bridge of reconciliation is built.

It is worth noting that the word “appease” (kaphar) illustrates a biblical theme. The Bible says that Jesus Christ “appeased” (i.e., “propitiated”) God’s wrath against our sins (see Dan 9:24; Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1Jn 2:2; 1Jn 4:10). In this context, Esau was angry with Jacob. Jacob sends a costly gift ahead, hoping to turn aside Esau’s wrath. Of course, this illustration is not perfect. Esau’s wrath is a matter of bad temper and resentment. God’s wrath is a matter of justice and righteousness. It is a determination to wipe sin out of existence. Jacob’s gift is one of his own providing. The blood of Jesus Christ is provided by God. But the essential idea of propitiation is illustrated for us here. God is angry with sin. We are not acceptable to Him as we are. There is only one way in which the anger of God against our sin can be turned away: We must send ahead of us the blood of Jesus Christ. God accepts the gift and then, through the blood of His Son, accepts us and we see Him face-to-face. In Jacob’s case, it is reconciliation with his brother that he wants.

In 32:22-32, we transition into a new scene. Moses writes, “Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had” (32:22-23). The fact that Jacob “arose” indicates he had already gone to bed. Questions must have been flooding his mind. Would Esau accept his gift? What if he didn’t? What should he do next? No doubt unable to sleep, he awakened his

family members and ushered them and his possessions across the river.

In 32:24-26, Moses records some of the most fascinating words he has ever penned: “Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (32:24). It was when Jacob was alone, having done everything he could to secure his own safety, that God came to him. God has arranged the circumstances so that He can get Jacob alone at a moment when he feels completely helpless. God then comes to Jacob as a wrestler to teach him how to fight like a man. This is only fitting since Jacob had spent most of his adult life wrestling with people-Esau, Isaac, Laban, and even his wives.

Jacob was standing between his past struggle with Laban and the impending struggle with Esau. God comes at this time because He wants Jacob to realize that his real struggle all along has been with God. Notice that we are not told that Jacob wrestled with a man…the man wrestled with Jacob. Is this significant? I think so. It shows us that God is the initiator of this conflict. God was bringing Jacob to the end of himself. He was leading him to a settled conviction that God was superior to him and that he must submit to God’s leadership in his life (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

Unfortunately, the greatest problem God has with most of us is getting us to slow down long enough to hear His voice. We’re always on the move, always talking, never stopping just to listen. So what does God do? If we won’t slow down on our own, He’ll step in and slow us down. With a pink slip. Or a midnight phone call. Or a visit to the emergency room. Or a family crisis. Or a financial disaster. Or a serious illness. Or any one of a thousand other crises that break into our little routine and force us to stop what we are doing and begin to listen to God.

“When he [the man] saw that he had not prevailed against him [Jacob], he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him” (32:25). After wrestling with Jacob all night, the man merely “touched” Jacob’s thigh socket and dislocated his leg. But why did he touch Jacob’s thigh? Because the thigh is the largest and strongest muscle of the body. By touching his thigh, the man was deliberately crippling Jacob at the point of his greatest strength. It was an acted-out parable, a lesson whose moral Jacob could not miss: When you wrestle with God, you always lose. In one sense, this is an “unfair” fight because at the end God cheats. He cheats! Touching Jacob’s thigh was “unfair.” At least that’s the way it looks from the purely human perspective. According to the rules of wrestling, that isn’t “fair.” Please understand. God is just and right in all He does. He never cheats. But sometimes it appears that God is unfair in the way he treats us. How many of us have gone through a difficult time and seen life crumble around us, and we’ve cried out, “God! That’s not fair.” And the answer comes down from the Almighty, “My child, I’m not playing by your rules.” That’s such an important lesson to learn. God doesn’t play by your rules. That’s why things happen in your life that, on the surface, appear to be unfair. God is never unfair in the absolute sense. But in order to accomplish His greater purposes, He is willing to do things in your life that may appear to you to be unfair. God’s answer is always, “My child, I love you more than you know, but I’m not playing by your rules.”

“Then he [the man] said, ‘Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.’ But he [Jacob] said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’” (32:26). This is a new determination. Up until this point in Jacob’s life, he used all his strength and ability to achieve his own ends. For the first time, he’s come to the end of his own resources. Before this night, Jacob was running the show. Now he realizes that without God, he’s nothing. All his huffing and puffing has brought him to realize how helpless he is when compared with the strength of God. Whereas before he used his wits to deceive Esau and trick Isaac, now he is learning the great lesson of Zec 4:6, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.”

The man requested to be released but Jacob refused to let Him go. Jacob has been reduced to the place where all he can do is hold on to the Lord with everything he has. Jacob can't fight anymore, but he can hold on, which isn't such a bad place to be. He requested that the man bless him. Jacob, the schemer, had finally come to realize that the blessing of God must be obtained from God Himself, and this must be done by clinging to Him in helpless dependence, not by trying to manipulate Him. After wrestling all night, Jacob became a man. He earned some spiritual chest hair. Jacob demonstrates strength and persistence. Jacob prevailed, in the sense of obtaining his request, by acknowledging his dependence and cleaving to God as his deliverer. He is sincere in his need for God's help (32:26; cf. Joh 15:5).

In 32:27, Jesus says to Jacob, "'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.'" Now this may seem like a strange question coming from the Lord! Didn't He know who Jacob was? Of course He did. The question is, "Jacob, do you know who you really are?" The last time Jacob was asked for his name, the question had come from his earthly father, Isaac. Jacob had lied on that occasion and said, "I am Esau," and he stole the blessing. Now, 20 years later, he was seeking the blessing of his heavenly Father. This time he answered truthfully, "My name is Jacob" (i.e., "heel-grabber," "cheater," "deceiver," and "supplanter"). It had come to stand for the basic reality of Jacob's life. He was a man who fully earned his own name. It is a confession of who he really is. He had to acknowledge the truth about himself before God could make him into a new man. Jacob owned up to his name. Women birth males; God makes men.

What is your name? Until you can say, "My name is bitterness," you can't be healed. Until you can say, "My name is greed," you can't be healed. Until you can say, "My name is deception," you can't be healed. Until you can say, "My name is unfaithfulness," you can't be healed. What is your name? Whenever you are ready to come clean, God can make you clean. But until then you will stay just as you are. Every believer's self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-dependence must be conquered by God if we are to fulfill His purposes in our lives. God may be wrestling with you this very day. He may be saying to you (clever, astute, capable as you are), "You have believed in Me, but you have always manipulated your own life and made your own arrangements. My child, what is your name?"

Until we are "broken" by God, we can never be greatly used by God. God brings us again and again to breaking points. Why? Because God can't really use a self-reliant man. But a broken and contrite heart, he will not despise. When you are broken, you'll be ready to listen and ready to obey. Then-and only then-can God greatly use you. Are your broken today? A.W. Tozer once said, "The Lord cannot fully bless a man until He has first conquered him." God never uses anything that comes to him together. Will you submit yourself to Him?

Jesus responded, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.'" Jacob was given a new name, Israel. Israel means either "God strives" or "he who strives with God." If the latter interpretation is the one intended by the wrestler who blesses Jacob, then the name fits well with Jacob's character as one who, throughout his life, strove with God. Jacob became a man's man…God's man! When the sun goes down his name is Jacob. When the sun comes up again his name is Israel. At 8 PM he is "the cheater"; by 6 AM, he is "the man who wrestled with God." Before that night, Jacob was in excellent physical condition; ever after that he would walk with a limp.

Part of the new life in Christ is that we are blessed with a new identity! As believers, we are no longer sinners but saints! We are no longer enemies of God, but friends of God. We are no longer orphans, but adopted sons and daughters of God. We are no longer rejected, but "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." (1Pe 2:9). And God isn't finished! In Rev 2:17, He promises to

give a new name written on a white stone to believers who overcome. A name so wonderful that it would seem preposterous to you now if you were to hear it, but our Almighty God will make you adequate for it.

In 32:29, Moses writes: “Then Jacob asked him and said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And he blessed him there.” One wonders if, “Why is it that you inquire about my name?” is another way of asking, “Jacob, don’t you realize who I am?” The verb “blessed” here means that the Lord endowed Jacob with success; he would be successful in everything he did, including meeting Esau.

Who won the match that night? God. Who lost? Jacob. But who really won? Jacob! That’s the paradox of life. When we wrestle with God, we always lose. But when we lose, we win! Did not Jesus say something very similar?

- **“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Mar 8:35).**
- **“The last shall be first, and the first shall be last” (Mat 20:16).**
- **“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mat 20:26).**
- **“Whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Mat 20:27).**

In God’s economy, the values of the world are completely reversed. The way up is down and the way to save your life is to lose it. Strangely enough, when you fight with God, defeat leads on to victory and the road to the kingdom goes by way of the cross.

Our story closes with this account: “So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.’” “Peniel” means “the face of God.” The face of God is Jesus Christ. Jesus came down from heaven to humble Himself and wrestle a 100-year-old man. It was commonly understood that no one could see God and live (48:16; Exo 19:21; Exo 24:10; Jdg 6:11; Jdg 6:22).

“Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip.” Jacob had a permanent limp. God had crippled him and made him weak so that He might be Jacob’s strength and that God’s power might be perfected in Jacob’s weakness. It was a lesson that Jacob would remember with every step he took for the rest of his life (cf. 2Co 12:7-10). The result of this spiritual crisis in Jacob’s life was obvious to all who observed him from then on (32:31). It literally resulted in a change in his walk. When God touched the strongest sinew of Jacob, the wrestler, it shriveled, and with it Jacob’s persistent self-confidence.

Maybe you’re a bit like Jacob. Maybe you need to reconcile a broken relationship from the past. Humble yourself. Prepare to make restitution if necessary. Go to that person acknowledging your sin and seeking forgiveness. Leave it under the blood of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you need to be reconciled to God. Perhaps you have exhausted yourself trying in your own strength to be good enough to make up for your past sins-to somehow be right with God. Acknowledge Him, admit your need, and cling to Jesus as your Savior.

Chapter 42

\"Time to Eat Crow\" (Gen 33:1-20)

This past August, I was asked to speak at a Chinese-English church camp. When I accepted this opportunity, I had no idea what would befall me. My friend, Mike Paolicelli ("The Italian Stallion"), the interim pastor of this church, invited me to be the guest speaker. During this retreat, Mike and I were required to team up and compete in a "Chinese Fear Factor." Talk about an initiation!

The most difficult obstacle in this "Fear Factor" was to bob for a "Century egg" and then somehow eat it. The Century egg is a Chinese "delicacy" made by preserving duck eggs in various substances for around 100 days. The egg that I ate was black, gushy, and nasty! In fact, these eggs cause most people who eat them to vomit. (This includes some Chinese people as well.) They are awful! However, I broke a record in this event by devouring such an egg in 20 seconds. This shattered the previous record of 1:29. By doing this, I demonstrated unusual courage and expertise in the eyes of these Chinese believers and earned great respect. Through this Century egg event, I was reminded that it is best to tackle challenges head-on. To put it another way: When it is "time to eat crow," or duck, it is best to quickly take the initiative, knowing that it is typically not as bad as you expected.

Genesis 33 is a pivotal chapter in Jacob's life. Twenty years earlier, Jacob had left his home because his brother, Esau, had sworn to kill him for stealing his birthright and their father's blessing (27:41-45). Rebekah, the boys' mother, had told Jacob, "When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I'll send word for you to come back from there" (27:45). But since she never sent for him, Jacob had every reason to believe that 20 years had not diminished Esau's anger. Needless to say, this caused Jacob to fear Esau in a big way! Yet, God had brought Jacob to the place where he recognized that he needed to make things right with his brother. Remember, Jacob is coming off of his wrestling match with the Lord (32:24-32). He has just had a mountaintop experience. I'm sure Jacob wished he would not have to face off with Esau, yet now he must prepare himself for the inevitable.

In the Christian life, the greatest mountaintop experiences with the Lord do not remove us from the circumstances of life. If the truth be told, the Christian life is filled with one conflict after another. We must recognize that great times of blessing are usually followed by great trials of faith. Therefore, we must be prepared for tension and challenges in our personal relationships. To expect otherwise is to be like an ostrich that buries its head in the sand. But here's the good news: God doesn't promise to take us out of the fire, but He promises to get into the fire with us.

Our story begins in 33:1a: "Then Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him." Jacob lifts up his eyes in fear because he sees Esau marching toward him with 400 men. His guilty conscience can only assume the worst. Like Jacob, we often lift our eyes only high enough to see our problems but not high enough to see God, who has the power to solve our every problem. Jacob should have said, as Jehoshaphat did, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2Ch 20:12, ESV; cf. Psa 121:1-2). I wish that he had said, "Lord, You've crippled me so I'm helpless unless You intervene. You've promised to bless me. I'm trusting You to work."

But instead, the old Jacob takes over. "So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last" (33:1b-2). Jacob has a family-value, depth chart. He divides his children and wives, putting

the least favorite in the front so that the more favored can possibly escape the massacre he still fears. Jacob continues to rely on his own wits to get him out of another tight situation. The fact that Jacob made preparation for his encounter with Esau wasn't necessarily wicked. In fact, the Lord will often lead us to do very practical things when we follow Him. But we must take action only after prayer and guidance from the Holy Spirit. This demonstrates our trust in the Lord.

Sadly, valuing some family members over other family members is not something that is new to the family of the patriarchs. Jacob's tendency to favor Rachel and Joseph over his other wives and children was an ungodly pattern, passed on by his own parents. It was a significant factor in the dysfunction of his own family life. This kind of ranking-according to favoritism-no doubt fed the jealousy over Joseph that later becomes an important element in the narrative.

Fortunately, in 33:3, Jacob shows some indication of spiritual maturity. Moses writes, "But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother." By going ahead of his family to meet Esau, Jacob shows the new Israel overcoming the fear that had formerly dominated the old Jacob. A remarkable and important transition is taking place here. Jacob-the self-serving, greedy, self-promoting, self-protective heal-catcher is being transformed by his relationship with God. He is beginning to take responsibility for the consequences of his own sinful past. After all, it wasn't his wives or children who had cheated Esau out of his birthright and inheritance. It was Jacob. If anyone was going to suffer for sin, Jacob didn't want it to be his family. He himself would suffer first and die if necessary that his family might be spared.

As he neared Esau, the once proud Jacob "bowed down to the ground seven times." Bowing to the ground expresses great humility. This was ancient, court protocol whenever subjects approached a lord or king. Jacob was definitely putting himself in a subservient role. He was attempting to demonstrate a healthy respect for Esau.

Some argue that Jacob is manipulating Esau and that he is disingenuous. I disagree. It seems to me that Jacob is a changed man. However, like all of us, there is still the residue of the old man. Under the pressure of the moment, Jacob can resort to his old scheming ways and take matters into his own hands; however, that element of Jacob is mixed with some positive aspects of his newly discovered trust in the Lord. So the result is a mixture of living by the flesh and of living by faith.

What I especially like about 33:3 is that Jacob decides to face Esau, man to man. He earns some serious, spiritual chest hair right here. The looming question that fills the air is: How will Esau respond? With just a word, he could command his soldiers to kill Jacob on the spot! What will he do? If he wants to get even, this is his big chance.

Whenever a problem arises, you always have two options: You can run from it or you can face it head-on. Most of us are tempted to run but we must recognize that the problem never goes away. We will always have to face up to it. Like eating a Century egg, it is better to deal with your problems promptly because they typically are never as bad as you may imagine. While you may be fearful, God wants you to step out in faith. Unfortunately, many times we meet the trials of life in the panic of the flesh. When a financial difficulty arises, and it is necessary to meet with a creditor, how do we meet it? Or, when the doctor must be met, do we meet him in the peace that flows from our redemption and the assurance of a Father who cares for all our needs? Or when the boss calls us in for a chat, do we meet him in the strength of the indwelling Spirit? Jacob's problems are really little different from the ones that contemporary believers

must meet. And God wants us to be courageous and trusting men and women of faith.

In 33:4-5, Moses pens a couple of amazing verses. “Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, ‘Who are these with you?’ So he said, ‘The children whom God has graciously given your servant.’” Can you imagine what Jacob must have been thinking when he saw Esau running at full speed toward him? He must have thought, “This is it! My number is up!” Instead, even as God had been working in Jacob’s life for the past 20 years, God had been working in Esau. To Jacob’s astonishment, Esau wasn’t running to kill him, but to reconcile with him and to bless him. He came as a forgiving friend and brother rather than as a foe.

Think through this scenario slowly and carefully. In Esau’s culture, men walk they don’t run. Esau is breaking the cultural norms and humbling himself. After running to his brother, Esau raised Jacob up from the bowing down position and embraced him. He gave Jacob one of those big, old, family bear hugs. He kissed him. The kiss seems to be an indication of forgiveness (cf. 2Sa 14:33). Finally, the brothers wept in one another’s arms. They had been apart for twenty years.

Esau’s response to Jacob is remarkably similar to the father of the prodigal son at his return (see Luk 15:20). The account of Jacob and Esau and the story of the prodigal son are recorded for us, to show us what God’s heart is like toward us who have sinned against Him. We were all, at one time, like Jacob-scoundrels, self-centered, abusive, selfish people deserving death. Our own conscience condemned us and we had an appropriate sense of anxiety that God was going to punish us. But as we made our way toward Him in our sincere effort at reconciliation, He came running toward us, not to harm us, but to embrace us and kiss us. This is the heart of God. It is the heart of the cross. It is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today, you may not have a relationship with God. You need to know that you can never outrun God’s love and grace. No matter what you have done, He is willing to take you into His arms and love you with a perfect Father’s love. He only asks that you humbly come to Him, on His own terms, through faith in Jesus Christ. It’s also possible you’re a Christian that has walked away from the Lord. After a season of sin, you’ve realized the insanity of it all and you’re ready to return. Please know this: God wants us to be restored to Him far more than you’ll ever want to be restored. His heart has been breaking ever since you left. When you do return to Him in humble repentance, He will gratefully receive you. May you sense His unconditional love for you.

In 33:5, Jacob gave God the glory for giving him his family; he confessed that his family was a gift from God. This echoes James’ words that “every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above” (Jam 1:17). This attitude is evidence of a basic change in Jacob’s approach to life. He is becoming a more humble and content man. Is this true of you as well? Are you steadily growing in your character?

In 33:6-7, we will see that reconciliation requires grace from everyone. Moses writes, “Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down.” All three divisions of Jacob’s caravan bowed before Esau. This is the ultimate in humble submission. Jacob desperately wants to ensure that reconciliation occurred. When we attempt to make things right with someone that we have offended, we must be willing to do the same. We must “pull out all the stops.”

In 33:8-9, Esau said to Jacob: "'What do you mean by all this company [herds] which I have met?' And he [Jacob] said, 'To find favor in the sight of my lord.' But Esau said, 'I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own.'" In an attempt to reconcile with his brother, Jacob offers him a gift of 550 of his animals (cf. 32:14-15). He wants to find "favor" or grace with Esau. Yet, Esau surprises us with his response. He tells Jacob he has plenty and urges him to keep his animals. These words must have pierced Jacob's soul! Jacob has spent his entire life scheming to get ahead. He has kicked, scratched, and clawed his way to the top, only to find that he has alienated himself from everyone he ever loved. What a devastating and sobering reality. Esau serves as a convicting example to Jacob of a man that is content. Many of you are winning the financial race, but are losing the race of life. You are being consumed by the pressures and demands of success. Yet the Bible places a high premium on contentment. Look at these words: "But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1Ti 6:6-10).

In 33:10, Jacob responds to Esau by saying, '"No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably."' Either this is a blatant example of flattery and overstatement, or a recognition of God's character of grace in the life of his brother, Esau. It would seem that the latter is the case. What an amazing turn of events. Jacob is referring back to his previous encounter with God (32:24-32) and saying that Esau's response to him is evidence of the grace of God. There is no greater compliment for a believer than for people to see in us the face of God! Eph 5:1 says, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children."

In 33:11, Jacob continues: '"Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty.' Thus he urged him and he took it." The word translated "gift" (berakah) is the word "blessing." Jacob had stolen Esau's blessing and birthright (27:35) and he understood that for reconciliation to take place, he would need to make restitution for his theft. Esau didn't want or need the animals; he wanted his brother. But Jacob needed to feel he could restore himself; he needed to feel restitution. Finally, Jacob convinced Esau to accept the gift. Esau took it to allow his brother the opportunity to feel forgiven. When we receive a person back and they sense the need to restore our relationship, we can allow the person to perform restitution, not as a precondition for coming back, but as a result of coming back. This is an important step in the process of reconciliation.

Sadly, it would seem that Jacob missed two of the more elementary steps in the reconciliation process. As far as we know, Jacob never does come right out and say, "Forgive me for what I did to you many years ago." He also never verbally confesses the wrongs he had committed against Esau. This is similar to when a husband wrongs his wife. To make peace, he brings home some flowers and a gift. That may be a way of waving a white flag-opening the door for peace talks-but if the gift is all that's done, there hasn't been an adequate settlement. The husband needs to specify how he wronged his wife and ask forgiveness. They need to talk about what happened so that they understand each other. Otherwise, she's going to say to herself, "He thinks he can just run roughshod over me and then bring me a gift to make everything right. But he's not willing to deal with the real problem."

After reconciling with Jacob, Esau said, "'Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you.' But he said to him, 'My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir' Esau said, 'Please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.' But he said, 'What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.' So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth" (33:12-17). At almost every point in this story, Esau emerges as the more appealing, more humane, and more virtuous of the two brothers. He is literally bending over backwards for Jacob. Nevertheless, Jacob turns down Esau's gracious offers. To make matters even worse, he deceives his brother again, for old time's sake. Think about that. Even after forgiveness…and after reconciliation…after the gift has been accepted…and the hugs and the tears…even after all the stories have been swapped…after all of that, and with the best of motives, Jacob still can't quite believe that everything is okay between him and his brother. So he tells one final lie, and goes his own way.

Jacob tells Esau he will come to him in Seir (33:14), but then he immediately goes and builds a house for himself in Succoth. Now Succoth was not to the south and east, but to the north and the west! In other words, it was in the exact opposite direction from Esau. Thus, the flowery words and the tender solicitation of them were a cover-up for a lie. Like Jacob, many of us lie to preserve peoples' feelings; however, God does not bless this type of deception.

There are several possible reasons for Jacob's deception:

1. His herds and children probably could not keep up with the warriors.

2. God did tell him to return to his land, not Seir.

3. He didn't want to face his father, whom he had deceived 20 years earlier.

4. He probably did not fully trust his brother. He was glad to reconcile with Esau, but didn't want to live too close to him.

5. He knew that his herds would do much better in the rich pastures of the Jordan Valley where Succoth was located, while Bethel was in the mountains.

Regardless of the reasons behind Jacob's deception, Derek Kidner, suggests, "Succoth was a backward step, spiritually as well as geographically." God had first appeared to Jacob at Bethel, and it was there that Jacob vowed to someday return to build an altar and give a tithe to God (28:20-22). When God instructed Jacob to return to Canaan, He identified Himself as the "God of Bethel" (31:13). Jacob was instructed to return "to the land of your fathers and to your relatives" (31:3). Succoth was in the opposite direction of Seir, where Jacob had told Esau he was coming.

Like his previous acts of compromise and deception, this brought pain and loss into Jacob's life. As a result, he never saw his father again. Furthermore, the next time we find Jacob and Esau together in Scripture is 27 years later at the graveside of their father, Isaac (35:29).

Our story closes in 33:18-20: "Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. 19 He bought the piece of land

where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. 20 Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel." Jacob built his first altar, as Abraham had done at Shechem, when he had first entered Canaan (12:6-7). This is the first instance in which an altar is named (see also 35:7; Exo 17:15; Jdg 6:24). "El-Elohe-Israel" means "the mighty God is the God of Israel." Jacob used his own new name, Israel (32:29). Here he acknowledges God as the God, his own God.

After splitting off from Esau, Jacob crossed the Jordan River and moved his family into the land of Canaan. He chose "Shechem" ("peaceful") as his home. Although purchasing the land and erecting an altar were acts of faith, Jacob errs in settling into the land of Shechem. He made a vow to worship the Lord at Bethel when he returned to the Promised Land (28:20-22), but it takes him at least ten years to fulfill this vow. The idle years near the Canaanite city reflect a general passivity on Jacob's part that has horrendous consequences.

Why did Jacob choose Shechem when he was told by God to settle in Bethel (35:1)? The text doesn't give us a motive for Jacob's incomplete obedience, but it may hint at one. Verse 18 states, "Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem." Jacob may have felt safe there, but feared returning to the southern part of Canaan, where his father was, because of continuing fears of Esau, who frequented that region. In spite of Esau's warm greeting, Jacob probably didn't trust him. Those who are treacherous, like Jacob, often think others will be treacherous. But while Jacob was afraid of Esau, he wasn't afraid of staying in Succoth, outside the land, or of buying property in Shechem, where his family would be morally polluted. He was afraid of the wrong things! God had promised to protect Jacob if he obeyed; but Jacob felt he was safer in a place of partial obedience than to risk trusting the Lord by obeying completely. Jacob's gradual transition into Shechem is reminiscent of Lot's ever-closer association with the city of Sodom; first pitching his tent facing Sodom, then moving into Sodom, and finally sitting as an elder in Sodom's gates. And, as we will see in our study of Genesis 34, disastrous consequences await Jacob and his family in Succoth for his failure to fully obey the Lord.

My observation of Christians (including myself) tells me that Jacob was doing what we all do. He was making an attempt to follow the Lord, but at the same time he was not obeying the Lord completely. By calling the altar "God, the God of Israel," he was acknowledging his gratitude to God for bringing him safely back to the land. But by not going all the way to Bethel, he was catering to his fleshly fear of Esau. He was the new man, Israel; but he was still the old man, Jacob. We do the same thing. We begin by faith in the Lord, but then live by the flesh.

Yet, one of the major lessons of this chapter is that those who have received God's grace may trust in God's promise of protection when they seek reconciliation with others. If you are in conflict with someone today, make a point to reconcile with him or her. You can refer to Mat 5:23-26; Mat 18:15-17 for God's instructions on how to go about doing it. Besides the fact that by doing so you will be imitating the reconciling heart of God, reconciling has a number of wonderful practical benefits:

- **It will give you a clear conscience.**
- **It will produce in you personal and spiritual growth.**
- **It will serve to advance the kingdom of God.**

This past Tuesday, I was playing indoor, tackle football with my three children. After being jumped on by all three kids, Joshua (my eldest) grabbed the ball from me while I was on my back and began sprinting for the end zone (i.e., the couch). I tripped him up with a combination of hands and feet and he was catapulted into the air only to land on his right shoulder. The pain that emanated from his crumpled body was horrible. It was devastating; and it lasted over 60 minutes. Finally, we decided to take him to the doctor. It was there that we were informed that Joshua had broken his humerous bone. Obviously, this was not a laughing matter for us. Note: The doctor discovered that Joshua had a bone cist on his right shoulder, so the impact of my tackle did not cause the break. Whew!

Even so, I felt very badly. I was guilt-ridden. When Joshua was first injured, he screamed that he would never wrestle with me again for the rest of his life. (By the way, he's maintained that story even today.) I wondered if he would forgive me for the pain that I had inflicted upon him. Now, did I humble myself, eat crow, and profusely apologize? You better believe it! And Joshua compassionately absolved me of blame. In fact, he has wanted plenty of "Daddy time" since his injury. I witnessed in Joshua a deep desire to forgive. Amazingly, he even said that it was his fault. Of course, I then agreed and said, "That's right Joshua, you never strip me of the football and try to score a touchdown on me."

Seriously, I have a wonderful son and we are fully reconciled, even though he may have to undergo surgery and will be in a sling for six weeks. There can be consequences in conflict, but in the vast majority of cases, you will find that people want to have a clear conscience. They crave peace and harmony. So you and I must learn to eat crow and initiate the process of reconciliation. Regardless of what happens, we will never regret it.

Chapter 43

\"Chips off the Old Block\" (Gen 34:1-31)

Ever since I was a little boy, I have been plagued by canker sores. Much to my chagrin, I typically get a number of large sores at a time. This past week, I had a terrible time with several canker sores lining my throat. Talk about ruining your week! To make matters worse, on Monday I woke up with two, small cuts on the corners of my mouth. I had no idea what had happened. I wondered if maybe I had opened my mouth too wide, the morning before when I was preaching, or if I had cut myself with my razor, shaving too close to my mouth. I didn't know what was going on. Over the course of the week, these cuts turned into cold sores that grew in size. As the week progressed, I found myself battling both canker sores and cold sores. The painful lesson that the Lord has been teaching me is this: Compromise is like cold sores. Both start small and can grow rather large. Furthermore, compromise and cold sores can bring a whole lot of pain. Through his own compromise, Jacob discovered this stark reality.

In Genesis 34, we come to an awful chapter-not only in the book of Genesis-but also in the history of mankind. Now, we know that the Bible was not written as chapters. Rather, chapters were added later for ease of use. But we do know that in this entire account (which makes up this chapter), God's name is absent. It is made worse by being the only chapter in the Bible, outside the book of Esther, where the name of God is not even mentioned. However, throughout the book of Esther we see the fingerprints of God. This is not the case in Genesis 34. In this passage, we do not see God's name or His influence. This is a passage filled with sin, excess, and godlessness. Yet, this story serves to warn us of the high price of compromise. The tragedies that take place in this chapter are the result of Jacob's failure to be obedient to God's command to return to Bethel (28:21; 31:3, 13). That single act of compromise cost his daughter dearly and put the rest of the covenant family of God at risk. What a chilling reminder that half-hearted obedience can be just as deadly as disobedience.

Our story begins in 34:1: "Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land." Dinah is in her early teens and she is Jacob's only daughter (30:21). You would think she would be spoiled and pampered by her dad. However, the narrative reminds us that Dinah is "the daughter of Leah"-the "unloved" wife of Jacob (29:31, 33). Therefore, it is likely that Jacob paid little attention to Dinah. This apparently led her to explore other avenues for attention and affection. This is supported by the fact that 34:1 is written in a matter-of-fact way, giving the indication that this is not Dinah's first trip into the city. Most likely, Dinah hung out with the daughters of the land and their male counterparts. Yet, in biblical times, girls of marriageable age were not permitted to leave the tents of their people to go about visiting without a chaperone. Interestingly, the Hebrew word translated "went out" (yatsa) also bears a sense of impropriety. Like many teenage daughters down throughout time, it would appear that Dinah went out on the town behind her parents' back.

Was Dinah naive, rebellious, or just plain ignorant of the ways of the world? Why was it so important that she get to know the women of the land, and why didn't her mother advise her and somebody dependable accompany her on her sightseeing trip? (Her brothers were out in the field with the flocks.) Where are her parents? Where is Jacob? They know that Shechem is a corrupt and godless place. How could they allow their teenage daughter to wander the streets of such a wicked city? Three reasons stand out:

1. Jacob was a man of compromise. He should not have been tarrying in this pagan neighborhood and deliberately endangering his family. He should have been at Bethel leading them closer to the Lord. If Jacob had fully obeyed God and traveled to Bethel instead of stopping short in Shechem, this would not have happened. Are you a man of compromise? If so, how is it currently hurting your family? What will you do about it?

2. Jacob wasn't a very strong spiritual leader in the home. There is no mention of Jacob instructing his children in the Lord. Due to his continual lapses in faith, it is certain that Jacob was not the father he should have been. Dad, you are to be the spiritual leader in your home-that is your responsibility. Whether you're a dad, a mom, or a single parent, you are your child's primary teacher/discipler. If you don't watch out for them, who will?

3. This past week, Joshua and I went on a long walk. Since he has a broken humerous bone, we kept him indoors for several days after the injury. We wanted to protect him from further injury. But he was getting a little stir-crazy inside the house so I took him out for some exercise. As we were walking along, there were a few times that he almost tripped. Of course, if he fell to the ground, he could do permanent damage to his shoulder…and I would never be able to explain this to his mother. So while we were walking, I urged him to stay on the street and not get tangled in the stickers or ivy patches. I was his chaperon. I protected Joshua from himself and those obstacles that would seek to trip him up. Parents, this is what God has called you to do.

4. Jacob was a man of blatant favoritism. Could it be that if Jacob had loved Dinah the way God intended, this would not have happened? Parents, be careful to not favor one child over another. Spend equal time with each of your children. If you don't spend time with your children now, they will take your time later. We need to invest in all of our children when they are young. We must teach them and discipline them. We should be asking, "Does the town I want to live in have a good church? Can my children find spiritual companionship? What kind of Christian service can I have in this city?" Above all else, we must be asking, "Is this where the Lord wants me? Is this where I can best serve Him?"

In 34:2-4, Moses records this disturbing account: "When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force. He was deeply attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, 'Get me this young girl for a wife.'" Now, don't be confused here, Shechem is the name of the city in which they live. It is also the name of the son of Hamor, who is the prince, the leader of that part of the world. As Hamor's son, Shechem was probably very powerful. He could have had whatever he wanted, any of the daughters of Hamor that he wanted, any of the daughters of Shechem that he wanted, but when he saw Dinah, she was the one he wanted. Unfortunately, in his lust, he raped her.

After his rape of Dinah, something very unusual happened-he genuinely fell in love with her. This is the opposite response of Amnon's rape of Tamar when, afterward, Amnon despised his victim (2Sa 13:15). In the course of two verses, we see the two sides to Shechem's personality. In 34:3, Moses writes that Shechem loves Dinah and speaks tenderly to her; in 34:4 he orders his father to get him this young girl. He sounds like the cartoon caveman: "Me want woman!" It would seem, like most rapists, that Shechem has a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde type personality.

In 34:5-6, we will see the reactions of Jacob and his sons to the rape of Dinah. "Now Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter; but his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob kept silent until

they came in. Then Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him." These verses kill me because they show the passivity of Jacob. The natural and expected response would be anger or rage; but Jacob "kept silent." He appears too indifferent or confused to act decisively. Why isn't Jacob more outraged? Why doesn't he act in behalf of his daughter? Again, he is guilty of the sin of favoritism (cf. Jam 2:1). Consider his passionate love for Joseph and Benjamin and his distress at their misfortunes. If it had been Rachel's daughter who had been violated, he would have acted differently.

In keeping silent, Jacob was the precursor for another biblical character. When King David's daughter, Tamar, was raped, David was furious. However, like Jacob he also did nothing (2Sa 13:20-21). Consequently, his son Absalom took matters into his own hands and inappropriately poured out his wrath (2Sa 13:22). Likewise, instead of taking control of a dangerous situation, Jacob let Dinah's brothers handle things. Jacob's refusal to do what was right in this situation not only allowed evil to triumph, but also created an enormous leadership vacuum in the family, which was immediately and sinfully filled by his angry sons. Edmond Burke once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

In 34:7, Jacob's callous indifference toward Dinah and her brothers fueled his sons' fury. "Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done." Apparently, Jacob does not view the travesty as important enough to send word to his sons. But when they do finally hear about it, they are steamed! The word for "grieved" (atsab) is found elsewhere only for God's reaction to human wickedness (Gen 6:6). These proper emotions are assigned to the brothers, not to Jacob. The brothers express a righteous indignation. Amidst their fury, Jacob's sons responded properly to the demeaning of Israel as well as Dinah. They understood that because Jacob had become Israel at Peniel, the rape of his daughter was a crime against Israel, as a people, seeing that the relationship of Israel to God had been ignored and abused. Tragically, their father, Jacob, had neither stood up for his daughter or his God!

Many Christians say that we cannot get angry. We CAN get angry (Eph 4:26). Grief and fury are appropriate emotions, if they are in response to what angers God. The problem is we get angry over things we shouldn't and then we don't even raise an eyebrow over things that should make us angry. Furthermore, I love the editorial comment that Moses adds at the end of 34:7: "for such a thing ought not to be done." Moses is not a moral relativist. He knows his Bible…and he should because he's writing it. There is no question here about right or wrong. The Bible says rape is a thing which "ought not to be done."

Rape is sin and it has affected the lives of countless ladies, some whom you and I know personally. If you are reading this sermon and you have been sexually assaulted or molested, you have been sinned against horribly. On behalf of godly men, I express my anger and grief over what happened to you. My heart breaks for you. Nevertheless, there are many other ladies who have been through this horrific ordeal and such a woman can comfort you (2Co 1:3) and, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, help you to overcome this violation. Please share this with someone today and seek to experience healing.

In 34:8-12, we will see the reactions of Hamor and Shechem. "But Hamor spoke with them, saying, 'The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. Thus you shall live with us, and the land shall be open before you; live and trade in it and acquire property in it. Shechem also said to her father

and to her brothers, 'If I find favor in your sight, then I will give whatever you say to me. Ask me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give according as you say to me; but give me the girl in marriage.'" Hamor and Shechem both do not offer an apology. Apparently, they assume that the offense is no big deal. After all, this is how Shechemites behave. In essence Hamor says, "No hard feelings. Let's all get married, and be one, big, happy family." Hamor offers an alliance between the two peoples. To include intermarriage, trade, and land deals. Yet, despite his peace treaty, Hamor asks Jacob and his sons to agree to something that is expressly unbiblical (Deu 7:3; Jos 23:12; Ezr 9:14; 2Co 6:14-16; 1Jn 2:15-17). God wants His people to only marry other godly people. Do you share this conviction?

Since Jacob was not going to be talking, "Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with deceit, because he had defiled Dinah their sister. They said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised, then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live with you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go'" (34:13-17). As was customary in their culture, Jacob's sons took an active part in approving their sister's marriage (34:13; cf. 24:50). They were correct in opposing the end in view: the mixing of the chosen seed with the seed of the Canaanites. Yet they were wrong in adopting the means they selected to achieve their end. Moses says, the boys answered "with deceit." Now, where do you suppose these sons learned how to be so deceitful? Deceit has been a problem in the patriarchal family right from the very start. Deceit runs deep in this family, and nobody knows it better than Jacob. And now his sons are just "chips off the old block." Hence, the description "Jacob's sons" rather than "Dinah's brothers." The sons are just following in their father's deceitful footsteps (34:13). Jesus will later articulate this, "A disciple is not greater than his teacher, but everyone when fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luk 6:40 NET).

The sons mix truth and deceit in order to exact their revenge against the Shechemties. The truth relates to circumcision. Circumcision was an outward symbol of an inward commitment to the covenant of God (17:10). This sign was of great importance for the people of the covenant. Any uncircumcised male of Israel is cut off from the covenant. Yet Jacob's sons are deceptive in not explaining the real reason why they want the Shechemties to be circumcised (cf. 34:25-31).

Here, Jacob's sons play the religion card. Few sons are more despicable than pressing the sacred into service for profane use. But Simeon and Levi, feeling justified by the violation against Dinah, prostituted the symbol of God's covenant in order to take advantage of the men of Shechem. However, Jacob's silence is even more evil than his sons' schemes. His sons proposed intermarriage with the Canaanites only as a means to induce them to be circumcised so that they could be overcome more easily. Jacob silently and passively accepted the agreement with the people of Shechem, fully expecting to carry it out. Jacob planned to allow his descendants to intermarry with the Canaanites, but his sons had no such intention. Jacob, in comparison with his sons, is even guiltier than they! Jacob's willingness to intermarry with the Canaanites is not only contrary to the purposes and promises of God in the Abrahamic covenant, but it is also a direct violation of the instructions, which his father had given him (28:1-4). Compromise can be deadly!

In 34:18-24, Moses continues the story. "Now their words seemed reasonable to Hamor and Shechem, Hamor's son. The young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. Now he was more respected than all the household of his father. [If Shechem is the most honored in Hamor's house and Hamor was the founder and leading citizen of Shechem, that tells us

something about the utter depravity of the place!] So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, 'These men are friendly with us; therefore let them live in the land and trade in it, for behold, the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters in marriage, and give our daughters to them. Only on this condition will the men consent to us to live with us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock and their property and all their animals be ours? Only let us consent to them, and they will live with us.' All who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and to his son Shechem, and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city." The men of the city were convinced on financial grounds. Circumcision was a small price to pay if it resulted in a huge financial windfall.

In 34:25-29, when the men of Shechem are weak and vulnerable, Jacob's sons take matters into their own hands. "Now it came about on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and came upon the city unawares, and killed every male. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem's house, and went forth. Jacob's sons came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses." Simeon and Levi are two of eleven redneck farmers. Both boys are in their 20's and they love to fight. So they go door-to-door killing all the men. After this genocidal spree, the remaining brothers swooped in "like vultures descending on lifeless corpses." The rape of Dinah was a disgraceful, evil act; but the wholesale murder of the men of Shechem, the looting of the city, and the imprisonment of the women and children of the city was inhumanly excessive. The punishment clearly did not fit the crime. The ancient law of lex talionis ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth") had been trampled by Simeon and Levi. There had been no equity here, only exponential revenge. Two wrongs never make a right, nor does might make right.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "Hatred is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat." They are much worse off now than they were even after the rape of Dinah. If the sons of Jacob could only have brought themselves to forgive Shechem of his sin, none of this would have happened. A little forgiveness goes a long way in healing hurts. Hatred has no place in our lives, folks, even when people do despicable things to us. Treachery has children, and when we respond to treachery with treachery, we give birth to those children. Let's make sure we show forgiveness and not hatred because hatred destroys us as much as it destroys anybody.

Our story closes in 34:30-31 with this tragic account: "Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I will be destroyed, I and my household.'" All Jacob can think of is his own reputation. His ego has been hurt, and he thinks only of his lowered standing among the local inhabitants. His selfish response is highlighted by his use of "me," or "my," and "I" no less than eight times in the NASB. Never mind the fact that his daughter has been raped, his sons abused the rite of circumcision or breached a contract, or that every male citizen of Shechem has been slaughtered, or that the city itself had been plundered, or that its women and children had been taken captive, or that Jacob's sons had degraded and dehumanized themselves by committing acts of unspeakable wickedness. His concerns are tactical and strategic, rather than ethical.

Men, when you become a father, you need to be a godly man that cares more about your children than yourself. There's no indication that Jacob ever talks to Dinah. He just rebukes his sons for sinning when the mistake is his. Jacob is concerned about what people will think. He's saying, "Look what you've done to me." So many men worry about their image, business, income, investments, hobbies, safety, etc. Yet, they do not spend adequate time worrying about their children…especially their girls.

One would hope that Jacob would confess his sin and the story would close. After all, the rape, the desecration, the genocide, and the disgrace were all due to his disobedience. But Jacob doesn't repent.

The logic of the story implies the importance of keeping one's vows. Jacob fails to keep his vow to build an altar at Bethel and then almost loses his household. One cannot worship God as one pleases.

Jacob builds an altar but in the wrong place (cf. 33:20). Because he is not in the place where he is supposed to be, he brings a sword, not a blessing to the nations.

Our story ends with these words: "But they said, 'Should he treat our sister as a harlot?'" (34:31). It is interesting that Simeon and Levi referred to Dinah as "our sister" rather than as Jacob's daughter, which would have been appropriate in addressing Jacob. This implies that, since Jacob had not showed enough concern for Dinah, her blood brothers felt compelled to act in her defense. Simeon and Levi may have been zealous to a fault, but at least their concern was for Dinah as a sister, implying that Jacob had not cared for her as a daughter.

Despite the atrocity of their genocide, the sons had assumed the moral high ground. Jacob was silenced. The response of Jacob's sons may be directed at both Shechem and Jacob. To do nothing about the rape and then to be willing to accept gifts after the event is to act like a pimp. Jacob committed sins of omission. Sin is not only what you do, but what you don't do! Jacob sinned by living in Shechem, letting his girl go out into the city, and not devising a plan.

This story demonstrates the sovereign control of God. While the story in this chapter operates at a level of family honor and the brothers' concern for their ravaged sister, the story nevertheless also carries along the theme that runs so clearly through the Jacob narratives, namely, that God works through and often in spite of the limited, self-serving plans of human beings. The writer's purpose is not to approve these human plans and schemes but to show how God, in His sovereign grace, could still achieve His purpose through them.

God demands complete obedience. He disdains cold-sore-like compromise. When we compromise, He will discipline us and allow us to experience the consequences for our actions. But the good news is this: God is faithful in spite of our sinfulness. He is a sovereign God who is able to accomplish His purposes in and through us despite ourselves.

Chapter 44

\"The Way Back Home\" (Gen 35:1-29)

In your driving experience, have you ever taken a wrong turn? I have. When I was in seminary I interned at a church in Vancouver (WA). One of my responsibilities was to follow up the people who attended our church. One evening, I drove north of Vancouver into a distant and unfamiliar neighborhood. My visit lasted longer than expected and so I was in a hurry to get back home. Unfortunately, I took one wrong turn. This one wrong turn led to several more wrong turns until I was completely lost. Although I was only 30 miles from our apartment in SE Portland, I honestly wondered if I would ever locate civilization. The harder I tried to find my way back home, the more my destination eluded me. However, the reason for my plight was my own ignorance. I'm directionally impaired…I have trouble reading a map.

Now, unlike me, Jacob could read a map. He had vowed that he would return to Bethel, (28:20-22), and God had reminded Jacob of his vow (31:3, 13). Interestingly, in Gen 35, thirty years have passed since Jacob made that vow. Twenty of those years were spent serving his father-in-law, Laban, and ten years living in the ungodly city of Shechem, which almost destroyed his family. From a physical point of view, only 30 miles separated Jacob from God and His appointed destination of Bethel. That thirty miles had separated him from God's will for 30 years! And for the past ten years, he was near Bethel but not near to the God of Bethel. From a spiritual standpoint, Jacob might as well have been a million miles away. Jacob's condition is not that different from many Christians today. Outwardly, we may appear to be walking close to the Lord, but inwardly we have stopped short of whole-hearted devotion to Him. Since every one of us will face times when we have strayed from an intimate and obedient walk with God, Genesis 35 provides us with a map for finding our way back home.

Sometime after being humiliated by his sons (34:30-31), God speaks to Jacob and says: "Arise, go up to Bethel ["The House of God"] and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau" (35:1). God says, "Hit the road, Jake!" In fact, there are two commands in 35:1: "Arise" and "go up." There is a sense of urgency. God is saying, "You've delayed so long, now you must fulfill your vow. There can be no more procrastinating. You must go to Bethel." Why does God command Jacob to go to Bethel? It was at Bethel that Jacob had his first real encounter with God. It was at Bethel that Jacob was first told about God's plan to bless him. It was at Bethel that Jacob first built an altar of worship to the Lord.

God has not spoken to Jacob since He had commanded him to leave Paddan-aram and return to Bethel (31:3, 13), some ten years earlier. Why the ten years of silence? Until now Jacob wasn't ready to listen. Now Jacob is facing a crisis and he has "ears to hear":

• Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, has been raped.

• Jacob's sons (Simeon and Levi) had slaughtered the men of Shechem in their vengeance.

• Jacob's sons had looted the city and taken the women and children as captives.

• As a result, the relatives and neighbors of the people of Shechem would undoubtedly launch a vicious and deadly counterattack!

It’s amazing how a personal crisis can improve one’s spiritual hearing. Often the bottom has to drop out before we’re ready to listen to God. He has to bring us to our knees so that there is no other place to look but up. God does not, like many of us do as parents, yell and holler and fuss and fume over the disobedience of His children. He is, of course, deeply grieved by disobedience, but He will allow us to go our own way and to reap the painful price of sin (Gal 6:7-8). And then, when we have gotten our fill of sin and there is no other way to turn, He will speak to us again, reminding us of that which He has previously spoken.

God calls Jacob to fulfill the vow he made when he “fled from…Esau” (27:42-45; 28:20-22). This phrase is pointed and is intended to remind Jacob that he should have headed to Bethel a long time ago. He has been wasting time, out of God’s will. If you are contemplating a detour to Bethel, take this word to heart: You will never find what you’re looking for. You will waste precious years that you will never be able to have back. It’s not worth it! Besides, God will eventually come to you again and call you back to where you were supposed to be in the first place. Why expend the effort of traveling far outside of His will and then retracing your steps back to where He originally wanted you?

This time around Jacob has learned his lesson and responds to God’s command with prompt obedience. In 35:2-3, Moses writes, “So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.’” Jacob finally does right. Instead of being passive and silent, he demonstrates spiritual leadership by taking initiative and leading his family in righteousness. In 35:2, he tells his entire caravan to “put away the foreign gods.” These “foreign gods” came from Laban’s collection (31:19) and the Shechem spoils (34:27-29). Worshipping the gods of the pagan nations was always a temptation to the Israelites. Moses had to warn them about idolatry before they entered the land (Deu 7:3-6; Deu 7:25-26) and Joshua had to challenge the Israelites to abandon their idols after they had conquered the land (Jos 24:14; Jos 24:23-24). Even Samuel faced this problem in his day (1Sa 7:2-4). Not to mention, the prophets after Samuel often rebuked the nation for building the high places where they served false gods.

Despite knowing Israel’s struggle with idols, it’s easy to think, “This doesn’t apply to me. I don’t have any idols-I’m a Christian, not a pagan!” But idols aren’t just little statues you bow down to. An idol is anything that takes your attention and devotion away from God, anything that competes with your worship of God, or anything that has more influence in your life than God.

• For some, the idol is career success. It is the consuming desire to earn a powerful promotion, make more money, and have the respect of one’s colleagues. Everything else, even the family, is subordinated to the goal of career success.

• For others, it is affluence: collecting all the junk Madison Avenue tells us we need to be happy or spending an inordinate amount of time studying the stock market or working on investments.

• Some worship personal fulfillment, even if it means divorcing their mate.

• For some, it’s the pursuit of leisure. There is no time for personal or family devotions. No time for getting to know lost neighbors. There’s no time to serve in the church or community but there is time for TV, movies, videogames, sports, or other hobbies.

The second command Jacob gives is “purify yourselves and change your garments” (35:2). This sounds strange to our modern ears. Yet, we must keep in mind that most people today are accustomed to indoor plumbing, fragrant soap, and ample wardrobes, so we forget that the ancient, nomadic people in Bible lands had none of these conveniences. For that matter, our modern hygienic practices and facilities were totally unknown, even in Western civilization, during most of its history. What we call necessities would have been considered luxuries by our ancestors. Thus, in Scripture, washing the body and changing clothes is quite significant. It signifies making a new beginning. Like dirt, sin is defiling and must be washed away (Psa 51:2; Psa 51:7; Isa 1:16; 2Co 7:1; 1Jn 1:9). Our old garments typify the old life with its failures (Isa 64:6), but God in His mercy gives us “new garments” so we can make a fresh beginning (3:21; Exo 19:9-15; Isa 61:10; Zec 3:1-5; Luk 15:22; Eph 4:22-24; Rev 3:18). For some of us this will mean new behavior. We forsake immorality. For others it will mean a new wardrobe. We stop showing skin. For others it will mean a new attitude, new entertainment, new priorities, etc.

It is significant that Jacob called God the One “who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone” (35:3b). That epithet serves as a fitting summary of the picture of God that has emerged from the Jacob narratives. Jacob was in constant distress; yet, in each instance, God remained faithful to His promise and delivered him. Whether you are aware of it or not, if you are a believer in Christ, this is the story of your life. God has been with you wherever you have gone, even in your seasons of disobedience and sin. And He is the One that answers you in your day of trouble.

How did Jacob’s family and company respond to his orders? Moses records these words: “So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem” (35:4). There is an immediate response of obedience. Verse 4 demonstrates the natural outcome of spiritual leadership. In 35:2-3, Jacob exercised spiritual leadership and the family and company followed. Husbands and fathers, our wives and children are looking for us to step up and lead. They want to follow. They want to respect us. It may not be easy initially. There may be a season of transition. But since this is God’s intention and design, if we play by His rules, we can expect that eventually His purposes will be accomplished in our homes. Husband and father, today you may sense the Spirit’s conviction. You know that you have not been the spiritual leader God has called you to be. I have four words for you: “Better late than never!” This is your day. Like Jacob, you can capitalize TODAY! While you can’t get back the years you’ve lost, you can redeem the time and begin today to be the man God wants you to be (Eph 5:15-16).

Before moving on, notice that the family and company gave all of their idols to Jacob and it was Jacob who hid or buried these idols. Back in 31:34, Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat on them. Now here, their burial beneath the oak of Shechem ridicules these idols as worthless and pathetic items that are really no gods at all. Jacob’s hands and fingers must have been covered with dirt from digging holes to bury idols, yet the dirt and calluses depict a self-sufficient schemer and trickster who has been transformed into a dependent servant.

The oak referred to here seems to have been the oak of Moreh (lit. “teacher”) where God had appeared to Abraham shortly after he had entered the land (12:6). At the same spot, possibly prompted by Jacob’s example, Joshua issued a very similar call to Israel. In Jos 24:15, Joshua commanded the people of Israel to “… choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” Later, in Jos 24:23, he said, “…put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” There comes a time when we must draw a line in the sand. Have you drawn your line?

In 35:5, Moses writes, “As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.” The inclusion of the phrase “the sons of Jacob” suggests that the other cities feared Jacob’s boys (cf. Deu 11:25) because of what they had done to the people of Shechem. Yet, it also seems evident that as Jacob obeyed the Lord, the Lord protected Jacob and his family by causing a great terror to fall on the surrounding cities. Admittedly, this is rather ironic. Throughout his life, Jacob has had to contend with his own fears-fear of God (28:17), fear of Laban (31:31), and fear of Esau (32:7, 11). Nobody had been in fear of him…angry, yes; fearful, no. Yet here, it is the terror of God that protects him. What a powerful truth: God can accomplish far more through His powerful means than we can pull off through all of our sinful scheming.

As a result of this terror, “Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother” (35:6-7). Jacob faithfully fulfilled his vow to God at Luz, which he renamed Bethel (house of God, 35:15). He named the place of his altar El-Bethel (God of Bethel, 35:7) in memory of God’s first revelation to him there.

In 35:8, we read these sobering words: “Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth [“Oak of Weeping”].” Deborah (cf. 24:59) must have been an important member of Jacob’s household to merit this notation. She was a favorite nanny who may have left Beersheba with Jacob or may have joined him later, after the death of Rebekah. The reference to Deborah is probably a way of reminding the reader of Rebekah and alluding to her death in a veiled manner. This may have been appropriate in view of Rebekah’s deception of Isaac (ch. 27). How sobering! Women, this should serve as a great reminder to not deceive your husbands.

This verse is the first of three deaths mentioned in this chapter. This is intended to demonstrate that Jacob’s new step of faith didn’t prevent him from experiencing new problems and trials. Being a victorious Christian doesn’t mean escaping the difficulties of life and enjoying only carefree days. Rather, it means walking with God by faith, knowing that He is with us, and trusting Him to help us for our good and His glory, no matter what difficulties He permits to come our way. The maturing Christian doesn’t pray, “How can I get out of this?” but “What can I get out of this?” Are you in the midst of a severe trial today? I pray that this will be your response as you continue to be faithful to the Lord.

In 35:9-12, the Lord reconfirms His covenant with Jacob. “Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him” (35:9). Upon Jacob’s obedience, God again appears to Jacob and then blesses him in three ways.

• First, God renames Jacob: “God said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’ Thus He called him Israel” (35:10). Why does God rename Jacob for the second time (32:28)? Because men and women are prone to forget. Yet, we must remember our identity is not shaped by our past but our future. It is not based on our performance; it is based on Christ’s performance.

• Second, God promises Jacob many descendants: “God also said to him, ‘I am God Almighty [El Shaddai]; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you’” (35:11). God’s words, “be fruitful and multiply” recalls clearly the original blessing of creation (1:28) and, hence, shows God to be still “at work” in bringing about the blessing to all mankind through Jacob. Furthermore, for the first time since 17:16 (“kings of peoples will come from her”), the

mention is made of royalty (“kings,” 35:11) in the promised line.

• Third, God promises Jacob land: “The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you” (35:12). God’s promise of land was first given to Abraham and then to Isaac, and was renewed here with Jacob. God’s blessing of Jacob when his dedication was complete, illustrates God’s response to those who fully obey Him.

In 35:13-15, Moses records Jacob’s response to God’s promises. “Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.” Jacob solemnized this occasion by setting up a second pillar (cf. 28:18) that perpetuated the memory of God’s faithfulness for the benefit of his descendants. He not only set the stone apart as special, by pouring oil on it as he had done 30 years earlier, but also made an offering to God there and renamed the place “Bethel.” Jacob celebrates God. He acknowledges it is by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a picture of the Christian life. It is to be a life of celebration that is lived out under the influence of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18-21).

Jacob is riding high. Things are going well. He is in a great place spiritually. Still, all of Jacob’s problems are not behind him. Someone has said that the person whose problems are all behind him or her is probably a school bus driver!

In 35:16a, Jacob’s caravan “journeyed from Bethel.” Before we go any further, it is important to recognize that Jacob is not disobedient to God in leaving Bethel. God’s instructions to go to Bethel and “live there” (35:1) were evidently directions to dwell there while he fulfilled his vow. God did not command permanent residence there. Moses continues “…and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. When she was in severe labor the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear, for now you have another son.’ It came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin” (35:16b-18). Ben-oni means “son of my sorrow” (35:18). Can you imagine this? “What’s your name?” “My name is ‘Depression.’” “How are you doing, Depression?” “Terrible.” For Rachel, Benjamin’s birth was a fatally painful experience. However, the birth of his twelfth son alleviates Jacob’s sorrow over Rachel’s death. So he names his son Benjamin, meaning “The son of my right hand.” One thing boxers know is to watch out for the right hand! The left hand is to set up the right. Jacob is saying, “This son of mine is going to be powerful and meaningful to me.” This is the only son that Jacob named, which suggests his renewed leadership of the family. Benjamin was born in the land that later became part of his tribe’s allotment. His birth there gave him title to it. He was also born near the same town where Jesus was born (Mat 2:1). It’s amazing to see how the Scriptures fit together.

In 35:19-21, we read these words: “So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.” Jacob buried Rachel near Ephrath, an older name for Bethlehem (“house of bread”). Ironically, Rachel, who had cried in desperation to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die” (30:1), died giving birth to a child. So again, Jacob must grieve through the course of his life walking with God. Men, one day you may bury your wife. Live your marriage as if it is that day. Pray that you may outlive your wife so that you can provide for her all the days of her life.

In 35:22a, Moses writes these disturbing words: “It came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine, and Israel heard of it.” This was not an act of passion or lust. Instead, Reuben was seeking to accomplish two things: First, Reuben wanted to prevent Rachel’s maid, Bilhah, from succeeding Rachel as his father’s favorite wife. By making Bilhah detestable to Jacob, Reuben hoped that he would turn to his mother, Leah. (Taking the concubine of one’s predecessor was a perverted way of claiming to be the new lord of the bride.) Second, Reuben wanted to assert his position as the rightful heir to Jacob. In the ancient Near East, a man who wanted to assert his superiority over another man might do so by having sexual relations with that man’s wife or concubine.

Reuben acts as the firstborn since the others sons have disqualified themselves. His dream is that the two most powerful people in Israel will be him and his mom. Yet, this sinful act would come back to haunt Rueben. In the end, he forfeited his rights as the firstborn son of Jacob (49:3-4). Judah obtained the right to rule as head of the family, and Levi got the right to be the family priest eventually. The double portion of his father’s inheritance went to Joseph, who realized it through his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Reuben also lost the privilege of being in the direct line of the promised Messiah (1Ch 5:1-2).

Sin always has costly consequences. In the end, it is never worth it. Thus, the goal must be to live with the end in mind. Today, contemplate where your sin might take you. Can you handle the price tag?

While Jacob has made some strides in this chapter, again he demonstrates his passivity. Moses puts it like this, “Israel heard of it.” Jacob was told of Rueben’s sinful actions but did nothing about it. My guess is that Jacob’s own sin and guilt over stealing Esau’s birthright and blessing, as the first-born son of Isaac, prevented him from taking disciplinary action against his own son. Much in the same way that King David’s sin with Bathsheba prevented him from taking action against his son, Absalom, who slept with his father’s concubines (2Sa 16:21-22).

Amazingly, in spite of the dysfunction of Jacob’s family, God’s plan would be worked out in human history through Jacob’s 12 sons (see 1Co 1:26-29). Our passage closes in 35:22b-29. “Now there were twelve sons of Jacob-the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid: Dan and Naphtali; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.” Jacob had left Beersheba with only a staff in his hand. Now he returned with 12 sons, a large household, and much livestock. Through Jacob’s 12 sons God would fulfill His promises.

The end of the Jacob narratives is marked by the death of his father, Isaac. The purpose of this notice is not simply to record Isaac’s death but rather to show the complete fulfillment of God’s promise to Jacob (28:21). According to Jacob’s vow, he had asked that God watch over him during his sojourn and return him safely to the house of his father. Thus, the conclusion of the narrative marks the final fulfillment of these words as Jacob returned to the house of his father, Isaac, before he died. The Bible says that when he died he was “gathered to his people, old and full of years.” That thought of being “gathered to his people” is an early hint of life after death. This, incidentally, is the last recorded time that Jacob and Esau meet. Many years earlier they had separated because of their father; now they had come together to bury him (35:27-29).

Like Jacob, have you spent the last 30 years only 30 miles short of God's will? Jacob's reconciliation with God, at Bethel, required several actions on Jacob's part: First, he had to come to the point where he stopped going his own sinful way and once again obeyed that which he knew to be God's will. Second, he had to get rid of the foreign gods he had tolerated, which were so offensive to God. Finally, he had to be reconciled with his family members whom he had injured and offended by his sins (Mat 5:23-24; Mat 18:15-17). It is very important that God's people follow through and keep the commitments they have made concerning participation in His program. When they commit themselves to Him in purity and worship, He commits Himself to blessing them.

Have you ever learned a language? It is difficult and can be very discouraging. After several months of learning, there is the frequent temptation to quit. Yet, it is important to go back to the beginning of the process. When we first looked at Greek, Spanish, French, or German, even the alphabet looked like chicken-scratch. It can be helpful to remember how far we've come.

This is also true in the spiritual life. There are times when we look at our spiritual walk and feel as if we haven't gotten anywhere. We can feel overwhelmed by our failures and our inability to master the Christian life. Those are the times when we need to pause and look back so that we can gain an appreciation of how far God has brought us. God does not demand instant perfection, but He leads us little by little, making inroads into our self-centeredness and doing His work in our lives one step at a time.

Chapter 45

\"A Hairy Tale\" (Gen 36:1-43; Gen 37:1)

What is one of the most fascinating things to do in your spare time? Study your genealogy, of course! While it may not seem like your idea of an evening well spent, there is a growing interest among many people to trace their family lineage, to have a better sense of their own identity, to discover how they fit into the larger picture of human history. For many people, researching their family genealogy is a hobby. For others it is an obsession! In fact, some of the most frequented sites on the Internet today are sites that help people research their family history.

Now I am willing to grant the possibility that studying one's own genealogy might be an enlightening experience, but studying someone else's genealogy can be terribly dull and lifeless. Yet, the Bible is full of genealogies. Not only are these genealogies particularly challenging to teach, it is rather tricky just to read them because of all the difficult names. Nevertheless, we are going to study Esau's genealogy in Genesis 36. Now even if you read your Bible, I'll bet that Genesis 36 is a chapter you don't spend much time thinking about. It's one of those chapters that makes you wonder, if you're honest, why it's in the Bible. There are a bunch of names which mean nothing to us and about whom we can learn very little. They lived and died almost 4,000 years ago, linked together with the common thread of being Esau's descendants. It's like reading a telephone book in a foreign language. For these reasons, Genesis 36 is one of those texts that most Christians flip past and most pastors refuse to teach. But the fact remains that God considered the genealogy of Esau important enough to include in the canon of Scripture (2Ti 3:16-17). The question is, "Why?" I would suggest at least four reasons:

• To record the fulfillment of God's promises to Esau. Despite the fact that Esau forfeited his birthright and blessing, God ensured that he would have his own identity, nation, and family history (17:5-7). God is a faithful God that can be trusted to keep His promises.

• To protect the descendents of Esau. The first readers of this chapter were the Israelites who were about to cross over the Jordan River to possess the land of Canaan and to annihilate the Canaanites (Deu 1:8; Deu 20:16-18). There were, however, some people who were not to be attacked or annihilated. Among those whom God protected were a people called the Edomites, the descendants of Esau (Deu 2:2-5). And so, to prevent this command from being violated, it was essential for those Israelites of Moses' day to know who the Edomites were and to have a carefully documented record of the generations of Esau (i.e., Gen 36).

• To prove that the Messiah would come from a particular family. The biblical genealogies include some people and eliminate others, ultimately stopping at the only remaining branch of the family of David. This is the family that Jesus was born into. All of the genealogies help include and exclude those who will be a part of His line. Note: In the early first century, no one attempted to deny the claim that Jesus was a descendant of David. There were clear records kept until A.D. 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, the foundation stands as sure today.

• To remind us that every person counts in God's eyes. Someone else's genealogy may not be of any interest to you, but to the people and families it represents, it is precious. Each of these names represents the life of a man or woman-individuals made in the image of God who had hopes, dreams, and aspirations just like you and me.

As we reflect on this genealogy, my hope is that you will be challenged to stop and think about the true meaning of life and success. For if we succeed by worldly standards, but fail with God, we fail where it really matters. Esau and his descendants succeeded in this world but failed terribly in light of eternity. Genesis 36 reveals four principles that we can learn from.

1. A beautiful and successful family by the world's standards does not equal a family blessed by God (36:1-6, 9-14). Verse 1 begins with: "Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, Edom)." The name Esau means "Red." This is a reference and reminder of Esau's foolish decision to trade the birthright and blessing of his father, Isaac, for a pot of red stew (25:30). Esau was a man that lived for short-term gratification. This led to many mistakes that cost him dearly.

One of the most significant mistakes Esau made is found in 36:2-3. Moses tells us, "Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan" (36:2a). First, we must notice that Esau took more than one wife. Practically speaking, it should go without saying that this is never a good idea. Besides, we know from our previous studies that this type of arrangement is not God's will. In the beginning, God called Adam and Eve "man" and "woman" that they might cling to each other. Adam and Eve were a single family unit. There was no Evone, Evette, and Eva Jane…just Eve! Men, God's design is one woman for one lifetime. You may say, "Listen, I'm not a polygamist. I'm still married to my one wife." Yet, I would ask: Are you committed to her with your eyes? Or do you have your own visual harem? The Bible calls each of us to be a "one-woman man" (1Ti 3:2). Whether married or single, God calls you and me to a high level of purity.

In this genealogy, Moses records three of Esau's wives. Esau's wives were no doubt beautiful women, as their names indicate. Names weren't given just because they sounded nice-they had meaning.

• Adah ("ornament," "the adorned one"),

• Oholibamah ("tent height," i.e., "tall, stately"),

• Basemath ("the perfumed one")

Note that each of their names focuses on some outward feature of beauty or sensuality. Esau was plainly a lover of fine women. He chose the most attractive women to marry. Yet, he no doubt learned that there was more to a woman than her looks. Men, I hope we learn that lesson again and again. If you're single you should look for someone that you're attracted to, but "gird up your loins" and don't let them rule you. Look for a woman with a gentle and quiet spirit (1Pe 3:4). Look for a woman that is spiritually provocative. Married men, this also applies to you. Don't focus on the weight that your wife has gained. Don't let her wrinkles and her cellulite bother you. If this is a struggle for you, I have just the remedy…look in the mirror at yourself. I'm sorry, but this cracks me up. Many men complain about their wife's appearance when they are nothing to look at themselves! Husband, love and nurture your wife.

Most tragically, Esau took his wives from the Canaanites, even though marriage to the Canaanites was strictly forbidden. Esau's grandfather, Abraham, had gone to great lengths to find a proper wife for Isaac, making his servant, Eliezer, swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites (24:1-9). But Esau spat upon this when, in open defiance, he took wives from the idolatrous Hittites and brought them to his tents within the camp, where "they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah" (26:35 NET). Later, still lacking spiritual discernment, he took a wife from the descendants of Ishmael (28:9). A man's choice in marriage showcases his values and is almost always the determining factor in the trajectory of his own life. Esau made his own bed-for life. Men and women, please choose your future spouse wisely. The Bible is

clear that believers are to marry “only in the Lord” (1Co 7:39).

From these unions came five sons (36:4-5). Esau’s kids were born leaders-talented and strong. Yet, there is no indication that Esau raised them to know the Lord. In this chapter, there are 81 names listed, yet only two names hint at a belief in the true God: “Reuel” (36:4, 10), Esau’s son by Basemath, means “friend of God”; “Jeush” (36:5, 14), Oholibamah’s son, means “the Lord helps.” Esau, the grandson of the godly Abraham, the favorite son of peaceful Isaac, was a successful man whose sons and grandsons after him were successful men, by worldly standards. But they all failed at what matters most because they left God out of their lives.

The most important thing you can impart to your kids is not how to be a worldly success. It’s easy to encourage our children to succeed in the wrong ways. They may make the football team or be the homecoming queen. They may score well on the SAT and go to the best colleges and get the best paying jobs. But if they fail with God, all that stuff doesn’t matter. We need to instill in our children what it means to succeed with God. Dad and Mom, this means that you must encourage your kids spiritually. Do your kids enjoy attending church? Are they involved in youth group? Do they have personal devotions? If so, tell them how proud of them you are. Give them accolades for spiritual desires! Work with your kids on their kids’ choir and Awana projects. Support them in every way you can with their spiritual endeavors! Look for creative ways that you can stimulate them to love and good deeds (Heb 10:25).

It’s significant that there is no mention of barren wives when it comes to Esau’s line. Abraham had God’s promise of many descendants, but his wife Sarah was barren. Isaac had the same promises, but Rebekah could not conceive for the first 20 years of their marriage. Jacob’s favored wife, Rachel, was barren for a long time. But Esau’s wives bore him five sons and a number of daughters with no trouble (36:4-6).

Esau represents the natural man-strong, capable, independent, able to cope with life’s problems with his own resources. Who needs to depend on God for things when you can take care of it yourself? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their barren wives, represent God’s way of working. He humbles our pride by shutting us up with problems we are incapable of solving-problems like barren wives in the face of promises to make us into a great nation. Then, when we call on Him, He proves Himself mighty to save.

Esau had a beautiful family by the world’s standards. But in the end, I’m sure he would have traded it all for a family that was right with God.

2. Material prosperity does not equal spiritual prosperity (36:6-8). In 36:6-8, Moses writes about Esau’s relocation. “Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom.” This account sounds a lot like the episode between Abraham and Lot (13:1-13). Esau had begun to settle among his wives’ relations, in Seir, before Jacob came from Padan-aram, but after his father’s death, he now makes the move permanent. There are two reasons for this: First, there wasn’t sufficient water and pasture for both Esau’s and Jacob’s flocks and herds. Second, Esau had finally come to accept that the promised land of Canaan that God had covenanted to Abraham was to be passed on to Jacob.

Esau had become a very gracious man. At one time he had threatened to kill his brother for his deception, but now when their mutual prosperity necessitated it, he graciously moved out of his brother’s way. It was

nice of Esau to be so agreeable. But, sadly, he had no vision for God's promises to Abraham concerning Canaan. Ever since God called Abraham, He repeatedly emphasized Canaan as the land He would give to Abraham's descendants. But for Esau, any nice land would do. He had no spiritual vision. He was living for himself, not for God's purpose. He was materially rich, but spiritually poor.

To his credit, Esau was not greedy. When he saw Jacob, after their 20 years apart, he declined Jacob's gift by saying, "I have plenty, my brother. Keep your things." But it's possible to be generous, contented people, but still to be living for material possessions, not for God. The danger is that our material prosperity dulls our senses with regard to our desperate need for God. The Lord warned the church in Laodicea, "... you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). We American Christians, who have been so blessed materially, need to be careful to become rich toward God by laying up treasures in heaven (Luk 12:13-34).

3. Political power does not equal power with God (36:15-43). Esau and his descendants were men of great political power. They are called "chiefs" (36:15 ff.; 40 ff.) and "kings" (36:31 ff.). These men reigned as kings in Edom before any king reigned in Israel (36:31). Esau's sons, who walked away from God, had the distinction of being kings long before Jacob's sons to whom it was promised. While Esau's sons and grandsons would become rulers, Jacob's sons remained lowly shepherds for generations (47:3). Esau's sons could have looked at Jacob's sons and scoffed, "Where is your God and His promises?"

Isn't that how it often seems-that the world is winning, while God's people are losing? We'll reign with Christ someday, but meanwhile the church is often persecuted and disregarded by powerful, political leaders who laugh at God. But we need to remember that political power and power with God are two different things. The world may boast now in its political power, but He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them (Psa 2:4). It is the Lord who "removes kings and establishes kings" (Dan 2:21). While it is fine for Christian people to be involved in politics, we need to keep things in perspective. Political power is always subject to Him who is "ruler over the realm of mankind," who "bestows it on whom He wishes" (Dan 4:17). True power is having power with God. In the short-term, the Edomites became chiefs and kings in this world, but in the long-term, Jacob's descendents would become kings and priests of the most high God. It is so important for you and me to have patience to wait on the fulfillment of God's program.

Esau's kingdom, Edom, later caused great trouble to Israel. There were frequent wars between the two nations. Edom cheered those who attacked God's people (Psa 137:7; Obadiah). Amalek, Esau's grandson (36:12), became the founder of a people who were a perennial enemy of Israel (Exo 17:8-16). There is a repeated emphasis in Genesis 36, that Esau is Edom (36:1, 8, 9, 19, and 43). The significance of this otherwise unnecessary repetition seems to be that God wanted His people to see what results when a man lives apart from Him. From this one man, Esau, an outwardly good man, a likable man, a successful man from the world's perspective, came the godless nation Edom, which often plagued the people of God. So God says, "Remember: Esau is Edom!"

4. Temporal fame does not equal eternal recognition by God (37:1). Moses writes, "Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan" (37:1). While Esau was out conquering the land of Edom, founding a nation, fathering kings, and making a great worldly success of himself, Jacob was quietly living in a land he didn't even own, the land where his fathers had sojourned. While Esau's descendants were mighty chieftains, famous in their day, Jacob's descendants were down in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh. By Moses' day (over 400 years later), Israel was a fledgling nation of slaves,

recently escaped from Egypt, owning no land of their own. Edom was an established kingdom that had the power to refuse Israel passage over their land. But this tour through Genesis 36 shows us that God, not man, writes the final chapter of history. These once-famous names don't mean a thing to our world today, but Israel's name is in the news almost daily. These men, successful by the world's measure, passed off the scene and were soon forgotten as others clamored to take their place. Today, we don't know anything more about them than is written here. Fame is a fleeting thing. The Edomite race endured until the time of Christ, when they were known as Idumeans. They disappeared from history in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed.

What really matters is recognition by God, not by this world. We live in a culture that worships fame. If an athlete, a musician, or an actor or actress becomes a Christian, we rush his life story into print and hustle him onto the TV talk shows. The guy may be a babe in Christ, who doesn't know anything about the Bible, but we listen to his every word as if he's a spiritual authority. But the recognition that counts will come soon, when we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master" (Mat 25:21; Mat 25:23). In that day, real success and failure will be unveiled. Until that time, we should be careful to not make a big deal about earthly success or failure. Only God knows who is truly successful and who is not (1Co 4:1-5).

What are we to make of Esau? The Hebrew writer provides this commentary on Esau's fateful decision: "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears" (Heb 12:15-17).

Most exegetes who discuss the matter believe that Esau was an unbelieving, lost soul. The main reason is found in the passage already cited in Hebrews. But the question is: Does this refer to Esau's entire life? Is it his life epitaph? Or does it apply to the event early in his life when he sold his birthright and lost his blessing-a time when his life was characterized by immorality and unholy conduct. As to the famous statement quoted in Rom 9:13 : "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated," which Paul uses to illustrate God's sovereign choice of Jacob over Esau, it must be remembered that this is a quotation from Mal 1:2-3, which is a centuries-later oracle of judgment against the Edmoites for their abuse of Israel.

When everything is considered, I think it is quite possible that Esau indeed became a believer. After his 20-year separation from Jacob, Esau manifested supernatural love and forgiveness. One day the second tablet of the law would be summed up by a call to love your neighbor as you love yourself (Lev 19:18), and here Esau appeared to be doing just that. Perhaps it was because he had first come to love God.

If this is so, this passage becomes even more applicable. Whether you are a believer or an unbeliever, it is possible to waste your life. That's why it is so important to ask yourself the question, "What am I living for?" What a shame to live your life like Esau, wondering, "What if ...?" While we still live, we all have a choice: to join Jacob and his descendants in waiting patiently for God to fulfill His covenant promises to us, as we labor for His coming kingdom, or to look over at Esau, prospering in the world, and join him in the pursuit of secular success. If we succeed by worldly standards but fail with God, we have failed where it really matters. Whether we fail or succeed by worldly standards, if we succeed with God, we will have true and lasting success. You are writing history. Every day you live, the choices you make, the things you say, and the actions you take are becoming a part of history. You are influencing the eternal destiny of others (one way or the other). How you conduct yourself in your marriage, with your children, in your work, and in the

community is incredibly important! You are leaving a legacy for those who will follow in your steps (Pro 20:7). I urge you, please live your life with eternity in mind (Eph 5:15-16).

Additional Lessons from Esau's Family Tree:

- **Your life matters to God (Mat 10:29-31).**
- **There is a high price for spiritual compromise (Gal 6:7-8).**
- **You can forfeit blessings that could have been yours (Gen 25:29-34; cf 2Jn 1:8).**
- **Patience while others prosper is a demonstration of faithfulness.**

Chapter 46

\"Extreme Home Break-Up\" (Gen 37:2-36)

A story as intriguing as the one found in Genesis 37 does not need an introduction. Beginning with 37:2a, Moses writes: “These are the records of the generations of Jacob” (37:2a). While the next 14 chapters of Genesis include Jacob, the storyline focuses on Jacob’s sons. And of his 12 sons, special interest is spent on Joseph. This means ¼ of the book of Genesis is devoted to this one man.

Moses writes, “Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives” (37:2b). Notice that Joseph is 17 and is “still a youth.” This demonstrates that it’s possible to be 17 and godly (1Ti 4:12). Age is not the determining factor when it comes to godliness. The reality is there are only two classes of people in the church: mature and immature. Teenagers who have a great love and passion for the Lord are putting many adults who have been saved for decades to shame. Thus, we must judge spirituality not by age and knowledge but by maturity and obedience.

Joseph is tending his father’s flock “with his brothers,” the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (i.e., Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, cf. 35:25-26). He is learning one of the lessons of leadership: You do not become somebody until you become nobody! If you want to become a leader, you must first be a servant. Only then will you follow in Jesus’ example and one day become a servant-leader (Mar 10:45; Joh 13:3-17). This description also prefigures Joseph’s later shepherding role in relation to his brothers, after they became dependent on him.

Moses concludes 37:2 with these words: “And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father.” The reference to the “bad report” is not very specific. Elsewhere, the word “report” (dibbah) is always used in the negative sense of an untrue report. It denotes news slanted to damage the victim (Pro 10:18). Thus, some scholars suggest that Joseph misrepresented the facts and maligned his brothers. Likely, his report was essentially true, but not perfectly so-due to exaggeration or inaccuracies. So young Joseph, in effect, became a tattler. This did not bode well for young Joseph.

In 37:3, Moses writes: “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic.” Jacob loved Joseph “more than all his sons” because he was born to Jacob when he was old. Joseph made Jacob feel virile and masculine. (There’s smoke in the engine: “I may be old, but I’m not dead yet.”) As a result, Jacob threw gasoline on the fire by giving Joseph a special robe. Now anytime a father attempts to dress his teenage son, something is wrong…very wrong. The “varicolored tunic” was probably a long robe extending all the way down to the wrists and ankles; as opposed to the ordinary, shorter one with no sleeves that working men wore. It was a garment that distinguished its wearer as a person of special distinction, who was not required to do the ordinary work of laborers. It marked Joseph as a “white collar worker,” while his brothers were mere “blue collar workers.” Joseph’s brothers hated this garment and what it symbolized, for their first act of violence was to strip his coat from him (37:23).

In 37:4, Moses goes on to say, “His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.” Favoritism has a long history in Jacob’s family (Isaac’s preference for Esau, Rebekah’s for Jacob, and Jacob’s preference for Rachel). In every case it created major problems. Jacob, of all people, should have understood this. His father loved his

brother more than him. While Jacob should have been sensitive to favoritism, he repeats the sin of his parents. Parents, learn from the mistakes of Jacob's family: Do not show favoritism toward any of your children (see Jam 2:1; Jam 2:9). Favoritism in a home is deadly. It will change the entire dynamics of your home and will affect your children for years to come.

Let me make some suggestions to parents. In order to convey our love to our children:

• We must look for the praiseworthy attributes of our children and then celebrate those traits. In other words, talk about and be proud of who God made them to be and what they do well.

• We must affirm an unconditional love that is not based on whether or not our child "produces."

• We must be alert to those sensitive areas in our children and be careful not to attack them in those areas when we are angry with them.

• We must strive to be consistent from one child to the next.

• We must present adverse consequences of misbehavior ahead of time and then follow through if tested. (Sometimes the best way to say, "I care" is to discipline…to not discipline is to be seen as not caring.)

I hope this passage encourages you to build a relationship with a child, grandchild, niece, or nephew that may feel unloved. These suggestions may help you to do that.

• Write them a note telling them what you appreciate and cherish about them…be specific.

• Give them a call and tell them you were thinking about them. One of the best things we can do for our children is to let them know that we love them.

• Ask them about their life and look them right in the eye while they are talking to you!

• Spend a day together doing something with them.

• Let them hear you pray for them.

Maybe your parents made (or are now making) some mistakes in dealing with you. You can get mad and bitter at them (or even at God) for all the wrongs they've done. You can blame them for not protecting you from things that damaged your life or for showing favoritism to your brothers and sisters or for being passive parents. Or, you can trust that God has sovereignly placed you in your family. Even though you don't understand everything taking place, you can thank God because you know that He will use all these hardships for ultimate good (Rom 8:28). You can ask Him to take away your bitterness and make you the channel of His love. But no matter what our family background or circumstances, we're responsible to obey the Lord. Even if you come from an appalling background, God expects you to deal with your sin by confessing and forsaking it as you obey Him in response to His grace and love as shown to you in Christ.

Tragically, the brothers don't express their concerns to Dad; instead, they hate Joseph. This should not be…their real problem is with their father. They need to deal with him. It is important to recognize that the growth of conflict between the brothers was rooted in the problems within the marriage. The same results are seen in 1 Sam 1, where polygamy produced inevitable competition and conflict between the wives. Of

course, polygamy is not necessary in order for conflict to occur. Any breakdown in the husband and wife relationship has serious spillover effects on all the relationships in the home. This is why it is so very important that spouses prioritize their relationship with each other over their relationships with their children. Even if you spend gobs of time with your kids and love them unconditionally, if there is not harmony in the home, your children will suffer. Husband, love your wife; wife, respect your husband.

Our story continues in 37:5-11: “Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, ‘Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.’ Then his brothers said to him, ‘Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?’ So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, ‘Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.’ He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, ‘What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?’ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.” Joseph has two dreams in this section. Dreams in the Joseph narrative come in pairs (Gen 40-41) to show that the matter is firmly decided by God and will come quickly (see 41:32). An isolated dream might be misinterpreted. Two dreams with the same meaning confirm the interpretation. Joseph’s first dream involves sheaves, which subtly points to his future role in overseeing all of Egypt’s grain distribution. Amazingly, 23 years later, in fulfillment of Joseph’s dream, all eleven of his brothers would prostrate themselves in submission to Joseph, on at least five different occasions (42:6-7; 43:26, 28; 44:14-16; 50:18). Joseph’s second dream is far more graphic. It involves celestial imagery bowing down to him. It doesn’t take a Rhodes scholar to interpret this dream! Even the densest of Joseph’s brothers interpret his dream accurately.

There seems to be both faith and foolishness resident in Joseph sharing his dreams. Since God intervened in Joseph’s life and he shared his dreams with his family, there is evidence of faith. Joseph took God’s revelation that involved other people and shared it with them. He is being faithful to God’s initiative to reveal the future to his brothers. By boldly relating his dreams to his family, he demonstrates his faith that God revealed these dreams to him. Yet most Bible students argue that Joseph is guilty of outright foolishness and even sinful boasting. Joseph would have been wise to share his dreams with his dad, receive confirmation from him, and then decide whether or not to share them with his brothers. Both of these suggestions seem to carry some weight.

It is important to recognize that idle or fanciful dreams provide an occasion only for laughter. Under most circumstances, the worst that might be considered would be that Joseph needed to be put into a padded cell for his own protection. But if there were already evidence of Joseph’s authority, leadership, and capabilities, fear of even greater status and power would be acted upon swiftly and harshly. Yet, by Joseph sharing his dreams, God extended grace to the brothers. The brothers should have asked what set of circumstances would have to happen for this dream to come to pass.

Unfortunately, jealousy consumed them. Envy and jealousy are extremely destructive character traits. If you don’t resist them and take every thought captive and obedient to Christ (2Co 10:5), they have the potential to destroy your marriage, ruin your career, alienate you from friends and family, and strip you of spiritual joy and contentment. What stirs up thoughts of envy and jealousy for you?

• When someone talks about his or her many accomplishments.

• When others show you their new car, boat, computer, etc.

• When someone tells you about a large inheritance received.

• When someone gets an award, recognition, or promotion that you felt you deserved.

• When someone talks about their accomplishment in an area where your want to excel.

• When you hear others talk about the vacation you can't afford to take.

Envy is the root of almost every sin against believers. Whenever it is harbored, there is an end of all peace, rest, and satisfaction. Pro 14:30 says, "A tranquil spirit revives the body, but envy is rottenness to the bones" (cf. Pro 27:4; NET;). Jam 3:16 tells us, "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing."

While the brothers burn with jealous rage, Jacob keeps the matter in mind (37:11). Like Mary to come, he pondered in his heart the meaning of what he heard (Luk 2:19). Why would Jacob give such credence to this? Jacob believes Joseph makes honorable decisions. He realizes that Joseph is doing something intentional and very difficult when he speaks to his brothers and parents.

In 37:12-14, Moses writes, "Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them.' And he said to him, 'I will go.' Then he said to him, 'Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem" (37:12-14). It was not uncommon for shepherds to lead their flocks many miles from home in search of pasture. Shechem was about 50 miles north of Hebron. Jacob owned land there. Yet, the three references to "Shechem" are suspicious. Why hammer away at Shechem, when we will discover that the brothers aren't even there? It is likely to prepare the reader and Joseph for the treachery that lies ahead. (It was at Shechem that Joseph's brothers perpetrated, in the name of family loyalty, the most heinous deception and murderous rampage.) Furthermore, is Shechem a nice town? No! Are Jacob's sons nice boys? No! Whatever is going on in Shechem is not good! Yet, willingly Joseph obeys his father's commission. Obedience was the mark of Joseph, no matter what prospects lay ahead of him. In 37:17, we learn that the boys had traveled 15 miles north of Shechem to "Dothan." Clearly, the brothers didn't want to be followed. They were likely living large and enjoying a Cancun Spring Break.

Why does Jacob send his beloved son to check on his brothers? There's a clue in 37:14: Jacob wanted Joseph to check on "the welfare of the flock." Apparently, Jacob still struggles with greed. He wants to make sure that his wealth continues (cf. 30:43). However, in doing so he sends his son into a deathtrap…something that will haunt him for many years. The only explanation for why Jacob does this is: He doesn't really know his sons. Before we condemn Jacob, let's admit: It's easy for fathers, especially, to get out of touch with their children. You leave the house early in the morning and don't get home until dinner. After dinner, the kids are busy with homework and other activities. You sit down with the paper or in front of the TV. And so it goes. Your kids are in their world; you are in yours. You've lost touch with the things that are shaping their lives. It's easy to be right where Jacob was, to be an insensitive parent! But the point is, while Jacob was not right, and while we need to work at avoiding the same mistakes, God is

still sovereign, even when parents are insensitive and foolish. Jacob should have been wise enough not to show favoritism to Joseph and to protect him from this explosive situation. He wasn't; and he was responsible. But God was still in control.

In 37:15-17, we have a very interesting account: "A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, 'What are you looking for?' He said, 'I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock.' Then the man said, 'They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan." Joseph just happens to encounter a man who had overheard the conversation of his brothers and can direct him to them. Otherwise, he most certainly would not have found them (15 miles away), would have returned home, and theoretically saved himself a long tour of duty in Egypt. But instead God brought about a divine appointment! Moses expects the reader to infer from this incident that behind the scenes God is at work. God made sure that Joseph hooks up with his brothers, despite what his brothers are going to do to him. There is also great irony is these verses: Joseph, alone and vulnerable, is safer with a Shechemite than with his own brothers. The family is not always the safest place on earth. The family can be a very dangerous place. Maybe you've experienced this. Nevertheless, God is control of your family and your life.

There is a scene shift at 37:18, when Joseph reaches his brothers. Suddenly the narrative is given from the brothers' perspective. Moses writes, "When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer! (lit. "master of dreams" or "dream expert") Now then, come and let us kill him [4:8] and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!'" "We shall see what will become of his dreams!"

Can't you hear the sarcasm in their voices? The brothers saw Joseph coming. They hated him. They ridiculed him. They decided to kill him. Nothing good can ever come from plotting to kill another person. And yet the brothers are plotting to kill Joseph. They concoct a story to explain his disappearance. The brothers revealed the real reason for wanting to murder him. They say, "We shall then see what will become of his dreams." There's a strong warning in the Bible to those who would plot to take another person's life. If you want to read that warning, just read Prov, chapter 1 (esp. 1:10, 11, and 15). The Bible always warns us very carefully about the quality and the value of another life.

In 37:21-24, Moses writes, "But Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, 'Let us not take his life.' Reuben further said to them, 'Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him'-that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father. So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it." Reuben was the oldest. He was the firstborn. He was the decision-maker in the family. He was apparently not part of the family group that was plotting to kill Joseph. That consisted probably of sons Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher-the four sons against whom Joseph brought a bad report (cf. 37:2).

If you recall from 35:22, Reuben committed incest with his father's concubine, Bilhah, stripping himself of the privileges of the first-born son. But despite his previous failure, he still felt the weight of responsibility and was compelled to do what he could to rescue his brother. But instead of simply standing up to his brothers and saying, "This is wrong! We can't do this!" he tries a more subtle approach by appealing to the logic and advantage of not shedding Joseph's blood. He planned to free Joseph later and restore him to

his father (37:22), perhaps as a way to get back on his dad's good side (after sleeping with his concubine). Once Joseph was in the pit, Reuben went off, perhaps to check on the flocks.

In 37:25a, Moses records these tragic words: "Then they sat down to eat a meal." The boys have lunch after they put Joseph in the pit. They are ruthless and cold. All they care about is their stomach. The callousness and cruelty of Joseph's brothers is shocking! There is no sense of guilt, no remorse, not even a loss of appetite. The next time the brothers would eat a meal in Joseph's presence he would sit at the head table (43:32-34). For the next 23 years, Joseph's cries for mercy would haunt them in their dreams and ring in their ears (see 42:21).

Our passage continues: "And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.' And his brothers listened to him. Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt" (37:25b-28). God, in His perfect timing, brings this caravan along to preserve Joseph's life and take him where He wants him to be. Judah, like Reuben, did not relish killing Joseph. Yet he was not willing to let him go free either. Probably he dreaded the prospect of Joseph receiving the rights of the first-born since he, Judah, was in line for Jacob's blessing. His suggestion that the brothers sell Joseph implies that he knew slave trading was common in Egypt. The price agreed on for Joseph was the same price that God later specified the Israelites should pay for a slave between the ages of five and twenty years, under the Mosaic economy (Lev 27:5). The "twenty shekels of silver" is also intended to remind us of how Judas sold out Christ for 30 pieces of silver. This is not happenstance. Joseph's life is designed to point to the life of the Lord Jesus.

In 37:29-30, Moses writes, "Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. He returned to his brothers and said, 'The boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?'" Reuben comes back to the pit, finds it empty, and panics. At this point we can discern his true motive in wanting to protect Joseph: He really was more concerned about protecting himself. As the oldest, he would have to answer to his father for whatever happened to his little brother. He was already in hot water with Jacob over the matter of sleeping with his concubine. He would have assumed that Joseph had escaped from the pit and fled for home, where he would tell Dad what happened. Joseph hadn't known that Reuben was planning to rescue him. Now Reuben would be in even more trouble! That's why when he hears what his brothers did, Reuben is quick to agree to their scheme. If he really was concerned about his brother he could have gone after the caravan and redeemed him.

In 37:31-32, Moses writes, "So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat and dipped the tunic in the blood; and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, 'We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not.'" One sin leads to other sins. This becomes one of the most well known cover-ups in the Bible. There is a sad irony in all this. Years earlier Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac, by offering him goat meat (27:16). Now his sons deceive him with the blood of a goat. The brothers undoubtedly prided themselves in the fact that they never said Joseph was dead. They simply "deceived" their father into believing this.

In 37:33-35, Moses records Jacob's response: "Then he examined it and said, 'It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!' So Jacob tore his clothes, and put

sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, 'Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.' So his father wept for him." Jacob felt the panic of losing his child. Imagine doing the funeral of your son. If you lost your child it would be devastating. Families with great sin often don't say a thing. The boys lived for years without ever telling their father what they did. Had Jacob believed more strongly in God's revelations in Joseph's dreams, he might not have jumped to the conclusion that Joseph was dead, and his sorrow might not have been as great (cf. 2Sa 18:33). Jacob's fears were groundless, but he did not realize this because he chose, in this instance, to live by sight rather than by faith.

Our story closes in 37:36 with these amazing words: "Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard." It was not coincidence that Joseph ended up in the home of one of the most responsible officers of Pharaoh's administration. Hidden from the logic of man's limited perspective, God was orchestrating His eternal and divine purposes for the preservation and deliverance of the people of Israel. God takes Joseph to Egypt to make him a great nation. But it would be 23 years of nightmare before Joseph's dream and God's ultimate plan for his life finally came to pass.

God is never defeated by our deceit. Jacob deceived. Jacob was deceived. The brothers hated. They envied. They plotted. They lied. And when you get to the end of the chapter, God has placed Joseph exactly where he needs to be to accomplish God's purposes. All of this points to the sovereignty of God. When you and I sin and go against the will of God, we don't thwart the purpose of God. We thwart ourselves. Our personal progress in the Lord is not all that it should be. Even if those around us do not display character, do not display integrity or honesty or godliness, we're still to do so. Because it's only when we have clean hands and a pure heart-it's only when we are useable to God that we can have a positive impact on those around us. Our job is not to work out the details. Joseph didn't. Our job is to remain pure and useable. God will work out the details. He did in the case of Joseph. He'll do it for you too.

God wants to grow you into a fruitful disciple who will impact earth and eternity. However, His plan for your life likely includes tests, trials, and tragedies. Most Christians resist this. We kick against the goads, yet God tends to deeply wound those that He uses greatly. To put it another way: The greater God's plan for us, the greater will be His training. You and I must receive God's sovereign training so that we can progress to be the people He wants us to be. As we submit our life to Him, He will accomplish more than we can ever ask or think.

Chapter 47

\"God’s Dirty Laundry\" (Gen 38:1-30)

Today, you may have been expecting to hear from Pastor Keith. However, your pastor asked me to speak to you instead. He believes that what I have to share will have a lasting impact on you. Let me introduce myself. My name is Judah. I am one of the 12 sons of Jacob. My name means, “praise.” Unfortunately, my life has not always lived up to my name. To be honest, I have made many mistakes in my life. I have many regrets. Genesis 38 records a scandalous story from my life that exposes some of the skeletons in my closet. I’d like to share this story with you and impart some of the lessons I’ve learned.

Scene 1 (38:1-11)

To begin with, I have the infamous “claim to fame” of persuading my brothers to sell our younger brother, Joseph, into slavery (37:26). I suggested this because I wanted a “profit” and didn’t want to kill Joseph. After committing this atrocity, I left my brothers’ company (38:1). I just didn’t want to live a boring life like my grandfather, Isaac, or my father, Jacob. I wanted some adventure and enjoyment out of life. I can tell you now that this was a grave mistake (cf. 1Co 15:33). Even though at this point my brothers were not a godly bunch, I moved away from the covenant people of God. In doing so I forsook any possible hope of accountability (cf. Heb 10:24-25).

I moved to Adullam and developed a friendship with a man named Hirah. In Adullam, I met a Canaanite girl, the daughter of Shua (38:2). It was “lust at first sight.” She was stunningly beautiful so I married her. To be honest, my sole attraction to this woman was purely physical. She was not devoted to God and had no interest in spiritual things. What a mistake it was to hook up with this woman (cf. 2Co 6:14-15). Sadly, I have no one to blame but myself. My grandfather, Isaac, and great grandfather, Abraham, made it clear that God’s people were not to marry Canaanites (24:3; 28:1). But I had to learn this lesson for myself. I came to understand that a spiritually mixed marriage will erode one’s faith.

Anyway, we had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah (38:3-5). Yes, Shelah is one of my sons. His name means “a son of Judah.” I found a wife for my firstborn, Er (38:6). Her name was Tamar. Tragically, my son, Er, was “evil in the sight of the Lord, so the LORD took his life” (38:7). The Bible does not say anything more than that, so I won’t either. But let me assure you that Er was not a godly young man. God was justified in taking his life. So I went to my next son, Onan, and asked him to marry Tamar and produce offspring for his deceased brother (38:8). While this must sound strange to your ears, this was a common practice in the Near East during the time I lived. This also became a part of God’s law (cf. Deu 25:5-10). It was called a “levirate marriage.” The word “levirate” comes from a Latin word meaning “husband’s brother.” In a levirate marriage, a brother would father a child through his brother’s widow and the child would take the name of the deceased husband, care for his mother in her old age, carry on the name of the deceased brother, and receive all of his inheritance. The purpose of this custom was to ensure that no line of the family would become extinct.

Unfortunately, my son Onan did not fulfill his duty as a brother and brother-in-law (cf. 38:8). Don’t get me wrong; he did have sex with Tamar. He was willing to gratify his desires, but was not willing to do the responsible thing. He refused to impregnate her (38:9). His reason was simple: Any kids that would come from their union would not be his! This was a birthright issue. Er was the firstborn and entitled to the birthright. If he has no offspring, the birthright will transfer to Onan. If, however, Tamar bears a son that is

considered Er's, the birthright will pass to that son. Of course Onan did not want this. His selfish heart had no love for his brother. Instead, he wanted what would have gone to his older brother's heir.

Needless to say, it greatly displeased God that Onan was deliberately frustrating the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. 11:4). Descendants were important in God's plans for His people. As a result, the Lord took Onan's life also.

Through the actions of my son, Onan, I now realized that I was being treated the same way that I had treated others, especially Joseph. I taught my sons the art of selfish living…and they paid with their lives. I failed to raise my sons to know and obey the Lord. Raising godly children is one of the greatest privileges God has given mankind. Moms, don't ever believe Satan's lies about the value of what you do in raising your children. And husbands don't ever believe the lie that raising children is women's work! (Cf. Eph 6:4) Fathers and mothers have a unique calling to raise their children in the Lord.

After losing my sons, Er and Onan, I started thinking: Two of my boys have been involved with Tamar and they are both dead! Mama didn't raise no fool! I was beginning to see a pattern! I concluded that Tamar was the problem. She was jinxed! So I sent Tamar back to her parent's home and told her that I would get back to her when Shelah, my last remaining son, was old enough (38:11).

I made a promise I had no intention of keeping. I looked Tamar right in the eye and lied to her! I promised her Shelah but was not going to let him get close to her. I sinned against Tamar by forcing her to live as a widow. I should have made certain that she had another legitimate opportunity to bear children. I should have cared for this defenseless widow. I was wicked to withhold my third son from Tamar…and now I was about to behave even more wickedly. Once we begin to compromise, further compromise gets easier and easier. In this story, my first crime led to a second.

Scene 2 (38:12-19)

After some time had passed, my wife died (38:12). I was about 50 years old at this time. After the period of mourning ended, I decided that it was high time to get on with my life. So my friend Hirah and I went to my sheepshearers at Timnah. Now I need to be honest and tell you that sheep shearing was a time for partying and celebration (cf. 1Sa 25:11; 1Sa 25:36; 2Sa 13:23; 2Sa 13:28). In fact, sexual temptation was everywhere due to the Canaanite, fertility, cult practice of ritual fornication. I walked into this knowing full well what I would encounter. But I was lonely and was seeking an out-of-town rendezvous.

Before I knew it, I came upon a prostitute on the road to Timnah. She was dressed in seductive clothing and had a veil over her face. I was immediately intrigued. I had to have her. So I turned aside to her by the road and propositioned her. The prostitute said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" I replied, "I will send you a young goat from my flock." A goat of all things! I can't believe I offered her a goat with my family history. My father, Jacob, deceived my grandfather, Isaac, by wearing a goatskin (27:9-10, 16). I deceived my father by dipping Joseph's robe in goat's blood (37:31). A goat? But at this moment, my hormones ruled me and I wasn't thinking clearly. The prostitute countered, "Will you give a pledge until you send the goat?" I inquired, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, "Your seal and your cord and your staff." The seal was a stamp engraved with a design that was uniquely mine. It was my identification and was used for all transactions. I wore my seal around my neck on a cord. I gave my identification to a prostitute in exchange for her body. What a travesty. After I committed this sinful act, I felt some remorse; however, I was able to get over it relatively quickly.

Scene 3 (38:20-26)

Quickly, I realized that I needed to pay the prostitute and retrieve my seal, cord, and staff. In my embarrassment and shame, I sent Hirah. I did not want anyone to catch me in the company of a prostitute.

The only thing that I was concerned about was my reputation. Hirah took the goat -the agreed upon price, but he could not find the prostitute (38:20). When he asked the men of the city where the temple prostitute was, they told him that there had been no temple prostitute in the region (38:21-22).

What was I to do? I had no choice but to let her keep my seal and staff. I had to drop the matter. After all, who in his right mind is going to call the authorities to report a robbery under these circumstances? I didn't want to be a laughing stock (38:23).

Three months later, I was informed that my daughter-in-law, Tamar, had played the prostitute and was pregnant (38:23). I was incensed! I was repulsed! No daughter-in-law of mine was going to be a pregnant, out-of-wedlock whore! In my rage, I yelled, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" (38:24) I continued to spew out venomous words. I was grateful to finally be rid of this nuisance!

As Tamar was on her way out to be burned she sent me a message. The message was straight to the point: "I am with child by the man to whom this seal, cord, and staff belong" (38:25). I was breathless upon hearing Tamar's words. I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach. My gaze fell on my personal seal, cord, and staff. You can't imagine the horror of this moment! (Cf. 2Sa 12:5-7) I realized I was a total hypocrite! (See Rom 2:1; Luk 12:2-3) I had slept with my daughter-in-law! Fortunately, I responded as well as I could. I acknowledged that Tamar was righteousness, not I. Please understand, I was not saying that Tamar was righteous. It would be impossible, by any stretch, to consider her actions as righteous. But in comparison to me, she was practically an angel! (Cf. 1Sa 24:16-18)

Now I know what you're all thinking: How in the world did this happen to me? Well, when I took off for my excursion in Timnah, word traveled to Tamar that I was going up to shear my sheep. Upon hearing this, she removed her widow's garments, put on new clothes, and covered herself with a veil. She obviously had some idea of my sexual inclinations or she would not have tried this risky plan. No doubt, she felt like she had no other choice, because my son Shelah had grown up and I had not given her to him as a wife (38:13-14). In my pathetic and sinful state, I had the honor to keep my obligation to a prostitute, but not to my own daughter-in-law.

Although Tamar's actions may seem strange to you, there is evidence that among ancient Assyrian and Hittite peoples, part of the custom was that the levirate responsibility could pass to the father of the widow's husband, if there were no brothers to fulfill it. Thus, Tamar was only trying to acquire that to which she had a legal right. After we exchanged services, she arose, departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments" (38:15-19; cf. Pro 6:25-29; Pro 6:32-33; Pro 7:10).

I have to hand it to Tamar-she was loyal to her deceased husband, my son, by trying to raise up seed for him. She had not married another Canaanite. Furthermore, she qualifies as a heroine in the story, for she risked everything for her right to be the mother in the family of Judah and to protect the family.

The good news is: I can honestly tell you that God broke me through this tragic event. I repented and I demonstrated my repentance by not sleeping with Tamar ever again. Moreover, my dad did not exclude me from receiving a special blessing as he did Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. Because I humbled myself God raised me to be the chief of the house of Israel and blessed the children that I fathered, even though they

were a result of my sin. The next time you will read about me is in Genesis 43 where I am back with my brothers and father. And in Genesis 44, I pled for the welfare of my brother, Benjamin, and offer my own life as a pledge to save him. God turned my life around.

Scene 4 (38:27-30)

Tamar and I had two sons: Perez and Zerah (38:27-30). I believe the twins were God's gift to Tamar to compensate for the lack of children from her two husbands. Additionally, since I lost two sons to wickedness, I think the twin boys were also a sign to me that my sins were forgiven and a new day was dawning under God's favor. Perez was the first of the twins born. Though born of an adulterous and incestuous relationship, Perez became the ancestor of David (Rth 4:18-22), who in turn became the ancestor of Jesus Christ (Mat 1:3). Tamar and I were not examples of godliness, but both of us are in the family line of Jesus Christ the Messiah, through Perez (Rth 4:12; Mat 1:3).

This is nothing short of astonishing! Why in the world would God bless such sinful and unfaithful people with the privilege of being in the line of Christ? It is a glorious example of God's amazing grace! (See 1Co 1:26-31)

Maybe you can identify with my story because you feel you have made a mess of your life. You have made bad decisions. You knowingly went down a wrong path. You sinned in some horrible way and have concluded that God could never love you or do anything through you. I hope my story will encourage you! The God who forgave me will forgive you. The God who transformed me will transform you. The God who used me will use you. It doesn't matter where you have been. It doesn't matter what you have done. What matters is where you turn now. Anyone who trusts Jesus Christ, the lion of Judah, with the shambles of their life will be received and remade. When Jesus died, He died for your sin. He died for mine. He paid the price so that we could have a new beginning and a new destiny! Please always remember that God's grace can cover your sin and change you from the inside out!

Chapter 48

\"God’s Career Path\" (Gen 39:1-23)

Yesterday, Lori and I met some friends in Tacoma for dinner. Our rendezvous point to carpool to the restaurant was Krispy Kreme’s. Lori and I arrived early and decided to indulge ourselves with a doughnut before our dinner. I know…not a good idea. (We confessed our sin to our friends.) Anyway, while we were there I decided to watch how the doughnuts were created. The process is quite remarkable. First, the little balls of dough are shot through with a piercing blast of air to create a hole. Then the flat doughnuts are forced to spend time in the “proof box” where they ride a vertical elevator up and down in an atmosphere of heat and humidity. This is what allows the flat dough to rise. Then the soon-to-be delicacies are dropped into hot oil in order to be cooked thoroughly. As the circular survivors make their way toward the end of the line, they pass through a cascading waterfall of icing.

Whew! What abuse! These poor little fellows have to go through quite a bit of pain only to be consumed by a ravenous beast like me. Yet, it is the trials that these lumps of dough have to endure that make them into tasty Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

In Genesis 39, Joseph is going to experience Krispy Kreme like trials. He is going to be drilled by his brothers into slavery. He is going to have to deal with the incessant heat and humidity of a woman. And he is going to be dropped into the hot oil of false accusation and prison. These are severe trials! Yet, these are a few of the trials that develop Joseph into a godly man. Just as the poor doughnut’s trials produce a product of great delight to me, the trials God allows in our lives bring about in us what delights Him. In all the anguish of our trials, God’s invisible hand of grace and sovereignty is present with us.

Scene 1: (39:1-6)

Our story begins in 39:1: “Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there.” After Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, the Midianites took him down to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar (37:36). The title “Potiphar” means “he whom Ra gives.” Potiphar is called “the captain of the bodyguard,” which means he was the chief executioner or chief of police. In other words, he had charge of the palace KGB, with the power of life and death, under the supervision of Pharaoh. Now, it was not a coincidence that Joseph ended up in this man’s home. Unbeknownst to Joseph, the Lord had sent him to Potiphar’s house to prepare him for the important task which lay ahead, that of serving as the second highest official in the land of Egypt. But in order for this to happen, Joseph first had to learn the language, culture, business, and politics of Egypt. And it wasn’t handed to him on a silver platter! He had to get up early and stay up late to both do his job and to learn Egyptian ways.

We can determine a sequence of events that culminated in Joseph’s promotion to the second highest position of power in Potiphar’s household. Joseph was a shepherd, so it would have been natural for him to begin his “career” in the fields of Potiphar. His master would first have observed his success in the fields. Good reports reached the ears of Potiphar, who then brought him into his house (39:2). What a lesson to be faithful in little (Luk 16:10 a).

Verse 2 informs us: “The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.” The theme of this narrative is found in the statement: “The LORD was

with Joseph" (cf. Act 7:9). The divine name "LORD" (Yahweh) appears eight times in this chapter (39:2, 3 [twice], 5 [twice], 21, and 23 [twice]) but only one other time in the eleven remaining chapters of Genesis (49:18). Thus we are to understand that at the most uncertain time of Joseph's life, when he could see nothing of God, the covenant God of Israel was at work to effect His covenant promises through Joseph.

In the same way, you and I must understand that as we walk with the Lord, He too will be with us. Even though the circumstances of life may not seem to go our way, God is in control. He will orchestrate His purposes behind the scenes. We can lean on Him. He will be faithful to us.

In 39:3, something profound takes place. Moses writes: "Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand." We must be careful not to read over 39:3 too quickly. God's blessing upon Joseph was not ordinary prosperity-it was phenomenal and unexpected, because even Potiphar had to admit that the Lord was with Joseph and was causing him to prosper. Imagine how strong Joseph's testimony had to be for Potiphar to recognize and admire Joseph's character and to attribute it to God rather than to Joseph. Potiphar had many slaves; he was a busy man; and he was a pagan. But Joseph's life was so uncommon and supernatural that Potiphar had to sit up and take notice.

This was not only God's will for Joseph's life, this is God's will for your life. He wants you to live a supernatural life that attracts the recognition of the world. He longs for your boss, your coworkers, your neighbors, and your family members to see the presence of God in you. A man or woman that has the favor and blessing of God resting on him or her will have to be acknowledged by the world. Will you be that type of person?

The natural outcome of Joseph's work ethic and God's hand upon him is detailed in 39:4-6a. "So Joseph found favor in his sight and became his personal servant; and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge. It came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house and over all that he owned, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field. So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate." Since the Lord was with Joseph, he was promoted from shepherd boy, to personal servant, to Potiphar's overseer (i.e., Executive Director). And God blessed everything that Joseph did. He had the Midas touch! But success and prosperity is not all it's cracked up to be. It's probably true that how we handle success says as much, if not more, about us as how we handle failure. If God is blessing you right now, how are you handling His goodness? Are you depending more on Him? Or have you become proud or self-sufficient? God's blessing comes when we are humble.

One of the greatest lessons we have to learn is that before we become leaders, we first must be servants.

God tests us as servants before He promotes us to being leaders (Mat 25:21). Before He allows us to exercise authority, we have to be under authority and learn to submit and obey. So many Christians want to bypass this process of leadership. Yet, one of the essential elements of leadership and growth is patience. One of the primary lessons God is teaching me is the discipline of patience. It may be that He is teaching you the very same lesson. Will you submit to His instruction or will you jump the gun and learn the hard way?

This section closes with a parenthetical statement that sets the stage for what follows. Moses writes, "Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance" (39:6b). The Bible rarely gives physical descriptions.

Joseph really stood out! He's a combination of Brad Pitt and Arnold Schwarzenneger. He's got six-pack abs, a chiseled chest, and guns of granite. He's a stud! Many men would love to look like Joseph. However, this is one blessing too many. In fact, this is an outright curse.

Scene 2: (39:7-20)

In 39:7, our story picks up some steam. Moses records these fateful words: "It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me.'" Please notice something very important. Verse 7 begins with the words, "It came about after these events…" The natural question to ask is: After what "events?" The answer: God's prospering of Joseph.

Temptation often comes when we least expect it. Joseph is exactly where God wants him to be and he is simply minding his own business. Verses 2-6 emphasize over and over again that God's blessing is on his life. How, then, does he get into such trouble? The answer is crucial. There is no contradiction between God's blessing and your temptations. We often think that there is. We honestly believe that if we do what is right, we will never be tempted. But the opposite is true. We are much more likely to be tempted when things are going well for us. Why?

• If we are never tested when things are going well, we tend to get arrogant and bigheaded. Temptation can effectively humble us to dust.

• Satan tempts us then in order to destroy our testimony. Serious believers threaten him.

• Temptation often blindsides us in the moment of our greatest success, because that is when we least expect it.

• Temptation successfully resisted prepares us to do greater things for God.

Moses records that Potiphar's wife "looked with desire at Joseph." The Hebrew reads, "she lifted up her eyes toward," an expression that emphasizes her deliberate and careful scrutiny of him. Many men think they are more desirable than they actually are. But in this particular case, Joseph didn't misread the signals-he was directly propositioned. Mrs. Potiphar's pickup line was, "Lie with me." For a woman to be this forward he must have been quite the stud. As he crossed the room she followed him with her eyes, a smile of satisfaction crossing her face. He was one fine-looking man, young and strong, the way Potiphar had been when they first met, before too many court dinners had spoiled his waistline and before too many late night meetings with Pharaoh had placed permanent bags under his eyes. Yes, this Joseph looked like an excellent companion for a casual affair, a brief meeting between "a younger man and a bolder woman."

Please notice though, it was after Joseph's rise to power and position that the physical attractiveness of Joseph registered with Potiphar's wife. There is little chance that she would have had any interest in a mere slave. But a man who had great leadership abilities and good looks-well, that was an irresistible combination.

In 39:8-9, we read this impressive account: "But he refused and said to his master's wife, 'Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?'" Joseph used three lines of argumentation: (1) the abuse of trust, (2) an offense against her husband, and (3) a sin against

God. This is what it means to be above reproach. Joseph is concerned about his integrity, the institution of marriage, and his fellowship with God. What a man! An important theological point is being made here: Our sin is never private. Every time we sin, we sin against God. And in a certain sense our sin is always against Him alone (Psa 51:4).

What would you do in a similar situation? If you haven't spiritually and mentally prepared for such a temptation, you might find that you are unprepared in the heat of the moment!

Now our man Joe showed some amazing resolve in 39:8-9, but he's not out of the woods yet. In 39:10, Moses writes, "She spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her." I'm sure she dressed seductively and touched Joseph as often as possible in her effort to break down his resistance to an adulterous affair. She likely had all kinds of one-liners in her repertoire: "Potiphar is gone for the day." "No one will ever know." "Just this once!" "Potiphar hasn't been a very good husband…I deserve some happiness too, don't I?" "Just come close and hold me…it won't go any further." "We won't be hurting anyone."

I have some bad news. Temptation will always be before you. It never takes a day off. It can haunt you.

In fact, temptation is like a telemarketer:

• It comes to us when it is least convenient.

• It comes back again and again.

• It keeps pushing even after you say, "No."

• It makes what it is selling sound great…but there is always a catch.

One of my favorite stories is of an affluent, aristocratic woman who reviews resumes from potential chauffeurs to drive her Rolls Royce. She narrows the applicants to three men and invites them to her palatial home. She escorts each one individually to her driveway and the brick wall beside it. Then she asks, "If you were driving my Rolls, how close do you think you could come to that brick wall without scratching my car?" The first applicant says, "I can drive within a foot of that wall and not damage your Rolls." She brings out the second man and asks, "If you were driving my Rolls, how close do you think you could come to that brick wall without scratching my car?" He scratches his head and says, "I can drive within six inches of that wall and not damage your car." She invites the third applicant and asks, "If you were driving my Rolls, how close do you think you could come to that brick wall without scratching my car?" He does not hesitate: "Ma'am, I do not know how close I could come to the wall without damaging your car, but if I was driving your car, I would stay as far away as possible from the wall so as not to damage your car." Guess who got the job? When addressing sexual temptation, the point is not how close one can get to the temptation without getting "scratched," but staying as far away as possible.

After resisting countless advances, Joseph may have been unprepared for what happened next. Verse 11 begins with these suspenseful words, "Now it happened one day…that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. She caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside." This woman was like static cling-all over Joseph. She tried to grab Joseph and take him to bed. She was a woman who was unaccustomed to hearing the word, "NO!" This reminds me of a friend of mine in Bible college who used to jokingly say, "Rejection only turns me on." Apparently, Mrs. Potiphar had the same mindset.

It is important to realize that the garment that Joseph had on was like an oversized T-shirt. This means there was a struggle involved here as Joseph sought to free himself. Can you imagine? Mrs. Potiphar is seductively screaming, “Lie with me!” and Joseph is trying to break free from her. What a sight this must have been! I imagine for a split second Joseph paused to consider his alternatives. He could submit to her this time and say, “Well, she made me do it.” He could go along because no one else would ever find out. He could say, “Why don’t we sit down and talk about this like mature adults?” Instead, Joseph made like Road Runner and ran! Joseph opts for better naked than naughty and he streaks away! Men and women, the word is out: God is looking for a few good cowards. Don’t fall like Samson, David, and Solomon. Be like Joseph…flee. It is possible to be pure in the 21st century. But it requires a pure mind, quick feet, and God’s grace.

I want to remind you again of the temptation that this must have been to Joseph. Consider the full picture:

• Joseph came from a dysfunctional family (37:3).

• Joseph was hated and betrayed by his brothers (37:4-5, 8, 27-28).

• Joseph was sold into slavery (37:36; 39:1).

• Joseph’s brothers Reuben and Judah were immoral (35:22; 38:18).

• Joseph was a young man with hormones in full force (37:2).

• Joseph’s family would never know.

• The Egyptian culture was filled with sexual immorality.

These factors would have led almost any man into sin…but not Joseph.

Victor Hugo, the great French writer, once said, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” This statement is certainly true of Potiphar’s wife. In 39:13-15, Moses records this wicked woman’s response: “When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside she called to the men of her household and said to them, ‘See, he has brought in a Hebrew to us to make sport of us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I screamed. When he heard that I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled and went outside.’” All of a sudden, Mrs. Potiphar is left holding the bag…or better yet, a pile of dirty laundry. What is she to do? She can’t admit that she has an insatiable sex drive and has been coming on to Joseph for many days. So she pulls the race card and blames her husband for bringing in a “Hebrew” to rape her. Mrs. Potiphar uses the phrase “make sport” in 39:14 and 39:17. The Hebrew word translated “make sport” (tsachaq) is the same one that provides the root for Isaac’s name and that has been repeatedly used as a motif in the book of Genesis (17:17; 18:12f, 15; 19:14; 21:6, 9; 26:8).

After this pathetic sob story, Mrs. Potiphar left Joseph’s garment beside her until Potiphar came home (39:16). In 39:17-18, Moses writes, “Then she spoke to him with these words, ‘The Hebrew slave, whom you brought to us, came in to me to make sport of me; and as I raised my voice and screamed, he left his garment beside me and fled outside.’” Again, Mrs. Potiphar blamed her husband for what took place.

Verse 19 is of particular interest to me. The verse reads: “Now when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, ‘This is what your slave did to me,’ his anger burned.” Curiously, in speaking of Potiphar’s reaction to this situation, records say only that “his anger burned.” The statement is deliberately ambiguous, not asserting whether his anger is directed at Joseph or his wife. I would suggest,

given his wife's slander of his own motives, the proven trustworthiness of Joseph, the fact that he is going to lose a competent slave, and his knowledge of his wife's character or lack thereof, his anger arguably burns at his wife, not at Joseph.

Potiphar is in a difficult position here-he cannot discount his wife's accusation without publicly humiliating her, even if he was certain she is lying. The action he takes against Joseph is as minimal as it can be and still retain his family's honor. In 39:20, Potiphar "took him and put him into the jail, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail." Attempted rape was a capital offense. The milder punishment suggests that Potiphar does not believe his wife. He probably knows her character. If Potiphar believed his wife and was truly angry with Joseph, Joseph would have probably been executed on the spot, no questions asked. Furthermore, the king's prison was a place for political prisoners and would hardly have been expected to accommodate foreign slaves guilty of crimes against their masters.

Another very telling observation is that the prison is in the basement of Potiphar's house (cf. 40:3, 7). Joseph was thus demoted. He was banned from the penthouse and bound in the prison. He went from the top floor to the basement. I can visualize Potiphar going down to Joseph each day to discuss the stock market, the economic conditions of the country, and all of the areas, which used to be under Joseph's direct control. Now he was only a consultant. Potiphar is a very shrewd man.

In reality, Joseph's imprisonment by Potiphar was an answer to his persistent prayers: "Lord, protect me from this woman." Where could Joseph be safer than behind the bars of a dungeon? The prison was God's chosen location to further develop Joseph's leadership skills and the setting of a very important future divine appointment between Joseph and the cupbearer of Pharaoh. But it was not an easy time (see Psa 105:18). This should also remind us of another principle: Those who resist temptation are rarely rewarded by the world. But overcoming your temptations like Joseph prove personal integrity, promote spiritual maturity, and prepare for fuller opportunity.

Scene 3: (39:21-23)

Joseph is not on a good career path. He does right and becomes a slave and then ends up spending years in an Egyptian prison. The more Joseph obeyed God, the worse life got. Yet, our story concludes in 39:21-23 with these fascinating words: “But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph’s charge because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.” The final paragraph creates a perfect symmetry for the chapter. Each phrase matches almost perfectly with a corresponding phrase in the opening section (39:2-6a). Once again Moses states, “The LORD was with Joseph” while he was in prison, just as He had been with him in Potiphar’s house (cp. 39:20-21 with 39:2). Joseph found favor in the sight of the prison warden, just as he had with Potiphar (cp. 39:21b and 39:4a). The prison warden put Joseph in charge of everything that went on there, just as Potiphar had placed Joseph over his entire household (cp. 39:22 and 39:4b). What happened in Potiphar’s house also happened in Pharaoh’s prison. Joseph soon became the chief administrator of the entire prison. Handling prisoners was a more difficult matter than handling the possessions of Potiphar. It was the same area of training; Joseph was an administrator. But the level of training was now higher. God was preparing Joseph for the day when he would be administering the entire land of Egypt. (41:41). The Lord blessed Joseph’s work and made everything he did in prison prosper, just as He had done earlier when Joseph was in Potiphar’s house (cp. 39:23 and 39:5). In light of the tragic events in the intervening verses, this symmetry illustrates God’s sovereign and gracious control.

Gen 39:2-6 a | Gen 39:21-23

“The LORD was with Joseph.” | “The LORD was with Joseph.”

Joseph found favor in the sight of Potiphar. | Joseph found favor in the sight of the prison warden.

Potiphar put Joseph in charge of everything. | The warden put Joseph in charge of everything.

The Lord blessed Joseph’s work in the penthouse and made everything he did prosper. | The Lord blessed Joseph’s work in the prison and made everything he did prosper.

God causes our roots to grow deep in the soil of adversity in order that we may better know and serve Him. Apparently, Joseph understood this because there is no indication that Joseph ever doubted God. The clear implication of the text is that Joseph was not bitter toward his brothers or enslaved by his circumstances. He was content in the presence of God (cp. Heb 13:5-6 and Php 4:10-13). He didn’t mourn his disappointments but became useful where he was. And used that heart of faithfulness and contentment.

The one great secret of adversity is to trust in the presence, power, and justice of God (Psa 37:6; Rom 8:28). Clearly, Joseph rose to the top, but how long did all this take? Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery (37:2). He was 30 when Pharaoh promoted him (41:46), and had been in prison for two years before that (41:1). So, he was in Potiphar’s house for 11 years. It took 11 years for the full measure of God’s blessing to be accomplished in Joseph’s life. Yet, Joseph persevered. He remained faithful to God. Even when his character was forged through fire, he held on, trusting in the Lord.

There was a man who was in search of a perfect picture of peace. He announced a contest to produce this masterpiece. The challenge stirred the imagination of artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. The crowd was shocked when the winning submission was revealed. It seemed to be the furthest thing from a picture of peace. A waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice, and stormy, gray

clouds exploded with lightning, wind, and rain. In the midst of the scene, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls, and a bird rested in a nest in the elbow of a branch. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcended all the turmoil.

The Master Artist has designed for you to experience His inner peace in a way that doesn't allow the circumstances of life to overshadow your hope of His sovereignty in all things. And He summons His people to spread that peace to those around them. When you have been filled with God's peace, you will want others to experience the same. It has been said, "Peace that Jesus gives is not the absence of trouble, but is rather the confidence that He is there with you always."

Whatever you are going through today, I can assure you that God's gracious and sovereign hand is with you. He simply wants you to trust in Him as you walk through the fires of life. Will you?

Chapter 49

\"You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down\" (Genesis 40-41)

There is a parable about a farmer whose old dog fell into a dry well. After assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the dog but decided that neither the dog nor the well was worth the trouble of saving. Instead, he planned to bury the old dog in the well and put him out of his misery. When the farmer began shoveling, initially the old dog panicked. But then it dawned on the mutt that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back he could shake it off and step up. This he did blow after blow. “Shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up, shake it off and step up!” he repeated to encourage himself. It wasn’t long before the dog, battered and exhausted, stepped triumphantly out of the well. What he thought would bury him actually benefited him-all because of the way he handled adversity.

That story always reminds me of Joseph, who frequently found himself about to be buried in some hole. Yet, like this courageous dog, Joseph also had the resolve and courage to “shake it off and step up.” Genesis 40-41 explains how God uses adversity to benefit His servants. In fact, as we study this section we will learn that suffering can prepare ordinary Christians for extraordinary service.

Scene 1 (40:1-8)

Moses begins our story with these words: “Then it came about after these things [cf. 39:20-23], the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended [cf. 39:9] their lord, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned” (40:1-3). These three verses ooze God’s sovereignty. While Joseph is wasting away in jail, God brings some influential and unexpected guests. (The cupbearer and baker were responsible for Pharaoh’s drink and food.) The word “in” is repeated three times in 40:3 to emphasize that God is the One that sovereignly drops these two men into prison with Joseph.

In 40:4, “the captain of the bodyguard” (none other than Potiphar) put Joseph in charge of the cupbearer and baker. Moses writes that he “attended” (sharath) to the men. This word means “to wait on as a servant” (cf. 39:4). Joseph isn’t consumed with the injustice of his situation. He doesn’t go on a hunger strike. He isn’t consumed by bitterness. He doesn’t spiral into depression. Instead, he chooses to focus his attention on serving those around him. Serving others had two very beneficial effects on Joseph: First, serving kept him from wallowing in self-pity. It is difficult to feel sorry for yourself when serving others (Mar 10:45). Second, serving paved the way for his ultimate deliverance. If Joseph hadn’t served the cupbearer and baker he would have never heard and interpreted their dreams. If he hadn’t interpreted their dreams, he would have never interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams. And if he hadn’t interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, he would have never been placed in a position to deliver the covenant people of God. And if he hadn’t delivered the covenant people of God, the Messiah never would have come to save us from our sins! Remarkably, our salvation was, in part, tied to Joseph’s willingness to serve his fellow prisoners when others may have been swirling in depression, asking “Why me, God?”

In time, the cupbearer and baker each had a dream on the very same night (40:5). Verses 6-8 tell us, “When Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected. He asked Pharaoh’s officials who were with him in confinement in his master’s house, ‘Why are your faces so sad today?’ Then they said to him, ‘We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it.’ Then Joseph said

to them, 'Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please.'" It is important to observe that Joseph took notice of the condition of the men. He could have easily become mired in self-pity. Instead, he takes notice that the cupbearer and baker look uncharacteristically discouraged and immediately discerned that something was wrong. He then draws them out. One of the keys to the Spirit-filled life is to be an others-centered person (Php 2:4).

Imagine this…Joseph was the one that ought to be sad. He was the one who had been falsely accused and put in prison. Yet, here he is, cheering up somebody else! Even though we may be in adverse conditions we can still encourage a person who is in even greater trouble than we are. When we are waiting for somebody to encourage us, it may be that we can be encouraging somebody else.

Now back to our story. The cupbearer and baker are sad and discouraged because there was no one to interpret their dreams. Dreams played an important role in ancient Egypt, and their interpretation was a specialized skill. As prisoners, the cupbearer and baker have no access to expert interpreters. Joseph recognized that the dreams of the cupbearer and baker were revelations from God. Realizing that God had given him the ability to interpret their divine revelations, Joseph invited the two prisoners to relate their dreams to him. He was careful, however, to give God the glory for his interpretative gift (40:8; cf. 41:16, 25, 28, 39).

Scene 2 (40:9-19)

Joseph prepared himself to hear the cupbearer's dream, which was like a Home and Garden Television video on fast-forward. Moses writes, "So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, 'In my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me; and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. Now Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I put the cup into Pharaoh's hand.' Then Joseph said to him, 'This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer. Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon'" (40:9-15). Some think that Joseph was wrong to appeal to the cupbearer in this way. But I see no reason to think that. Joseph probably saw this as the means of God's provision to his prayers. He had high hopes. That's not wrong, since we serve a God who does mighty things on our behalf. We should be people of hope. While content to remain in the dungeon for as long as God willed, Joseph also made every effort to seek his release through every legitimate channel (cf. Pro 16:9).

Moses goes on to write, "When the chief baker saw that he had interpreted favorably, he said to Joseph, 'I also saw in my dream, and behold, there were three baskets of white bread on my head; and in the top basket there were some of all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, and the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.' Then Joseph answered and said, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and will hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat your flesh off you'" (40:16-19). But there is a play-on-words in this section. Joseph uses the phrase "lift up your head" (40:19; cf. 40:13) to describe the baker's hanging. This brings new meaning to the phrase, "Heads up!" The baker would not simply suffer execution, but his corpse would then be impaled and publicly exposed. Scholars point out that the Egyptians did this to prevent his spirit from

resting in the afterlife.

Scene 3 (40:20-23)

Our chapter concludes with this account: “Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh’s birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand; but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him” (40:20-23).

Joseph’s predictions came true just as God had said! He was two for two in his interpretations. Unfortunately, the chief cupbearer “forgot” Joseph. This is not a mental lapse but a moral lapse. He self-centeredly does not bother to “remember” himself with his former inmates. Our text does not indicate what happened in Joseph’s heart as he waited in vain day after day. It just ends with the bleak words, “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him” (40:23). This is yet another reminder that people will disappoint us. Therefore, our trust cannot be in people.

Notice the place in your Bible between 40:23 and 41:1. It’s a white space, a chapter break. But that little break represents two years in Joseph’s life, two years in a dungeon, two years out of his twenties-the prime of his life. That white space in your Bible represents the maturing of Joseph, when he dealt with his disappointments and moved, not into despair, but into hope in God alone. I say that because of the product we see coming out at the other end. We don’t see a cynical, angry man, but rather a godly, mature man who is able to handle the heavy responsibilities thrust upon him. Psa 105:19 says of this time that “the word of the Lord tested him.” Those two silent years in the dungeon after his disappointment with the cupbearer were a time of learning to hope in God.

Joseph’s life teaches us that disappointments are essential to spiritual growth because they demand faith and resting all hope upon God. Nowhere in this narrative do we see Joseph feeling sorry for himself or blaming others. He simply took each situation as it came and made the best out of it. The biggest problem in life is not having problems. Our problem is thinking that having problems is a problem.

Jesus warned us in Joh 16:33 b, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” Every setback is an opportunity to grow in dependence on the Lord. Trials may be viewed from two standpoints, and it will make all the difference to our spiritual life and peace which of these two points of view we take. From the human side, Joseph’s suffering was due to injustice on the part of Potiphar, and ingratitude on the part of the cupbearer. From the divine side, these years were permitted for the purpose of training and preparing Joseph for the great work that lay before him. If we look only at the human side of trials we shall become discouraged, and may be irritated and angered, but as we turn to look at it from the divine side we shall see God in everything and all things working together for our good (Rom 8:28). Today, God wants to use adversity to benefit you. He wants to use your suffering to prepare you for extraordinary service.

Scene 4 (41:1-8)

In 41:1-7, Pharaoh has two hideous dreams. In the first dream, seven fat cows are eaten by seven gaunt cows (41:1-4). In the second dream, seven plump ears of grain are eaten by seven thin ears (41:5-7). In 41:8, Moses writes, “Now in the morning his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.” The “magicians” that Pharaoh sent for shouldn’t be confused with magicians of our own day. They didn’t wear tuxedos and pull rabbits out of hats. They were the wisest, most educated men of Pharaoh’s kingdom. They were schooled in the sacred arts and sciences of the Egyptians. Yet, Pharaoh’s magicians and wise men were totally baffled because the two dreams were a revelation from God. And the things of God can only be grasped through His Spirit.

Joseph was in prison for a divine appointment. Now the pieces of the puzzle begin to come together. If Joseph had been released from prison two years earlier there is no guarantee where he would be at this time, when Pharaoh needs his services. Joseph quite probably would not have been taken back into Potiphar’s house. Perhaps Joseph would have been sold to another Egyptian or even to a traveling band of slave traders who then might have sold Joseph to another master in another land.

Scene 5 (41:9-24)

It was not good for the king to be in such a state, and certainly not for anyone who worked so closely with him, as did the cupbearer. So at the opportune time, the cupbearer delicately volunteered that he knew of someone who could interpret Pharaoh’s dreams (41:9-13). “Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh” (41:14). The Egyptians hated hair and would shave all the hair off their bodies and then wear wigs.

In 41:15-16, we come to a very important exchange. “Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’ Joseph then answered Pharaoh, saying, ‘It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.’” What an opportunity for Joseph to capitalize upon! He could have used the occasion to make a bargain with the king-his freedom in exchange for the interpretation to Pharaoh’s dreams. But as much as I’m sure Joseph desired to be released from prison, he never brought up the subject. His first concern was not with his own comfort, but with serving God faithfully in the midst of God’s divine appointment.

Joseph rejects Pharaoh’s approach in emphatic terms, and with a minimum of words. (“It is not in me” is all one word in Hebrew.) Joseph then quickly attributes his powers to God. He doesn’t present himself as the “Dreaminator” or the “Dr. of Dreamology.” Instead, he freely admits he has nothing to offer in and of himself. The interpretations come from God alone.

When someone compliments you on your ability or on something you have done, it is fine to accept it simply by saying, “Thank you.” The person is trying to encourage you, and it can come across as false humility if you always respond with, “It wasn’t I; it was the Lord.” But, even when you say “thank you,” you had better be thinking to yourself, “Thank You, Lord, for Your grace in enabling me to do that.” If you sense that the other person is attributing something to you where God alone deserves the credit, then you need to be bold to honor God as Joseph does (cf. 1Co 4:7).

Joseph is a man of steel. He told Pharaoh, who himself was considered to be god incarnate that “the God” (ha Elohim) would explain his dream! Thus, to Pharaoh’s face, Joseph asserted that his God was superior

to and sovereign over Pharaoh and the “gods” of Egypt. The reader of Genesis can see that God was moving, because this was the third pair of God-given dreams that Joseph had been given to interpret. But Pharaoh did not know this. In fact, he did not believe in Israel’s God. And besides, he thought that he himself was a god.

In 41:17-24a, Pharaoh explained his dreams to Joseph. He also shared that he told his dreams to his magicians, but no one could explain it to him (41:24b).

Scene 6 (41:25-36)

Joseph informs Pharaoh that his dreams are “one and the same” (41:25). The seven good cows and the seven good ears are seven years of plenty. The seven lean cows and the seven thin ears will be seven years of famine (41:25-31). Joseph’s solution is as follows: “Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance. Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh’s authority, and let them guard it. Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine” (41:33-36).

Three times in this section, Joseph attributes the outcome of Pharaoh’s dreams to God:

- **“God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do” (41:25).**
- **“God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do” (41:28).**
- **“The matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about” (41:32).**

Scene 7 (41:37-45)

In 41:37-45, we read Pharaoh’s response to Joseph’s interpretations: “Now the proposal seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his servants. Then Pharaoh said to his servants, ‘Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?’ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.’ Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, ‘Bow the knee!’ And he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Though I am Pharaoh, yet without your permission no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh named Joseph Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, as his wife. And Joseph went forth over the land of Egypt.”

When Joseph appeared before Pharaoh it was his only way out. Pharaoh was a god, a political ruler. The Egyptians believed that he descended from the gods. Yet, Joseph ends up saying, “Pharaoh, you’re not God!” Joseph must have been so tempted to tell Pharaoh what he wanted to hear. He may have thought to himself, “I’ll do anything. I’ll say anything to get out of this hell-hole.” But in the end, he says, “I can’t do it.” He looks Pharaoh in the eye and says only the God I serve is the true God. Apparently, Pharaoh was a pluralist like many Americans because he calmly replied, “Okay. Do you need a job?” Joseph must have

thought to himself, “Let me check my calendar. I’ve been cleaning latrines. Okay, I’m available.”

Joseph went from the pit to the pinnacle, from the gutter to glory…and all in one day! Joseph can’t even see down to how good he had it before. To naturalize Joseph, Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name (41:45; cf. Dan 1:7) and an Egyptian wife, from an appropriate level of society. Joseph’s marriage to an Egyptian seems to have been Pharaoh’s order, and God permitted it. The patriarchs generally avoided marriage to Canaanites, but marriage to non-Canaanite Gentiles was less serious. Joseph’s wife and in-laws did not turn him away from his faith in Yahweh or his high regard for God’s promises to his forefathers (cf. Moses). I like to believe that Joseph taught her about the true and living God so that she abandoned her false gods and came “under the wings” of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Scene 8 (41:46-57)

Our story closes with young Joseph preparing Egypt for the seven years of famine (41:46-49). Then in 41:50-52, God blesses Joseph with two sons before He hits Egypt with a famine. Joseph named his firstborn “Manasseh,” which means “God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” He named the second “Ephraim,” meaning “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” If the name of Joseph’s first son (Manasseh) focuses on a God who preserves, the name of Joseph’s second son (Ephraim) focuses on a God who blesses. Joseph gave his boys Hebrew names that testified of God’s faithfulness. No doubt these Hebrew names would have raised some eyebrows in Egypt. People may have asked, “Why did you name your kids that?” No doubt, Joseph told them. He honored God with his family life, even in this foreign, pagan culture. The notation of the birth of Joseph’s sons is, of course, very significant in view of God’s purposes for Abraham’s family. An allusion to the blessing aspect of the patriarchal promises occurs in 41:49 (cf. 12:2-3).

In 41:53-57, Moses wraps up our story: “When the seven years of plenty which had been in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, ‘Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do.’ When the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. The people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth.” What a story! There are five practical lessons here to remember:

(1) God is always sovereign, even when it seems He has forgotten you. It’s obvious that God was sovereign in all these events. He put these two men in the same prison as Joseph. He gave them their dreams. And even though it seemed like the timing was wrong, in that He “wasted” two years of Joseph’s life, God gave Pharaoh his dream at precisely the right moment. As the master weaver, God was bringing all these strands together so that all was working according to His schedule. Nothing is outside of His sovereignty, even though it seems like it to us as we sit in a dungeon for two more years. Never doubt God’s sovereignty.

(2) God is never unfaithful or cruel, even when circumstances seem otherwise. God’s people down through history have gone through terrible trials. A skeptic might say that God is cruel to allow such things. But a skeptic doesn’t have God’s eternal plan in view. A skeptic doesn’t understand how God lovingly uses trials in the lives of His children. When the enemy taunts us by saying, “Look at your circumstances and you will see that your God is unfaithful or cruel,” we need to say to our soul, “Hope in God.” None who have hoped in Him have ever been disappointed. Don’t doubt His goodness when He is lovingly purifying

your faith through trials.

(3) God's promises are true in His timing, not ours. If Joseph had been released from prison two years earlier, he never would have been appointed as second in the land to Pharaoh. God's timing is clearly best, although Joseph had to take that by faith until years later when he could look back on how God worked it all together for good. Like it or not, there are certain lessons, such as patience and endurance, which we cannot learn except through waiting on God. In God's time, His plans make sense. But we need to remember that sometimes we won't be able to discern God's timing until eternity.

(4) We are not responsible for others' behavior, but we are responsible for our own behavior and attitudes. Joseph could have become angry toward the cupbearer and let his resentment burn into bitterness and revenge. Let's face it; he had good cause to be angry. The cupbearer wasn't willing to risk his neck enough to talk to Pharaoh about Joseph until it looked like it might gain him some advantage. But in spite of the flakiness of the cupbearer, Joseph had to deal with his own attitude. Later, when he was number two under Pharaoh, he never sought revenge against the man, nor against his brothers. People may have mistreated you and disappointed you because they were being selfish and uncaring. You have a choice: You can grow bitter and angry, blaming them for your troubles, or you can trust in the sovereign God and rejoice in His grace toward you. They will give an account to God for how they sinned against you. But you will give an account for your attitude and behavior in response to their sin against you.

(5) God's grace is always sufficient if we will receive it. Joseph came through these trials stronger, not weaker, gentle, not bitter, because he hoped in God. Even though he was in prison, the Lord was with him. Even though the cupbearer forgot him, God never did. Joseph experienced what Paul and every other believer undergoing trials has experienced-that God's grace is sufficient for our need, if we will just receive it.

One of our family's favorite Disney characters is Tigger from "Winnie the Pooh" fame [show congregation]. Tigger is a loveable, extroverted tiger. Tigger bounces on his tail everywhere he goes. His mode of motion also describes his attitude. He never gets down for long; his nature is to bounce back from adversity. Tigger likes to sing a song about himself that says in part,

The wonderful thing about Tiggers
Is Tiggers are wonderful things.
Their tops are made of rubber,
Their bottoms are made out of springs.

Maybe if we had tops of rubber and bottoms of springs we would become more resilient. Regardless, God is calling you and me to live a life of resilience because God uses adversity to glorify Himself and benefit you and me. Who knows…God may even use your suffering to prepare you for extraordinary service.

Chapter 50

\"When God Brings You to Your Knees\" (Gen 42:1-38)

Have you ever heard of a berkutchi? A berkutchi is an Asian man who trains eagles for hunting. The capture, taming, training, and keeping of eagles is highly ritualized. Most eagles, which have a life span of about 40 years, are caught when very young-either snatched from a nest or trapped in a baited net. Once captured, the eagle is hooded and placed in a cage with a perch that sways constantly so it cannot rest or sleep. For two or three days it is also deprived of food. During this time the berkutchi talks, sings, and chants to the eagle for hours on end. Finally, he begins to feed and stroke it. Slowly the weakened creature comes to rely on its master. When the berkutchi decides that their relationship has become strong enough, the training begins. Not all eagles can be trained, but those who take to life with a master display intense loyalty. While the training and breaking of the eagle may seem harsh, it is a picture of how over time God breaks our independent spirit to draw us close to Him.

God uses broken things: broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, and broken bread to give strength. In Genesis 42, God is going to break Joseph's brothers by awakening their sleeping consciences. They were a hard bunch. Years before, under the leadership of Simeon and Levi, they had deceived a village, slaughtered all the men, and taken the women and children captive in retaliation for one man's violating their sister. Reuben, the oldest, had slept with his father's concubine. Judah had two sons so wicked that the Lord took their lives. He himself had a fling with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, thinking her to be a prostitute. All of the brothers, except Benjamin, had sold Joseph into slavery and then crushed their father's heart by deceiving him into thinking that his son was dead. Now it's 22 years later. In the process of this story, their sleeping consciences awake. Their story shows us how God uses severity and grace to awaken our consciences and bring us to repentance.

Scene 1 (42:1-5): The seven years of famine that Joseph predicted are now in full force (see 41:54-57). The famine has spread throughout the entire known world (41:57), including Joseph's family in Canaan. Therefore, in 42:1-2 Moses writes, "Now Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, 'Why are you staring at one another?' He said, 'Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die.'" For a while Jacob's family was probably able to live on what they had in reserve. But the weather is not changing and the supplies are almost depleted. The situation is becoming serious. Jacob hears that there is grain in Egypt, so he starts talking it up with his sons. But every time he brings up the subject, none of his sons will look him in the eye. They just stare at one another. Reuben looks at Simeon, Simeon glances at Judah, and Judah's eyes dart over to Levi. Jacob is getting frustrated. In a crisis situation his sons don't seem to be doing anything.

Why don't Jacob's sons want to go to Egypt? For one thing, the trip to Egypt was long (250-300 miles) and dangerous, and a round trip could consume six weeks' time. Even after arriving in Egypt, the brothers couldn't be certain of a friendly reception. As "foreigners" from Canaan, they would be very vulnerable and could even be arrested and enslaved. If that happened there would be no one to take care of their families and their aged father. Furthermore, the word "Egypt" went off like a bomb in their guilty consciences. The brothers could hear again the clink of the silver coins they received from the traders as they sold their brother into slavery. They could see him begging for his life as he was being dragged off. They remembered the terrible expression of horror on his face. When a trip to Egypt was mentioned, they

dreaded the possibility of passing by a gang of slaves and perhaps seeing the hollow eyes of their brother. For 22 years these brothers had tried to silence their nagging consciences. But when God applied the pressure of famine, coupled with the word “Egypt,” the sleeping giants stirred. For these ten brothers, time didn’t erase their guilty consciences.

You can brush your sin under the rug and hope that enough years will take care of it, but one day, perhaps years later, God will apply some sort of pressure in your life and your conscience will stir. Maybe it will be a single word, spoken inadvertently by someone. “Egypt!” Your sin flashes as vividly in your mind as if it was yesterday. Far better to keep short accounts and deal with your sin now than later. Sin compounds with some serious interest! Better to pay up as quickly as possible.

After their father’s prodding, Joseph’s ten brothers “went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, ‘I am afraid that harm may befall him’” (42:3-4). It’s evident that Jacob is a man controlled not only by favoritism but also by fear. He had already lost his favorite wife. Then he lost his favorite son. Here he is determined to prevent the loss of Benjamin who is his final link to Rebekah. Interestingly, it appears that over the years, since the death of his eleventh son, Joseph, Jacob apparently has grown suspicious of his ten older sons regarding either the manner in which Joseph “died” or the relationship that the older sons have with Benjamin, Jacob’s youngest son. This suspicion manifests itself in 42:4, which records that Jacob does not send Benjamin with his brothers into Egypt to buy food for the family because he (Jacob) is “afraid that harm might befall him.” Of what is Jacob afraid? There is no reason for him necessarily to believe that Benjamin is in any greater danger from the Egyptians or from potential marauding bands along the journey than are any of the other of his sons. Thus, Jacob quite probably does not trust his older sons to treat Benjamin kindly. What gives solid support to the view that Jacob is suspicious of what his ten older sons might do is that he cannot be worried that Benjamin, as a young child, might accidentally be injured on the journey to Egypt since Benjamin is not a young child. Benjamin, in fact, is approximately 23 years of age at this time (cp. 35:18; 37:2; 41:46, 53, 54; 45:6). As a young adult, Benjamin should not have difficulty taking such a long journey-surviving around his ten older brothers, however, is a different matter.

Our first scene concludes with this statement: “So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also” (42:5). As shocking as it might be, Psa 105:16 tells us that God Himself “called down a famine upon the earth” (NET). It is important to see what God is doing. For years, Jacob and the boys lived life without having to think about God. Life went on as normal. They got up, did their work, came home, and the next day started all over again. They were content in their routine. Their needs were met; life went on as it always had. But with this famine God gets their attention. It is easy to avoid God when we feel self-sufficient. It is easy to feel that you have no need of God’s touch when everything is running smoothly. These men were comfortable in their denial and their deceptions. As long as the status quo remained they would never change. So God provokes a crisis. This crisis would either harden them further or wake them up.

God could have simply washed His hands of these brothers. He could have said, “Fine, forget it.” But that’s not what He did with the Israelites and that’s not what He does with you and me. God loves us too much to let us go without a fight. So, at times He exercises “tough love.” He brings a crisis into our life that forces us to address ultimate issues. It may be an unexpected diagnosis, a financial emergency, an overwhelming situation, or a family crisis. In these situations God is often seeking to awaken us out of our spiritual lethargy. God lovingly put Jacob and his family in the midst of a famine in order to draw them to Him.

Are you going through a tough time? Is life a struggle right now? Could it be that God is trying to get your attention? Could it be that He is trying to awaken you out of your spiritual slumber? Is it possible that God loves you so much and that He wants you to be His with such intensity that He will stop at nothing to turn your heart to Him?

Scene 2 (42:6-17): We now move from the home front to the brothers appearing before Joseph in Egypt. Moses writes, “Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground” (42:6). Back in 37:5-7, Joseph had two dreams and predicted that one day his entire family would bow before him. And here the prediction begins to come to pass. What God says will ultimately come to pass and whatever God says in His Word, you can trust it. He is faithful to His promises (2Co 1:20). Today, if you are growing wearing and impatient, know that God will fulfill His Word to you.

In 42:7ff, we come to the moment of truth: How would Joseph respond? He had had at least 20 years to consider what he would do if and when this moment presented itself. And now, here it was! You see the greatest test of Joseph’s life occurred not when he was laid low by injustice, but when he was given unlimited power over his wicked brothers. Would he use his God-given power to seek revenge against them? Or would he use it for the purpose of saving the nation Israel from famine? As Abraham Lincoln once said, “Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.” How are you using the authority God has given you? We all have some position of authority that God has entrusted to us (e.g., parent, discipler, supervisor, minister). Are you using your authority for selfish ends or for the glory of God?

Just to make things interesting, Moses writes, “when Joseph saw his brothers he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, ‘Where have you come from?’ And they said, ‘From the land of Canaan, to buy food.’ But Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him” (42:7-8). Can you imagine this scene? Joseph, wearied by the stream of people in need, looks up and sees his brothers. He recognizes them in an instant. They are tan, weather-beaten, bearded Semite shepherds. And there are ten of them-all brothers! The older ones have grayed but are still recognizable by their profile, their walk, and of course, their Hebrew dialect. While Joseph recognizes his brothers, they don’t recognize him. How is this possible? Keep in mind, the last time the brothers had seen Joseph, he was a 17-year-old boy who was in a position of weakness, pleading for mercy as he was carried off into slavery by the Midianites, who had purchased him for 20 pieces of silver (37:2). On the other hand, the man in front of them is:

• Almost 40 years old (41:46, 53-54).

• The governor of all of Egypt.

• Clean-shaven, wearing the royal clothing of an Egyptian king.

• Confident, powerful, and speaking in the language of the Egyptians (42:23).

I suspect you have been to class reunions and had a hard time recognizing people you grew up with. Or maybe you have run into someone in the mall who recognizes you but you don’t recognize him because you are seeing him in a different setting than normal. The very same thing happened to Joseph’s brothers.

In 42:9-17, the storyline gets interesting: “Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, ‘You are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land.’ Then they said

to him, ‘No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies.’ Yet he said to them, ‘No, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!’ But they said, ‘Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no longer alive.’ Joseph said to them, ‘It is as I said to you, you are spies; by this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not go from this place unless your youngest brother comes here! Send one of you that he may get your brother, while you remain confined, that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, surely you are spies.’ So he put them all together in prison for three days.”

Why did Joseph do this? Was it just a cruel act of vengeance-the product of 20 years of bitterness and resentment? No! The Bible is very clear that Joseph never indulged in any resentment against others who had injured him (see 45:5; 50:18■21). Joseph’s purpose in speaking harshly and accusing them of spying was not motivated by bitterness at all, but by a desire to covertly discover information regarding the health and well-being of his father, Jacob, and his younger brother, Benjamin. I also think Joseph (who had lived his life listening to God) realizes that this is an opportunity to accomplish God’s work in his brothers’ lives. Through a strategic, Spirit-led plan, God will use Joseph to:

• Confront his brothers’ sin against him 20 years earlier.

• Free his brothers from their guilt by guiding them into confession and repentance.

• Reconcile the brothers to himself, Jacob, and ultimately to God.

What kind of energy does it take to bend a sapling? Not much. What about an oak? It takes a whole lot! Joseph is not playing games with his brothers. He is recreating the same situation. He’s putting pressure on them; he’s twisting them. Joseph was used in the lives of his brothers like no one else could have been.

I would also suggest that Joseph repeats with his brothers the exact scene that had happened to him 22 years earlier. In 37:2, Joseph brought his father a “bad report” about his brothers. In 37:14-17, Jacob sent Joseph on a mission to find out where his brothers were and what they were doing. When Joseph finds his brothers they are upset because they no doubt think he’s spying on them for the second time. Reading between the lines, it is likely that Joseph’s brothers accused him of being both “a spy” and “a nark!” Now in an unusual turn of events, Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies. No doubt he had protested that he wasn’t spying, just as they now protest. They would have answered him roughly and without any basis for their accusation, just as Joseph now answers them. They threw him into a pit, just as Joseph now throws them into the dungeon. The parallels between their treatment of Joseph and the treatment they are now receiving is a powerful stimulant to their sleeping consciences. Joseph is doing all of this in the hope that his brothers will wake up to the nature of their actions. He is hoping this treatment will make them “come clean.”

Joseph (Genesis 37) | Joseph’s brothers (Genesis 42)

Accused of spying (37:2, 14-17)

Accused of spying (42:9, 12, 14, 16)

Denied the accusation (implied)

Denied the accusation (42:10-11, 13)

Rough response (implied)

Rough response (42:12, 14)

Thrown into a pit (37:23-24)

Thrown into a prison (42:17)

Joseph's brothers probably hadn't given much thought to what it felt like to be a captive in a pit until Joseph put them in the dungeon. He may have put them there both to give them time to think as well as to buy some thinking time for himself. As Joseph thought through his original plan of keeping all but one in confinement, he realized that it might be more than his aged father could bear. So he changes his plan and decides to keep only one in confinement. But the effect of three days in the dungeon got his brothers' attention. They began to think about their lives from a spiritual perspective. They thought about their own sin and the fact that sin has consequences. Before this they had shrugged off their sin as if there were no future reckoning with God. But now, sitting in prison for three days, they made the connection. Thorough repentance often takes time. It's not always quick, easy, and over with.

Joseph was not being cruel. God was using these events to awaken the conscience of his brothers. He was stripping away the pretense and exposing the horror within. The brothers needed to see, to feel, to understand their own wickedness. It is unfortunate but true that often we do not understand sin until we see the way it hurts God and destroys others.

In 42:18-20, Moses writes, "Now Joseph said to them on the third day, 'Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.' And they did so." Another shocking event takes place as Joseph uses the name of the Hebrew's God (Elohim). Joseph gives his brothers a glimmer of hope when he tells them, "I fear God." They would not have expected this from this seemingly harsh Egyptian prime minister. But there was enough hope of fair treatment in those words to keep them from despairing and to reveal some tenderness underneath the harsh exterior of this man. If he hadn't been harsh, he wouldn't have gotten their attention. If he hadn't shown them a glimmer of grace, he would have crushed their spirits. God's grace shines through in His compassion, which underlies His discipline.

In 42:21-24, Moses records this dramatic scene: "Then they said to one another, 'Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.' Reuben answered them, saying, 'Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.' They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. He turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes." In 42:21-22, the brothers begin talking among themselves. Joseph's brothers believed that this distress had rightfully come upon them. They were experiencing the grace of guilt-bloodguilt. They knew they were guilty and deserving of death. God's ancient command to Noah rang in their consciences: "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man" (9:6).

What this conversation shows is something very significant. Twenty years had past, their lives had gone on but their past sin continued to haunt them. I suspect they had agreed to never talk about the incident.

They certainly resolved many times to “move on” and to all appearances, they did. They seemed unaffected by the past. But it was like a paint job on a moldy wall-you can cover the problem but you don’t get rid of it.

Do you have a place in you that has stored all these memories? We try to bury them but they keep creeping back into our conscience.

• We try to forget the people we made fun of as kids.

• We try to forget the people we used for our own advantage.

• We try to hide the lies we told to people we loved.

• We try to forget the people in need that we ignored.

• We try to forget the things we did in secret that we knew were wrong.

But we can’t forget. Slowly these things eat away at our joy and our heart. We may work hard to be better people than we used to be but we cannot escape the fact that others are living with scars that we are responsible for. We cannot escape the fact that no matter how holy we try to pretend to be, there is a cancer called sin that is buried inside of us. We present ourselves as good and righteous while living in fear that someone will learn the truth. Yet, we are wicked people who have done horrible things, no matter how good we are at hiding these things. We know the truth. What we need is to be forgiven.

We have to see the wrongs of the past as sin. We need to expose our denials. We need to face the truth. And if you are unwilling to do so, God will pursue you. He will work to get your attention. He will haunt you with the past. He will pursue you with relentless determination. Not because He is cruel but because He loves you, and because He knows that until you recognize that you are sick you can never be made well.

At this point, Joseph’s pent-up emotions simply had to come out, so he left the room and wept privately. This is the first of six such experiences. Joseph also wept when he saw his brother Benjamin (43:29-30), when he revealed himself to his brothers (45:2), when he met his father in Egypt (46:29), when his father died (50:1), and when he assured his brothers that they were truly forgiven (50:17). What makes a person weep is a good test of character.

The Scripture does not say why Joseph chooses to imprison Simeon rather than any of the other brothers. Perhaps the reason lies in the brothers’ discussion of their guilt in having sold Joseph into slavery. In that discussion, Joseph learns for the first time that Reuben, the oldest son of the family, had kept the other brothers from killing him (Joseph). If Joseph had intended to imprison the oldest brother (i.e., Reuben), then he (Joseph) may have had a change of heart regarding Reuben when he (Joseph) learned of Reuben’s role in rescuing him (Joseph). If this was Joseph’s reasoning, then the next candidate in line for imprisonment would be the second eldest son, Simeon. Simeon, being the second oldest, would have been responsible for their collective wickedness. Joseph chose to keep him as leverage and to see if they were willing to desert Simeon like they had him.

In 42:25-28, our story continues: “Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man’s money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. And thus it was done for them. So they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed from there. As one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the mouth of his

sack. Then he said to his brothers, ‘My money has been returned, and behold, it is even in my sack.’ And their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’” Why did Joseph do this? No doubt to test his brothers to see if they could still be bought off with money. Joseph wanted to know if they would do to Simeon what they did to him. I also think Joseph did this as a demonstration of grace. His motive was love. I doubt that he knew it would scare them as it did. The brothers panicked because they figured that when they returned for more grain they would be accused of stealing this money on the first trip. Interestingly, Joseph’s brothers have never mentioned God until now (cf. 42:18). It was Joseph’s kindness in returning the money, which caused them to be afraid and to exclaim, “What is this that God has done to us?” God used a combination of fear and grace to get their attention and bring them to their knees.

In 42:29-34, Jacob’s sons shared with their father what had happened. In 42:35-38, our story closes: “Now it came about as they were emptying their sacks, that behold, every man’s bundle of money was in his sack; and when they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed.” At this point, the brothers realize that all of their money has been returned. This must have been a sick feeling. “Their father Jacob said to them, ‘You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me.’ Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, ‘You may put my two sons to death if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my care, and I will return him to you.’ But Jacob said, ‘My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.’” Reuben may be sincerely trying to console his father, Jacob, but he has a strange way of doing it. Reuben offers Jacob the opportunity to have his bereavement increased by the death of two of his grandsons (Reuben’s children) if Jacob becomes bereaved of his own youngest son, Benjamin. Sort of a “three-for-the-price-of-one arrangement.”

While we can certainly sympathize with Jacob’s emotions, he did not respond in a godly fashion. On the contrary, he responded in three inappropriate ways:

1. Jacob responded with blame: “You deprived me of my children!” (42:36) He did not accept responsibility for his favoritism or partiality. He did not acknowledge that he was a pathetic spiritual leader. Rather, he played the blame game. We have the tendency to do this as well. We blame our parents, spouse, children, boss, and church. We don’t accept responsibility for our actions. Yet, this does absolutely no good! We would be further along to own our sin.

2. Jacob responded with pessimism: “All these things are against me!” (42:36) While this is a valid statement from a human point of view, from God’s perspective everything that was happening was working for Jacob’s good and not for his harm (Rom 8:28). Some believers are like Jacob-very pessimistic and very negative. We tend to think we are the only ones that have any problems. We then magnify our problems until they seem insurmountable. The result is that all we do is complain and act miserable. But as followers of Jesus, we must learn to trust Him and cling to Him during times of adversity.

3. Jacob responded with fear: “My son shall not go down with you” (42:38). Jacob’s concern was legitimate, but not to the point of being paralyzed by fear. Jacob knew that he had to send Benjamin. He is merely postponing the inevitable. In doing so he paid a high price for his fear.

• He delayed sending his sons back to Egypt for more supplies.

• He prolonged the imprisonment of his son, Simeon.

• He delayed the miraculous and joyful reunion with his son, Joseph.

Here is a study in contrasts: While adversity drew Joseph closer to God, for Jacob it seemed to destroy his faith. Joseph (the son) learned from Jacob (the father) and did not follow in his example.

A boy's toy boat went out of reach on a pond one day and started floating away. A man at the side of the pond started throwing rocks at the boat and the boy became horrified at what might happen. But then he realized that the rocks were going over the boat and making ripples that finally pushed the boat back to shore and into the boy's hands. Many times, when we stray away from God, it appears that he is throwing rocks at us. But He is really using the ripples to bring us back home. Jacob thought God was throwing rocks at him, but in reality God was only throwing rocks around him in order to make some ripples that would bring his family back together.

I wonder what wonderful blessings we might be delaying in our lives because we live in fear rather than faith in God. So, how do you overcome fear?

• Confess your fears to God.

• Mediate on God's past faithfulness.

• Memorize and believe in God's promises (Rom 4:20-21).

• Remember that God is always with you (Isa 41:10).

In 2003, Pastor Kevin took our youth on a short-term missions trip to Honduras. He brought me home a two-foot machete. I keep this machete on top of my bookshelf in my home office. I don't want my kids playing with this tool. Machetes are dangerous. Yet, machetes have a purpose. They are normally used to cut through thick vegetation. Adversity is like a machete: it either serves us or cuts us, depending on whether we grab it by the handle or by the blade. How will you handle your adversity? Will you allow your adversity to serve you or cut you?

God wants to show you grace in your adversity. He also wants to show you grace when you repent of your sin. He will use whatever means He can to get your attention. Will you respond to Him today?

Chapter 51

\"All’s Well that Ends Well\" (Genesis 43-45)

Do you like putting together jigsaw puzzles? [Walk up with a jigsaw book puzzle box] I confess, I do not, but my kids do. Whether you like puzzles or not, you must admit that life is like a giant jigsaw puzzle. And we are like children trying to put the puzzle together with only a handful of pieces and someone took the box that has the picture on the cover. So we’re left trying to fit our little handful of pieces together and trying to figure out the big picture at the same time. No wonder we struggle to figure out what life is all about. As the years pass we pick up more pieces to the puzzle and things that once troubled us now seem to fit into place. And we have a new appreciation for the wisdom of God because nothing is ever wasted. Everything “fits” somewhere. The puzzle that I’m holding is a small, 100-piece puzzle. The picture is of a boy, a girl, a dog, and a cat sitting at a soda fountain, eating a bowl of ice cream, and drinking a float. The caption above their heads reads, “Dear God, You thought of everything!”

This statement is true in life and in the story of Joseph. Genesis 43-45 is a unit describing what happens when Joseph’s brothers return to Egypt. In chapter 43 Joseph exhibits tender love; in chapter 44 he exercises tough love, and in chapter 45 he expresses a theological love for God’s sovereignty.

Scene 1: Driven to Egypt (43:1-14). Moses begins our account with these words: “Now the famine was severe in the land (cf. 41:57). So it came about when they had finished eating the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father [Jacob] said to them, ‘Go back, buy us a little food’” (43:1-2). Did you catch how Jacob phrased that? Why buy just “a little” food? Jacob’s hope was that if they just bought a little bit, the harsh governor in Egypt wouldn’t require Benjamin to go there with his brothers. But Judah confronts his father with reality. He states twice that “the man” solemnly warned the brothers they could not see his face unless they brought their younger brother with them. In response to this Jacob said, “Why did you treat me so badly by telling the man whether you still had another brother?” (43:3-6). Even after some time has passed, Jacob still isn’t willing to make the hard decision to send Benjamin. So he starts blaming. “I’m a victim! Why did you share personal information about our family? If you had been more careful this wouldn’t be happening to me!” Isn’t this true to human nature? When we’re boxed in by circumstances, it is easy to blame others instead of accepting responsibility for our own failures. Yet, God calls us to sense His sovereign hand in the circumstances of our lives.

All of a sudden the brothers speak up together: “The man [Joseph] questioned particularly about us and our relatives, saying, ‘Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?’ So we answered his questions. Could we possibly know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother down’?’ Judah said to his father Israel, ‘Send the lad with me and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, we as well as you and our little ones. I myself will be surety [i.e., collateral] for him; you may hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame before you forever. For if we had not delayed, surely by now we could have returned twice’” (43:7-10). The information the brothers gave to Joseph was in response to his direct questioning. By complaining to his sons, Jacob was rebuking them for telling the truth. Again, Jacob is living up to his nickname of “deceiver.” Fortunately, Judah steps up and lovingly puts him in his place. This is the first good thing we find Judah doing in Genesis so far. Up until now, he was like his father, completely self-centered and self-absorbed:

1. It was Judah who proposed the sale of Joseph to the Midianites (37:26-27).

2. It was Judah who had separated himself from his family to live with the Canaanites (38:1a).

3. It was Judah who hung around with an ungodly man named Hirah (38:1b).

4. It was Judah who married an unbeliever (38:2).

5. It was Judah who was not a spiritual leader and lost two of his sons in death (38:7, 10).

6. It was Judah who was sexually immoral and slept with a supposed prostitute (38:15-18).

But now, in Genesis 43, Judah appears to be a different man! He has changed! He urges his father to stop thinking of himself and to act in the best interest of the entire family. While Jacob spoke only of “I,” “me,” and “my,” Judah speaks in terms of “we,” “us,” and “our” (contrast 42:36, 38 with 43:8). What a reminder that if Judah can change, anyone can change. God specializes in character transformation.

Jacob’s back is to the wall, so he reluctantly agrees to let Benjamin go. He says to his sons, “If it must be so, then do this: take some of the best products of the land in your bags, and carry down to the man as a present, a little balm and a little honey, aromatic gum and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. Take double the money in your hand, and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks; perhaps it was a mistake. Take your brother also, and arise, return to the man; and may God Almighty grant you compassion in the sight of the man, so that he will release to you your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved’” (43:11-14). The words and actions of Jacob in this section do not sound like words of faith and confidence in God. Nonetheless, he agrees to this risky “double your money back” plan. Jacob’s love language must have been gift giving, because every time he is in a fix, he heads to Costco with a shopping list! You may recall that he employed the same tactics when he was preparing to meet his brother, Esau (33:10-16). But Jacob’s gift giving wasn’t motivated by love or friendship. For Jacob it was simply a tool of diplomacy intended to soften the heart of the Egyptian leader. There is irony here. The gift was of the same produce that the original caravan bore that took Joseph to Egypt, including the silver! Life is coming full circle.

This is an interesting passage because it shows a certain amount of quiet resignation to the goodness of God. It’s kind of a question, “Has it really come to this?” When you come to the end of your rope and you simply have to trust God, does it really come to that? This is a different Jacob than we’ve seen before. This is a Jacob in which there’s now trust in God-no conniving, no second-guessing, no plan B’s-he simply has come to the end of all that and he has to trust God. While Jacob offers a prayer or blessing, it is more like a last resort when it should have been his first line of defense. Prayer and dependence on God should always be our first response to trouble and uncertainty in life. But it doesn’t come naturally! It is a learned behavior that becomes a lifestyle by virtue of habitual practice. Jacob had much to learn and so do most believers.

Scene 2: The Brothers’ Explanation (43:15-25). “So the men took this present, and they took double the money in their hand, and Benjamin; then they arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his house steward, ‘Bring the men into the house, and slay an animal and make ready; for the men are to dine with me at noon.’ So the man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph’s house. Now the men were afraid, because they were brought to Joseph’s house; and they said, ‘It is because of the money that was returned in our sacks the first time that we are being brought in, that he may seek occasion against us and fall upon us, and take us for slaves with our donkeys.’ So they came near to Joseph’s house steward, and spoke to him at the entrance

of the house, and said, ‘Oh, my lord, we indeed came down the first time to buy food, and it came about when we came to the lodging place, that we opened our sacks, and behold, each man’s money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full. So we have brought it back in our hand. We have also brought down other money in our hand to buy food; we do not know who put our money in our sacks.’ He said, ‘Be at ease, do not be afraid. Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money.’ Then he brought Simeon out to them. Then the man brought the men into Joseph’s house and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their donkeys fodder. So they prepared the present for Joseph’s coming at noon; for they had heard that they were to eat a meal there.” The brothers went from agony to ecstasy in a matter of moments. God was certainly in their midst.

Scene 3: Feasting with Joseph (43:26-34). Joseph hosts a meal for his brothers who years before had callously sat down to eat while he languished in a pit (cf. 37:25). Moses writes, “When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present which was in their hand and bowed to the ground before him. Then he asked them about their welfare, and said, ‘Is your old father well, of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?’ They said, ‘Your servant our father is well; he is still alive.’ They bowed down in homage. As he lifted his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, he said, ‘Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?’ And he said, ‘May God be gracious to you, my son.’ Joseph hurried out for he was deeply stirred over his brother, and he sought a place to weep; and he entered his chamber and wept there. Then he washed his face and came out; and he controlled himself and said, ‘Serve the meal.’ So they served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is loathsome to the Egyptians. Now they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at one another in astonishment. He took portions to them from his own table, but Benjamin’s portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they feasted and drank freely with him.” Jacob had hoped that the nuts and gifts would appease “the man.” But the truth is, Joseph didn’t care about pistachio nuts and honey, he cares about people! He cares about his brother Benjamin, his father Jacob, and his other brothers. It appears that Joseph didn’t even acknowledge these gifts.

The brothers’ attempt to win Joseph’s favor with nuts and honey is a lot like our futile attempts to appease God. We try to make up for our sins, but (1) we don’t realize how grievous our sin actually is, (2) we don’t realize who we’re dealing with, (3) we mistakenly think that we can reverse our sinful status before God with a bag of pistachio nuts (i.e., good works). God wants us to approach Him through His Son, the Lord Jesus. He does not want us to cling to anything or anyone but His Son. Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (Joh 3:16). It is as simple as receiving a gift.

Joseph showed respect to Benjamin as his distinguished guest by giving him larger and better servings of food than his brothers received (43:34). Special honorees frequently received double portions, but a fivefold portion was the sign of highest privilege. With this favor Joseph sought not only to honor Benjamin but also to test his other brothers’ feelings toward Benjamin. He wanted to see if they would hate him as they had hated himself, his father’s former favorite. Evidently they passed this test. Coming forth from this crucible, the formerly callous brothers emerge a bonded family, shining with integrity and love toward one another.

This is the second occasion that the brothers bow down before Joseph. This is a powerful example of God’s sovereignty over human intention and will. Why should Joseph’s brothers be “astonished” when

they were seated in chronological order by a host who (presumably) was entirely ignorant of their birth order? The reason why they were astonished was because the chance factor of a stranger seating them in exact birth order was approximately 1 in 40 million. They immediately knew this was more than coincidence!

Mercy is written all over this chapter. Jacob's prayer had been answered. Mercy rained down on the sons all day long. Joseph extended mercy toward Benjamin. The feast was one of grace and mercy. The celebration went on into the night. The time passed with hilarity and pleasure. The brothers' fears proved groundless. But morning was coming. And with it was a test over Benjamin that would try their mettle. The day of mercy had been a beautiful beginning. But there was much more to be done. A day of severer mercy was about to dawn. The question is how will Joseph's brothers pass this test? Will they humble themselves in repentance or will they harden their hearts?

There were four college sophomores who were taking Chemistry. The four men were all good students, good friends, and were living together in off-campus housing. Unfortunately, the night before their final exam, rather than studying, they stayed out late partying and overslept the next morning missing their final exam. Later that day, they found their professor and told him that they had gotten a flat tire and didn't have a spare. As a result, they missed the final. They begged him to let them take the final the next day. The professor thought it over and agreed. The guys were elated and relieved. They studied hard that night and went in the next day at the time the professor had told them. He placed them in separate rooms and handed each of them a test booklet, and told them to begin. The first problem was worth five points-an easy question about the chemical elements. "Yeah," they thought at the same time, each one in his separate room, "this is going to be easy." Each finished the problem and then turned the page. On the second page was written: (For 95 points): "Which tire?"

Genesis 44 reveals Joseph's effort to discover the truth-to find out whether his brothers were still the selfish, godless, wicked men who had sold him into slavery 20 years earlier or had they changed? Had they repented of their sins or were they still telling the same old lies? In essence, he was asking, "Which tire?" Joseph knew that real reconciliation could never occur with his brothers until they dealt honestly with their sinful past. For the last 20 years, the brothers had lied to each other, lied to their father, and lied to God. And now they were lying to Joseph. But God, through His servant Joseph, was about to give them a final exam they would never forget!

Scene 4: Joseph Frames His Brothers (44:1-13). "Then he [Joseph] commanded his house steward, saying, 'Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack. Put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, and his money for the grain.' And he did as Joseph had told him" (44:1-2). A silver cup was, of course, valuable. But its use here involved Joseph's personal recollection that his bothers had sold him into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. So he now harasses and tests them with silver! This nuance indicates how carefully calculated Joseph was. Our story continues in 44:3-9: The brothers wake up early and hit the road for Canaan. They are probably groggy and hung over after partying with Joseph (cf. 43:34). After the brothers exited the city, Joseph sent his steward to chase down his brothers and say to them, "'Why have you repaid evil for good? Is not this the one from which my lord drinks and which he indeed uses for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.' So he [the steward] overtook them and spoke these words to them. They said to him, 'Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing. Behold, the money which we found in the mouth of our sacks we have brought back to you from the land of Canaan. How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? 'With whomever of your

servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's slaves.'" The brothers are no doubt indignant at the steward's accusation because they are confident in their righteousness. Maybe they even said, "Come on, Mr. Steward! Do thieves voluntarily return valuables only to steal again?" Joseph's steward must have smiled inside as he said, "Now let it also be according to your words; he with whom it is found shall be my slave, and the rest of you shall be innocent.' Then they hurried, each man lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack. He searched, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest, and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. Then they tore their clothes, and when each man loaded his donkey, they returned to the city" (44:10-13). When Joseph disappeared, it was only Jacob who tore his clothes (37:34); now all the brothers do. Indeed, they are broken and they are family. Yet, this is the worst news they could possibly hear. It was bad enough to stand before a powerful Egyptian governor who was angered at the theft of his silver cup, but to realize that this man was their brother whom they had sold into slavery 20 years earlier-it was simply overwhelming! Their sin had been exposed. Their greatest fears had come to pass. Their minds were reeling with the ugly reality. They were doomed!

Scene 5: The Bothers Repent and Reconcile with Joseph (44:14-45:15). In 44:14-17, Moses writes, "When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there, and they fell to the ground before him. [Again, Joseph's brothers bow before him.] Joseph said to them, 'What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed practice divination?' So Judah said, 'What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found.' But he said, 'Far be it from me to do this. The man in whose possession the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father.'" That Joseph practiced divination is not clear from 44:5, 15. He may have, but this seems inconsistent with his character as a man of faith in the Lord. It appears to be part of the ruse. It also seems unlikely since Joseph had the gift of interpreting dreams (divine revelations) from God. If anyone needed to resort to divination it would not have been Joseph. The first statement made by Joseph's servant may have been a lie (44:5). The second statement made by Joseph did not claim to practice divination (44:15). Joseph said that such a person as he could do it. These references to divination seem intended to impress Joseph's brothers with the value of the cup that had disappeared. The brothers inferred that Joseph used it for purposes other than simply drinking.

In 44:18-34, Judah speaks up and provides the longest and most moving speech in the book of Genesis.

Then Judah approached him, and said, 'Oh my lord, may your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are equal to Pharaoh. My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' We said to my lord, 'We have an old father and a little child of his old age. Now his brother is dead, so he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.' Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes on him.' But we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' You said to your servants, however, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.' Thus it came about when we went up to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. Our father said, 'Go back, buy us a little food.' But we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down; for we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; and the one went out from me, and I said, 'Surely he is torn in pieces,' and I have not seen him since. 'If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow.' Now, therefore, when I come to your

servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to Sheol in sorrow. For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame before my father forever.' Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me-for fear that I see the evil that would overtake my father?'" Fourteen times in this speech, Judah mentions his father, Jacob (44:19-34). He likely spoke with tearful emotion. No more moving example of true contrition and repentance is found in Scripture, unless it be the parable of the prodigal son (Luk 15:11-32). A sinner disgraced became a sinner restored with a very tender heart.

Jacob will eventually crown Judah with kingship (49:10), because he demonstrates that he has become fit to rule according to God's ideal of kingship-that the king serves the people, not vice versa. Judah is transformed from one who sells his brother as a slave to one who is willing to be the slave for his brother. With that offer he exemplifies Israel's ideal kingship.

Do we see a genuine change in Joseph's brothers? Absolutely!

1. They didn't resent it when Benjamin was given a larger portion (43:34).

2. They trusted each other and didn't accuse one another of wrong when accused of stealing the silver cup (44:9).

3. They stuck together when the silver cup was found. They didn't abandon Benjamin when he was about to be enslaved in Egypt (44:13).

4. They completely humbled themselves for the sake of Benjamin (44:14).

5. They knew their predicament was the result of their sin against Joseph (44:16).

6. They offered themselves as slaves to Egypt together with Benjamin (44:16).

7. They showed genuine concern for how this would affect their father (44:29-31).

8. Judah is willing to be made a substitutionary sacrifice for his brother, out of love for Benjamin and his father, Jacob (44:33).

Consider Joseph's brothers:

• The same brothers who once callously ignored the cries of Joseph now have expressed regret and remorse for what they did to their brother.

• The same brothers who lied to their father about Joseph's death and broke his heart are now doing everything they can to reassure Jacob and protect him.

• The same brothers who used to act with deception and treachery are now seeking to act honorably in returning money that they knew wasn't theirs.

• The same brothers who hated the children of Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) are now promising to protect Benjamin with their life.

• The same brothers who had once abandoned Joseph now returned to rescue their brother, Simeon.

No matter how you slice it, the brothers manifested repentance. They acknowledged their sin! This is quite rare today. We are a society that is especially skilled at rationalizing and blaming. When someone is caught in a wrong you might hear:

• I come from a dysfunctional home. (I'm not responsible…blame my upbringing.)

• This is just the way I am. (I'm not responsible…blame my genes or God!)

• They started it. (I'm not responsible…they are.)

• I didn't know that was against the law. (I'm not responsible…you didn't tell me.)

• I have been oppressed. (I'm not responsible…society is.)

In 45:1-15, our story comes to a resolution. But remember that at this moment the brothers were on trial! They were being interrogated. Benjamin had been accused of stealing Joseph's silver cup. And Judah was pleading for mercy. From the brothers' perspective, it would appear that they had so angered the Egyptian official that he was either going to imprison them all for life or sentence them to death! "Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, 'Have everyone go out from me.' So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Please come closer to me.' And they came closer. And he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, 'God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall live in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children and your flocks and your herds and all that you have. There I will also provide for you, for there are still five years of famine to come, and you and your household and all that you have would be impoverished. Behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth which is speaking to you. Now you must tell my father of all my splendor in Egypt, and all that you have seen; and you must hurry and bring my father down here.' Then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him." After a threefold expression of Joseph's goodwill toward his siblings (weeping, explaining, and embracing), his brothers were finally able to talk to him. Throughout the course of Joseph's life, he had discerned God's providential control of the events of his life. Four times he stated that God, not his brothers, was behind what had happened (45:5, 7, 8, 9).

How was Joseph able to forgive his brothers?

• He saw his situation from an eternal perspective. He realized that even though his brothers intended to harm him…God was working through even those sinful intentions.

• He was prepared long in advance to forgive his brothers. And from the first moment he saw his brothers he was working to restore their relationship, not to avenge the wrong done to him.

• He received his brothers' confession and repentance for their sins.

In these 15 verses, there are a number of important principles on how to forgive.

1. You can keep their identity secret and conceal what they did (45:1). Joseph excused all of his servants before he revealed his identity to his brothers (44:34). He did this because his desire was to move his entire family to Egypt. And when his family arrived he didn't want everyone in Egypt to know what they had done. Joseph wanted his brothers to come to Egypt and be loved and admired by the Egyptians. He chose to protect them and guard their reputations. Since God forgives our sins and removes them "as far as the east is from the west" (Psa 103:12), why not protect those that you are in individual conflict with?

2. You set them free from fear (45:3-4). After identifying himself to his brothers and asking about his father, Joseph urged his brothers to come close to him. Husband, has your wife treated you badly in some way and you constantly remind her of this? Wife, has your husband let you down in some way and you won't let him forget it? Remember, love keeps no records of wrong (1Co 13:5).

3. You want people who have hurt you to forgive themselves (45:5). One of the proofs that Joseph had forgiven his brothers was that he didn't want them to be angry with themselves. That is the way God forgives. He forgives completely and unconditionally. When we choose not to forgive ourselves, we are exercising self-hatred. When we do so we not only hurt ourselves, we hurt others. The person who hasn't forgiven himself or herself is an unhappy person-and is usually unable to forgive others. The irony of forgiveness is this: The degree to which we forgive others will often be the degree to which we forgive ourselves; the degree to which we forgive ourselves will often be the degree to which we forgive others. It is like the age-old question: which comes first-the chicken or the egg? It is sometimes almost impossible to say which comes first-forgiving others so you will be able to forgive yourself, or forgiving yourself so that you will be able to forgive others.

4. You let them save face (45:7-8). Joseph does not diminish what the brothers did ("you sold me into Egypt"), but he puts it into the right perspective: "God sent me ahead of you to saves lives." Nowhere in this chapter was the sin of his brothers minimized. Yet, Joseph allowed his brothers to have some dignity by focusing on God's sovereignty.

5. You protect them from their greatest fear (45:9, 13). Instead of telling his brothers to tell their father how they sinned against Joseph, the gracious Joseph let his brothers deal with the issue between their father in their own way and on their own time. Undoubtedly, when they returned home, they had to explain to their father how Joseph ended up in Egypt in the first place. Hard as it might have been, such open confession was necessary for the healing of the family.

6. You maintain your forgiveness (50:18-21). After living in Egypt seventeen years Jacob died. Joseph's brothers were now convinced that he had simply waited for the day of his father's death to take vengeance on them. So they went to him and made up the story that their father sent word to Joseph saying, "Forgive your brothers for what they did." The brothers then bowed before Joseph and offered themselves as his slaves. Joseph said, "I forgive you!" He then told them not to be afraid because he would provide for them and their children. Even 17 years later, Joseph did not retract his forgiveness. In our country we have a law called the law of double jeopardy. We find this in the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. Double

jeopardy means you cannot be tried for the same crime twice. If you are declared innocent of a crime no one can try you for that crime again. If you have been sentenced and serve your time, the matter is closed. In like fashion, once you have been declared forgiven by God, you cannot be tried again. The verdict has been declared. The price has been paid. The matter is settled. And you and I need to remind ourselves of this every time our own conscience begins to accuse us again. As someone has written, “God has cast our sin into the sea and he has posted a sign that says, ‘No Fishing.’”

The thrust of this section is this: Will you be a family member, friend, or coworker like Joseph: firm, forbearing, and forgiving? Will you see that God’s sovereignty allows you to forgive others for whatever sin they have committed against you?

Scene 6: The Brothers Return to Jacob (45:16-24). “Now when the news was heard in Pharaoh’s house that Joseph’s brothers had come, it pleased Pharaoh and his servants. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Say to your brothers, ‘Do this: load your beasts and go to the land of Canaan, and take your father and your households and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you will eat the fat of the land.’ Now you are ordered, ‘Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father and come. Do not concern yourselves with your goods, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.’ Then the sons of Israel did so; and Joseph gave them wagons according to the command of Pharaoh, and gave them provisions for the journey. To each of them he gave changes of garments, but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of garments. To his father he sent as follows: ten donkeys loaded with the best things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain and bread and sustenance for his father on the journey. So he sent his brothers away, and as they departed, he said to them, ‘Do not quarrel on the journey.’” Joseph’s admonition to his brothers not to quarrel on their journey (45:24) is a bit unclear. Probably he meant just that, not to become involved in arguing and recriminations over the past (cf. Pro 29:9). Since Joseph had forgiven them, they should forgive one another (cf. Mat 18:21-35). The brothers had already quarreled over their sin against Joseph in Gen 42:21-22. Joseph knew that as soon as these men left his presence they would be tempted to assign blame to one another. Accusations would fly and a heated argument would follow. But it would be pointless since all had been forgiven. Their trip would be a happier one if they focused upon God’s grace rather than their own guilt.

Scene 7: Jacob is Granted the Desire of his Heart (45:25-28). Our story concludes with these words: “Then they went up from Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to their father Jacob. They told him, saying, ‘Joseph is still alive, and indeed he is ruler over all the land of Egypt.’ But he was stunned, for he did not believe them. When they told him all the words of Joseph that he had spoken to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. Then Israel said, ‘It is enough; my son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.’” Jacob was told Joseph was dead and he believed it. Now he is told Joseph is alive, and he doesn’t believe it. However, God grants Jacob the desire of his heart (Psa 37:4). God is good to Jacob even though Jacob has been characterized by unbelief.

The only survivor of a shipwreck washed up on a small uninhabited island. He cried out to God to save him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a rough hut and put his few possessions in it. But then one day, after hunting for food, he arrived home to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up to the sky. The worst had happened; he was stung with grief. Early the next day, though, a ship drew near the island and rescued him. “How did you know I was here?” he asked the crew. “We saw your smoke signal,” they replied.

Though it may not seem so now, your present difficulty may be instrumental to your future happiness.

God wants us to remember that life is a jigsaw puzzle and we don’t have all the pieces. But one day things will make more sense than they do now. But for now, we are to trust that our Father knows best.

Chapter 52

\"One Big, Happy Family\" (Genesis 46-47)

Have you ever taken a lengthy family vacation? I have. While I was growing up, the Krell family took many long vacations. But two stand out. If you can believe this, our family of four took two (not one, but two) six-week-long family vacations around the United States in a Subaru. Yes, that's right, a Subaru! Not a min-van…not a motor home…a Subaru. Needless to say, these two trips led to some serious family bonding. I don't think any of us have ever fully recovered.

In Genesis 46-47, Jacob and his family embark on their own family vacation. You could call it "Family Reunion in Egypt." Jacob has just received news that his favorite son, Joseph, is alive. So he prepares the family to leave Canaan and head out to join Joseph in Egypt.

Scene 1: God leads Jacob and his family to move to Egypt (46:1-7). Our account begins in 46:1: "So Israel [Jacob] set out with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac." Jacob is 130 years old as he sets out for Egypt. If he were alive today, he would have been retired and living on Social Security for over 65 years. This is not the time when people begin making radical changes in their lives. But Jacob is about to launch into one of the most remarkable faith ventures of his life. Yet, in order to participate in God's incredible plan:

1. He has to leave everything familiar and the security of his earthly comforts. Often, following God's plan includes stepping out in faith and taking a risk. If God calls you to another location or another job, will you go where He leads despite the risks to your personal comfort and security?

2. He has to believe that he still has a mission from God. When most Christians would have long-since turned the ministry over to the next generation, Jacob is taking giant steps of faith. Are you willing to find creative ways to keep serving and fulfilling God's plan for your life?

3. He has to be willing to obey God's Word no matter the cost. Do you love the Lord enough to deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Him (Luk 9:23-25)?

Fortunately, Jacob starts off right by first offering sacrifices to God! Jacob's sacrifices are not burnt offerings, but offerings of thanks that Joseph was alive and likely vows to follow God. One of the things that has been a help to me in my Christian life is learning to give thanks in everything (1Th 5:18; Heb 13:15). I challenge you to regularly spend some time in prayer without asking for a thing. Instead, spend the whole time thanking the Lord for who He is and what He has done. Sacrifice what you would like to ask Him and just express thanks. As you do so you will find that the disappointments and frustrations of life are not nearly as troubling and you will recognize all that you have to be thankful for.

Moses records that Jacob offered sacrifices at Beersheba. Why? Beersheba was the southern-most boundary line of Israel. In essence, it was the point of no return. Before Jacob advanced into the desert wasteland that separated Canaan and Egypt, he determined to inquire of the Lord to be absolutely certain he was in God's perfect will. Furthermore, Beersheba was a significant place to Jacob's family. This is where Abraham had dug a well, planted a tamarisk tree, and called on the name of the Lord (21:30-33). Abraham even lived in Beersheba after offering Isaac on Mt. Moriah (22:19). Isaac also lived in Beersheba (26:23, 32-33) and built an altar there (26:24-25). It was perhaps at this altar that Jacob now presents his

sacrifices.

Sooner or later, we all find ourselves at significant intersections in life when we must make critical life decisions that will have far-reaching consequences on our own lives and the lives of others. How do you make decisions at such points? Many people simply make the best decision they can based on the information they have. But the Bible warns us against this strategy (Pro 3:5-6; Jam 1:5; Jam 4:2).

In 46:2, Moses writes, “God spoke to Israel in visions of the night.” The Bible indicates that God primarily reveals His will to believers through His written Word (2Ti 3:16-17). However, He can and does communicate through a variety of other means, including: prompting by the Holy Spirit, godly counsel, circumstances, and dreams and visions (Joe 2:28). But these other means of revelation must be measured against the revealed will of God recorded in His Word. Anything that contradicts Scripture must be rejected. As significant as experience can be, experience never trumps Scripture.

In this vision, God twice calls Jacob by name: “Jacob! Jacob!” (46:2) God also did this with Abraham (22:11), Moses (Exo 3:4), Samuel (1Sa 3:10), Martha (Luk 10:41), and Saul (Act 9:4). If you can’t figure out why someone would call out a person’s name repeatedly, then you must not have children. Jacob is smarter than most because he immediately responds with the words, “Here I am.” These are the same words Jacob’s grandfather Abraham used when God called on him (22:1). When God speaks either audibly or through His Word this is the only proper response.

God now identifies Himself. He says, “I am God, the God of your father” (46:3). He is saying, “I am the true deity.” This is virtually the same introduction the Lord gave when He spoke to Jacob during his vision of the stairway to heaven (28:13). God then comforts Jacob with the words: “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt.” Why would Jacob have been afraid? He is having an encounter with the God of the universe. For this reason alone, Jacob has every reason to be afraid. In fact, whenever God reveals Himself to man in a supernatural way, His first words are invariably, “Do not fear!” Jacob is concerned about making a mistake that would affect his life, the lives of those in his family, the future of the nation of Israel, and the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God. So God affirms His promises to Jacob (46:3b-4). He declares what His good purpose is in bringing Jacob’s family to Egypt.

1. I will make you a great nation in Egypt. This promise is a reaffirmation of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants (12:2; 13:16; 22:17; 26:4; 28:14-15). This reaffirmation demonstrates the unconditional faithfulness of God.

2. I will go down to Egypt with you. God informs Jacob that He will go with him into hostile enemy territory. Where God guides, He provides…and protects. There is no need to ever fear.

3. I will bring you back to Canaan again. God is fulfilling the words He spoke in 15:13-14 when He told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land that was not theirs. God said that they would stay there in this foreign land for 400 years and then God would judge the oppressive nation in which they stayed and God’s people would be released. God’s Word always comes to pass. So what you and I really need is to hear from Him.

4. Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes. Jacob would enjoy 17 more years of life. And instead of dying without his son to comfort him, God promises Jacob that his son, Joseph, would be there to close his eyes at the moment of his death. God often gives His children the desires of their heart as they attempt to seek Him (Psa 37:4).

Jacob faced a critical, life-changing decision. But instead of forging ahead (like he had done in the past) he stopped and sought God's guidance. Then he listened for God's answer. When he heard the answer he moved forward obediently and with confidence. That's the sequence. It's not complicated. We must ask, listen, and obey. If we do that, God will lead us, protect us, and give us the strength to face the future.

After hearing directly from the Lord, Jacob and his family left Beersheba and traveled to Egypt (46:5-7). While this must have been a challenging endeavor, there must have also been some excitement in the air. It's easy to get excited about a move. Maybe life has been a bit boring and making a move is an adventure. That's U-Haul's motto, "Adventure in Moving." If you've ever driven a U-Haul, you know what that means!

Maybe you're tired of your problems in a job or locale and you're ready to trade them in for a new situation. Maybe the move means more money, a greater challenge at work, a bigger home, a more desirable place to live. But if God isn't in it, don't do it! Put the brakes on your excitement long enough to yield yourself fully to Him, to seek Him, and to pray. Jacob had a direct and divine encounter from God. He knew with the utmost of confidence that he was to move to Egypt. American Express used to run a series of commercials that declared, "American Express: 'Don't leave home without it.'" The same could be said of God's will: "Don't leave home without it."

Scene 2: Jacob and his family depart for Egypt (46:8-27). The second section of our text consists of a long list of names of people we know nothing about. It's not even useful if you're looking for names for your baby, unless you want something like Muppim, Huppim, or Ard (46:21). But God saw fit to include it in Scripture and we need to think about the reason why. We need to remember that to the first readers of this book, these names meant something. This is a list of every tribe (and every major family group within that tribe) that later formed the nation Israel. Every Hebrew knew his family ancestry. The division of labor, the organization of the army, and the parceling of the land all were based on the tribes. Even the coming of the Messiah was through the particular tribe of Judah. God's way of working is to call individuals to Himself, just as He called Abraham. Through those individuals, He calls families, and through those families, nations are called to obedience to the Savior. God's plan is to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham (12:1-3). That's why, in 46:1, the text says that Jacob offered sacrifices to the God of his father, Isaac, and in 46:3, God identifies Himself to Jacob as "the God of your father," instead of "Jacob's God." Why? For the simple reason that this is covenant history-the story of God's dealings with His people. There is a corporate flavor, a sense of continuity between the generations. God is moving from the individual to the family to the nation in His working.

One of our major blind spots as American Christians is our individualistic approach to the Christian life. I'm not suggesting that we do not need an individual relationship with God. Of course we do! But we have made Christianity so personal that we have lost the sense of belonging to the church as God's covenant people, His extended family, just as Israel was His people. Because we don't know church history, we don't have a sense of continuity with those who have gone before us. We join and leave a church according to our personal likes and dislikes. So many people attend a church for years yet hardly know the others who attend. This lack of belonging makes us vulnerable to the enemy. God wants us to be in community. Are you? If so, to what degree do you have relationships with God's people?

This list of boring names reminded Moses' readers of their identity as God's people in fulfilling His purposes. Additionally, this list would have reminded them that the outworking of God's purposes takes time, but it is absolutely certain. When Abraham was 75, God told him that He would make of him a great

nation. Abraham was 100 before Isaac was born. Isaac was 60 before Jacob and Esau were born. It took 50 or 60 years for Jacob to have 12 sons and one daughter. Now Jacob was 130, and the "great nation," after 215 years, consisted of these 70 descendants of Abraham. That's not a quick start. But in the 400 or so years from Jacob to Moses, the number mushroomed from 70 to over two million!

This section demonstrates the power of exponential multiplication. While discipleship is painfully slow at the beginning, eventually multiplication occurs. One of my mentors likes to say, "If you work the process, the process will work." Nowhere is this truer than with discipleship. Discipleship is God's A-plan (Mat 28:19-20). When we faithfully make disciples, God fulfills His will. Our lifetimes are too short to measure God's purpose. Our task is to understand God's missionary purpose for the world (to bless all nations through Abraham's seed) and to devote our lives to seeing that purpose brought about, even if it seems as if God is slow about His promises (see 2Pe 3:3-13).

Scene 3: Jacob's reunion with Joseph (46:28-30). Moses writes, "Now he sent Judah before him to Joseph, to point out the way before him to Goshen; and they came into the land of Goshen." That Jacob chose Judah to be their guide indicates that he trusted his son, which suggests that the men had told their father everything and were in his good graces again. Now Jacob could see the hand of God in all that had happened. In spite of his past failures, Judah now proved himself faithful, and his descendants were eventually named the royal tribe (49:8-12). Regardless of what you've done or how you've lived, God is a God of grace and He loves to forgive His children. Like Judah, God's grace can propel you forward. He can make a success out of the shambles of your life.

Jacob and Joseph are reunited in 46:29-30. Moses records these words: "Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel; as soon as he appeared before him, he fell on his neck and wept on his neck a long time. Then Israel said to Joseph, 'Now let me die, since I have seen your face, that you are still alive.'" The eleven brothers had already been reunited with Joseph, but now Jacob meets him after a separation of 22 years. Previously, Jacob had said that the loss of his sons would bring him to his grave in mourning (37:35; 42:38). But Joseph's "resurrection" enables his father to die in peace. Similarly, the resurrection of a greater Joseph has allowed many to face death with courage and hope (cf. Php 1:21-26; 1Pe 1:3). Here Jacob beheld his son, his temporal savior, and he said he could now die. Simeon would behold the Son, his eternal Savior, and knew he would die in peace (Luk 2:29-30).

Scene 4: God provides Jacob land and food (46:31-47:12). Moses writes, "Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, 'I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me; and the men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks and their herds and all that they have.' 'When Pharaoh calls you and says, 'What is your occupation?' you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,' that you may live in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is loathsome to the Egyptians.'" Joseph encouraged his family to be completely honest with Pharaoh (46:34). Dishonesty has long plagued Jacob's family, but now Joseph led them out of this destructive behavior. Believers should respond to divine providence by making their decisions in response to the initiative of His wise leaders. They should do so with confidence in His promises and dependence on His continuing guidance and provision.

Why did Joseph place such emphasis on having his family live in Goshen? Goshen had some of the best pastureland in all of Egypt. Goshen was located near to Joseph's place of residence (45:10). Goshen would keep the Hebrews isolated and insulated from the culture and religion of Egypt since the Egyptians

considered sheep unclean and Hebrews detestable (43:32). One of the greatest dangers to the covenant promises of God was intermarriage between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. Why was this a danger? Because intermarriage would inevitably lead to spiritual compromise and the worship of the false gods of the Egyptians. Hidden in this text is the wisdom of God! If God had allowed the Israelites to remain in Canaan, they would have inevitably intermarried with the Canaanites and become ethically, morally, and spiritually corrupt. So God places them in one of the most racist societies on earth at that time, thereby protecting them from spiritual adultery and allowing them the time and opportunity to multiply into the millions.

God is an amazing God! He continually reminds me that He is my protector and provider. Often, this means that He protects me and provides for me despite myself. That's how gracious our God is. He often delivers us from our flesh and the evil one even when we desire to sin and live for ourselves. Even when He doesn't directly deliver us Himself, He provides us with a way of escape (1Co 10:13).

In 47:1-6, Joseph explains to Pharaoh the needs of his family. He even introduces five of his brothers to Pharaoh. After the brothers answer Pharaoh's questions, they ask his permission to live in Goshen. Pharaoh tells Joseph that his family can live in the land of Goshen. He even offers any capable brothers a job-to be put in charge of Pharaoh's livestock.

Joseph knows God is on a roll so he brings his father before Pharaoh and Jacob blesses Pharaoh (47:7). Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh (47:7, 10) is unusual since it implies that in one sense (i.e., as one of God's elect) Jacob was superior to Pharaoh. Pharaoh was a man of immense worldly power and influence. But this is a case of "the lesser is blessed by the greater" (Heb 7:7). This account reminds us that the least and most faltering of God's children has the superiority in the presence of the most elevated men of the world.

In 47:8-9, Pharaoh says to Jacob, "How many years have you lived?" Jacob answers, "The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning." When we first encountered Jacob he was struggling inside his mother's womb with his twin brother. As we come to the end of Jacob's days, he is struggling for his life in a famine-devastated Canaan. In between these first and last moments of struggle have been many trying experiences for Jacob. His life has had more sorrow than joy. Why is this so? Jacob's words in 47:9 appear to be the author's attempt at a deliberate contrast to the later promise that one who honors his father and mother should "live long and do well upon the land" (Deu 5:16). Jacob, who deceived his father and thereby gained the blessing, must not only die outside the Promised Land but also, we learn here, his years were few and difficult. From his own words, then, we can see a final recompense for Jacob's actions earlier in the book.

A summary of Jacob's life:

1. He struggled with his brother in the womb (25:21-26).

2. He was raised by parents who were dysfunctional (25:28).

3. He stole his father's blessing by means of deception and was forced to leave his family because of the hatred of Esau (27:1-46).

4. He spent years in exile, serving his uncle, Laban, who repeatedly cheated him (29:13-30).

5. He planned to marry one wife and ended up with four (29:18), and the outcome of this was continual competition and strife (29:30ff).

6. He finally fled from his uncle and eventually had to make a nonaggression pact with him lest further conflict arise (31:1-55).

7. His only daughter, Dinah, was violated at Shechem (34:1-4).

8. He lived in fear of reprisal from Shechem's neighbors when his sons killed the men of Shechem (34:30).

9. He lost his favorite wife, Rachel, at an early age (35:16-19).

10. His oldest son, Rueben, lay with one of his concubines (35:22).

11. His favorite son, Joseph, was tragically lost and presumed dead (37:33-34).

12. And now he was on the verge of losing everything due to a seven-year, worldwide famine. It had been a hard life!

In 47:11-12, Joseph settled his father and his brothers and generously provided them "the best of the land." This was a time of reward for Jacob. Of course, Jacob's life had been full of ups and downs. There had been times of deceitfulness and immaturity. There had been times of self-pity when he swore he would spend the rest of his life in mourning. But all the desires of his heart were given him. All the sufferings and the trials had been counteracted. Why? Because God is gracious and loves to reward His people. He does the same for us as we follow after Him.

Scene 5: God's provision of land and food for Pharaoh (47:13-27). This section demonstrates the fulfillment of Jacob's blessing on Pharaoh (46:31-47:6; 47:7-10). Joseph was able to save Egypt and its neighbors from a very severe famine and to alleviate the desperate plight of the Egyptians. Pharaoh received money from Egypt and Canaan (47:13-14), livestock (47:15-17), land and slaves (47:18-21, 23, 25), and 20 percent of future harvests (47:23-26). God blessed Pharaoh because he had blessed the Israelites with the best of Egypt. In 47:22, Joseph gave preferential treatment to the pagan Egyptian priests. This may be the most troubling of all the issues. This concession was no doubt due to the powerful lobby that the priests had with Pharaoh. Thus, despite what Joseph may have wanted to do, it is likely that Pharaoh tied his hands. "Then Joseph said to the people, 'Behold, I have today bought you and your land for Pharaoh; now, here is seed for you, and you may sow the land. At the harvest you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own for seed of the field and for your food and for those of your households and as food for your little ones.' So they said, 'You have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's slaves.' Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt valid to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; only the land of the priests did not become Pharaoh's. Now Israel lived in the land of Egypt, in Goshen, and they acquired property in it and were fruitful and became very numerous" (47:23-27).

Scene 6: Jacob prepares to finish well (47:28-31). Our story begins to draw to a close in 47:28: "Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the length of Jacob's life was one hundred and forty-seven years." Jacob thought he was going to die soon (45:28; 46:30; 47:9), but he lived for 17 more years. Some people think they're at death's door, but God will give them many more years. Others think they have many more years, but they're unknowingly at death's door. Since none of us knows how long we're going to live, we need to live each day in light of eternity.

I also find it interesting to note that Jacob enjoyed the blessings of God for 17 years-the same number of years he enjoyed Joseph until Joseph was sold into slavery to Egypt by his older brothers (37:2). Coincidence? I don't think so. God is gracious and merciful. Genesis is silent about these years, but a fast-forward to his ultimate age of 147 suggests uneventful, unruffled tranquility for both father and son. How sweet it must have been for Jacob and Joseph. No doubt these years were used to further inform and deepen Joseph for the continuing role he would play in God's plan.

Jacob's decidedly dysfunctional family is on the verge of coming together again in genuine community. There is always hope for your family. I don't care what has taken place in the past; God can still reconcile and restore your family. Don't give up hope. God loves to bring loved ones back together again. Persevere in your marriage and family and just see what God will do.

Our story concludes in 47:29-31: "When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, 'Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.' And he said, 'I will do as you have said.' He said, 'Swear to me.' So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed." Why does Jacob insist on being buried in Canaan? It wasn't because he had already invested in a family plot. Knowing that the day of his departure drew near, Jacob made his death a testimony to his faith and a stimulus to the faith and obedience of his descendants. Jacob urged Joseph, his most trusted son, to swear a solemn oath promising that he would not bury his father in Egypt, but in Canaan in the cave of Machpelah with his forefathers (49:29-32; 50:24-25). This would serve as a reminder to his descendants that Egypt was not home, but only a place to sojourn until God brought them back "home" to Canaan, the land of promise (Heb 11:22).

Few Christians give much thought to the impact they will have after they have gone to heaven. Yet, men and women of faith should be like Abel who "still speaks, even though he is dead" (Heb 11:4). Jacob's demand to be buried in Canaan would speak to later generations of the fact that he was living in expectation that God's future was in despised Canaan, not in luxurious, powerful Egypt. We too should give thought to ways of affecting later generations.

Our passage concludes with Jacob worshipping God (47:31). For the first time, Jacob stopped striving and simply worshipped God. Worship is the highest calling of a believer and one of God's primary purposes for saving man. He wants to fill heaven with worshippers! May God give us the grace and wisdom to be men and women who, in our old age, are still worshipping Him. It is also to be noticed that Jacob was determined to serve God even in extreme old age. If God allows us to live to be very elderly we shall find that there are ways of serving Him even when we are frail and worn.

Hence, the bookends of this account are living for the Lord in our later years. Today, regardless of your age, will you commit that you will live out your fully allotted days for the Lord? This is the only way to live life.

Chapter 53

\"Deathbed Adoptions\" (Gen 48:1-22)

Have you ever heard of John Grisham? Most Americans have. John Grisham writes legal thrillers and is one of the most popular writers of our time. What you may not know is Grisham is a follower of Christ. One defining moment in Grisham's spiritual journey came several years after graduating from Mississippi State University, when one of his classmates in law school told John he was terminally ill. Grisham asked him, "What do you do when you realize you are about to die?" The friend replied, "It's real simple. You get things right with God, and you spend as much time with those you love as you can. Then you settle up with everybody else."

How do you want to die? In eternity, what type of life will you wish you had lived? Lock that thought in your mind and begin to live your life from your death backward. You will not regret examining your life, but you may live to regret an unexamined life. As a pastor, one of my tasks is to challenge you to think deeply and reflect on your life. Today, I want you to consider the legacy that you will leave behind.

In Genesis 48, Jacob has come to the end of his life. He has carried the torch of God's covenant for 147 years. He has committed many sins and has not always honored God, however, Jacob is an example of a man who finishes well. In this passage, we will see that before he dies Jacob is determined to pass the torch on to those who would follow. This must be our goal as well.

Scene 1: Jacob prepares to die (48:1-2). Moses writes, "Now it came about after these things that Joseph was told, 'Behold, your father is sick.' So he took his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim with him. When it was told to Jacob, 'Behold, your son Joseph has come to you,' Israel collected his strength and sat up in the bed" (48:1-2). The death of which Jacob has so frequently spoken, and even longed for at times, is knocking on his door. Thus, Joseph takes his two sons to say "goodbye." It is likely that in the 17 years Jacob lived with Joseph in Egypt he invested in Manasseh and Ephraim. Both boys are now about 20 years old. So while Joseph and Jacob were separated for 22 years, Jacob has now been able to invest in his grandsons for 17 years. He likely learned the importance of pouring his life into the lives of his family members. Have you learned this same lesson?

Scene 2: Jacob adopts his grandsons (48:3-12). In 48:3-4, Jacob speaks to Joseph: "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz [the former name for Bethel] in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and He said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession.'" Jacob may be losing his health, but he is not losing his memory. In these verses, Jacob shares his testimony. He begins by addressing God, as "God Almighty" (El Shaddai). Jacob didn't talk about the difficulties of his life (cf. 47:9); he spoke about "God Almighty" and what He had done for His servant. By using the name "God Almighty," Jacob is acknowledging that only an all-powerful God could have made such far-reaching promises with the assurance that they would be fulfilled (see also 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 49:25).

Jacob's testimony is based on God's promises and his experience with God. It was in Luz that Jacob dreamed of the stairway to heaven before he left from Canaan to find a wife in Haran (28:10-22). It was in Luz that Jacob built an altar to the Lord after he returned to Canaan from living with Laban (35:6-7). In both encounters, God promised to make him fruitful and give him land. Despite Jacob's faithlessness, God remained faithful (2Ti 2:13). Jacob banked on this and so can we. While we may sin and fall short of God's

desires for our lives, He remains faithful for He cannot deny Himself. This was Jacob's testimony. This is my testimony. God has been faithful and gracious to me from the moment of salvation to today. And I know He will remain faithful to me until my death or Jesus' return. Can you say that?

If you have a testimony about God's faithfulness and grace in your life, you need to pass it on. One of the best things you can do is pass your story on to others…especially the story of your spiritual pilgrimage. What a blessing for your children and grandchildren to know how you came to faith. It is helpful to learn of how you have seen God's faithfulness demonstrated in your life. So, share your stories. Take time to build a sense of history into those you love.

• Write down your memories. Journal the history of your life. Share about your conversion, spiritual growth, and special memories.

• Create a tape recording or video recording that chronicles your life.

• Make it a point to convey to your children the similar experiences that you share.

Interestingly, there is a website called LastWishes.com that advertises remote-controlled, video-equipped tombstones, which can relay a message left by the grave's inhabitant. Stories can be told and computer equipment is linked up in the tombstone to the Internet. The result is that e-mail messages, audio clips, and video clips (made before death) can still be "sent" by the deceased. But why do this when you can share your memories today? Begin to pass on your faith to those you love the most.

Jacob continues speaking to Joseph in 48:5-6. He says, "Now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. But your offspring that have been born after them shall be yours; they shall be called by the names of their brothers in their inheritance." Jacob adopted Joseph's two sons. Ephraim and Manasseh went from being Jacob's grandsons to his number one and two sons. They displaced Reuben and Simeon. Thus, in future lists of the twelve tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh are normally included in the place of Joseph. Normally, the birthright would have been given to the firstborn son. But Reuben and Simeon had disqualified themselves from positions of status and leadership in Israel's family because of their sin: Reuben due to his sin of laying with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine (35:22; 49:4; 1Ch 5:1-2) and Simeon due to his violent murder of the men of Shechem (34:25ff). In essence, Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh in place of Reuben and Simeon as far as the birthright was concerned. If you look at the maps in the back of your Bible you will see a map that shows the areas given to the twelve tribes and you will notice something: There are twelve tribes but you don't see the name of Levi (they were the priests and given land in each tribe) or Joseph, but you do see the names of Ephraim and Manasseh. In essence, Jacob is giving Joseph the double blessing that is generally reserved for the firstborn (Reuben). In the future, 48:6 states that Joseph's other children would be incorporated into the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

Verse 7 gives the reason for the adoption: Jacob wants to honor the memory of his beloved wife, Rachel. Moses writes, "Now as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died, to my sorrow, in the land of Canaan on the journey, when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)." Jacob loved Rachel. When she died a part of him died. He recognized that Rachel may have been capable of having more sons so in effect, Ephraim and Manasseh took the place of other sons that Rachel might have been expected to bear if she had continued to live.

Verses 8-12 lay out the details of a formal adoption ceremony. Beginning in 48:8, Moses writes, “When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, ‘Who are these?’” This question is not an indication of Jacob’s blindness but the initiation of the ceremony, just as in modern-day weddings when, near the beginning, the minister may ask, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” The ceremonial response, “Her mother and I do” is also paralleled in Joseph’s ceremonial response, “‘They are my sons, whom God has given me here.’ So he said, ‘Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them’” (48:9), thus meeting Jacob’s criteria for adoption.

The adoption process continues in 48:10: “Now the eyes of Israel were so dim from age that he could not see. Then Joseph brought them close to him, and he kissed them and embraced them.” This is an incredibly moving scene. It is so important to not just skip over. In 48:9, Jacob blesses his grandsons. He then hugs and kisses them. There is a profound need in every boy to be touched and verbally affirmed by his father and grandfather. A father’s blessing is so crucial. Many children never hear an encouraging word from their father. Instead, they are reminded of their weaknesses and failings. They are crippled by words of criticism and rejection. Fathers and grandfathers, we must bless our children and grandchildren.

• Identify and share the gifts of God you see in your children.

• Give them a vision of what God can do through them. Verbally affirm them.

• Lay your hands on their head and bless them in the Lord’s name (2Ti 1:6).

• Pray out loud. There is nothing like a father who blesses in the name of the Lord.

Verse 10 says that Jacob kissed and embraced his 20-year-old grandsons. Even though it may be hard for you to offer your boys physical affection, do so nonetheless. Fathers and grandfathers, a handshake is not enough! If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, there needs to be additional expressions of affection. Don’t tell me about your upbringing or your personality; just imagine that it is the last day of your life every day. How would you treat that son or grandson?

In 48:11, Jacob said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face, and behold, God has let me see your children as well.” Jacob gives God the credit that he is able to see Joseph’s sons (48:11). He has come to acknowledge God’s providential working and grace in his life as he realized how faithful God had been to him in spite of his unfaithfulness.

Moses closes this section with these impressive words: “Then Joseph took them from his knees, and bowed with his face to the ground.” Joseph may be the second most powerful man in Egypt, but he never loses his respect for his father, and he never ceases to be gracious toward him” (48:12). In Gen 47:9, I suggested that the primary reason that Jacob had such a hard life was because he did not honor his father (Deu 5:16). Joseph made sure that he did not make the same mistake. May we learn from Joseph’s example and honor our father and mother, despite how they treat us.

Scene 3: Jacob blesses his grandsons (48:13-20). In 48:13-14, Moses gives us the play-by-play: “Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand toward Israel’s left, and Manasseh with his left hand toward Israel’s right, and brought them close to him. But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn.” This is the first of many scriptural instances of the laying on of hands. By this symbolic act, a person transferred a spiritual power or gift to another. In this case Jacob symbolically transferred a blessing from himself to Joseph’s sons. Once uttered, blessings were irreversible (cf. Num

23:20; Rom 11:29).

We have no way of knowing exactly why this reversal took place, or how Jacob knew to enact it. But remarkably, this simple act was highlighted in Heb 11:21 as Jacob's outstanding action of faith. Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh also carried prophetic significance and force (48:19-20). Under the inspiration of God, Jacob deliberately gave Ephraim the privileged first-born blessing and predicted his preeminence. This was the fourth consecutive generation of Abraham's descendants, in which the normal pattern of the firstborn assuming prominence over the second born was reversed: Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Reuben, and Ephraim over Manasseh.

Some of us who are younger sons and daughters can draw great encouragement from this story. Many times the firstborn children are favored and children that come later are overlooked. But the Bible is full of hope for younger children. Isaac was a younger child. So was Jacob. So was Joseph. So was Moses. So was Gideon. So was David. In blessing the younger over the older, Jacob teaches us that God is no respecter of persons. He exalts those who honor Him, regardless of their background or their birth order. Very often it is through the "overlooked" people of the world that God does His greatest work. Do you feel overlooked or neglected? If so, please know that you're in good company. Many of the greatest men and women of the Bible felt this way, yet God used them in mighty ways.

In 48:15-16, Jacob blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and may my name live on in them, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." In his blessing, Jacob reaffirmed his great faith in the living God. Despite the self-serving acts of his youth, Jacob's faith had matured. Jacob used the definite article with the word "God" to emphasize "the Genuine Deity" (as in Gen 6:2; Gen 22:1; Gen 27:28; Gen 31:11; Gen 46:3). He also calls God "my shepherd." Jacob has come to see that every event in his life was a part of the will of God for him and that God was guiding him and shaping him through adversity.

The immature Christian prays that God will withhold pain and suffering, seeing these things as evil. The mark of a mature Christian is that he can look back on his life and see that God can take the pains and pressures of life and cause them to work together for good in his life and ultimately draw one near to Himself through them. The immature shun suffering. While the mature do not seek it, they come to savor it in the light of how beautifully God uses it to bring us into intimacy with Himself. When knowing God is the ultimate goal, suffering is not too high a price to pay to obtain it. Is the Lord your shepherd? Do you look to Him for comfort? Do you realize that He's been with you all the days of your life?

Jacob also testifies of "the Angel who has redeemed me from all harm." The Angel of the Lord appears frequently in the OT. He appeared to Hagar when she fled from Sarai (16:7-13); He wrestled with Jacob (33:22-32; Hos 12:4); and He appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exo 3:2). This angel is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. This is further supported by the first use of the word "redeemed" in the Bible. It is significant that it occurs in conjunction with the work of the Angel of the Lord, giving further evidence that this is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. Have you been "redeemed" or "delivered" (NIV) by Jesus Christ? Can you see all that He has protected you from? Are you trusting in His eternal protection and provision? If not, today, will you simply trust Jesus Christ as your Savior? He promises you eternal life as a free gift if you will only depend upon Him as your only way to God.

Something very interesting happens in 48:17-18. Moses writes, “When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim’s head, it displeased him [lit., “it was evil in his eyes”]; and he grasped his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head. Joseph said to his father, ‘Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.’” After watching this blessing ceremony unfold, Joseph finally realizes what is happening and he is appalled. His father had transgressed every tradition from the Nile to the Euphrates. Joseph knew his sons intimately, and there could be no logical reason for Jacob to elevate Ephraim over Manasseh. All Manasseh’s years had been lived with the privilege and expectation of the firstborn. As Manasseh’s father, Joseph had worked to instill firstborn character and an essential sense of responsibility in his oldest boy. Thus humiliation was an underserved wound. In any event the deed was done. Blessings once uttered could not be undone (cf. 27:34-37).

Why does God seem to repeatedly choose the younger over the older?

1. To highlight the election of God (Rom 9:11-12). In His sovereignty, God is absolutely free to choose some over others. As the clay, we have no right to argue with the Potter.

2. To highlight the mercy of God (Rom 9:15-16). God’s mercy does not depend upon our works. God chooses whom He will have mercy and compassion on and to what degree.

3. To highlight the glory of God (1Co 1:27-29). One of the reoccurring themes throughout Genesis is the pleasure God takes glorifying Himself. As a result, He shames the wise and strong “so that no one can boast in his presence” (NET).

In 48:19-20, Jacob refused Joseph and said, “I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations.’ He blessed them that day, saying, ‘By you Israel will pronounce blessing, saying, ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!’ Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.” It had taken Jacob a lifetime of divine discipline to learn that he must only speak of the Word of God. Now he dared to trust God and believe His plans were best. He dared to do God’s will despite the wishes of his illustrious, godly son.

Ephraim and Manasseh did become great tribes. At one time, Ephraim was used as a synonym for the kingdom of Israel. However, in the long run both tribes would fall away from God. Consequently, the tribe of Judah would take on the mantle and ascendancy. Psalm 78 describes their tragic demise (cf. 2 Kings 17). What a lesson for us to be diligent to persevere in our faith.

Scene 4: Jacob gifts Joseph a piece of land (48:21-22). Our passage closes in 48:21-22: “Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. I give you one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow.’” Jacob makes an important declaration in 48:21 when he says, “Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you.” Many times you don’t need me as your pastor. You don’t need someone else. You need God. Many times when you think you need your spouse or a friend you’re really yearning for God. If He is with you, you have all that you need.

Jacob firmly believed God’s promise to bring his descendants back into the Promised Land (cf. 46:4). In Jacob’s prophetic promise to Joseph (48:22) is a play-on-words. The word for “portion” means ridge or shoulder (of land) and is the same as “Shechem.” Jacob spoke as though he had taken Shechem from the Amorites by force (48:22). Probably Jacob viewed Simeon and Levi’s slaughter of the Shechemites as his

own taking of the city (34:27-29). Jacob gave Joseph Shechem, which he regarded as a down payment of all that God would give his descendants as they battled the Canaanites in the future.

Like Jacob, Joseph also had remarkable faith. In giving his two sons to Jacob, he was virtually consenting to their being rejected in respect to a future and position in Egypt. By identifying his sons with the despised shepherding people, Joseph sealed them off from ascendancy. It was madness from the perspective of the Nile. But like his father, Jacob, Joseph believed the word of promise-that God was building a great people who would one day return to the land of promise. Though Joseph apparently lived out his career as viceroy of Egypt, there is no record of any of his children attaining rank during the next 400 years in Egypt. Thus, by faith Joseph lived without currying the favor of Egypt.

You and I are also exhorted to be people of faith. We are to pass the torch, leave a legacy. We can do so through two simple means: example (1Ti 4:12) and disciple making (2Ti 2:1-2). Will you determine today that you will live your life with that end in mind?

Chapter 54

\"Determining Your Destiny\" (Gen 49:1-28)

The year 1980 was an eventful year. Ronald Reagan was elected the 40th US president in a sweeping victory. Mount St. Helens erupted. Hewlett-Packard released its first personal computer. Jessica Simpson was born. The Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series. The Pittsburgh Steelers won the Super Bowl. The Empire Strikes Back was the top grossing film. “Lady” by Kenny Rogers spent the most time at the top of the US charts. US viewers got caught up in the “Who Shot J.R.?” cliff-hanger on the soap opera series Dallas. On one hand, 1980 seems like a lifetime ago, on the other hand, it seems like yesterday.

In 1980, I was a nine-year-old boy. Today, I am the father of a nine-year-old son. I’m here to tell you that time flies. Our lives are here one moment and gone the next. This is why the Bible compares our lifespan with grass (Isa 40:6-8), vapor (Jam 4:14), and breath (Psa 39:5). While most of us will intellectually acknowledge the fleeting nature of life, the way we live our lives doesn’t match our beliefs. Sadly, many of us are more excited about things that will not matter in eternity. Yet, as Matthew Henry (1662-1714) once said, “It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our last day.” Or as Martin Luther (1483-1546) declared, “There are two days on my calendar-‘Today’ and ‘That Day.’” Honestly, a day is coming when all that will really matter is how you and I lived our lives for the sake of eternity.

Genesis 49 provides a sobering wakeup call to contemplate both our present and future life. In the first 28 verses of this chapter, we will be able to look on as Jacob gives his last words to his 12 sons. All 12 of Jacob’s sons regardless of their faithfulness have a future with God and are blessed by God. But only the faithful sons will have an inheritance in the land. The lesson is clear: The actions of believers determine their future blessings in God’s program. Also, the choices believers make today will affect their descendants for generations to come.

1. Introduction (49:1-2). Moses begins his account with these words: “Then Jacob summoned his sons and said, ‘Assemble yourselves that I may tell you what will befall you in the days to come. Gather together and hear, O sons of Jacob; and listen to Israel your father.’” The expression “in the days to come” refers to the distant future, including the end of the age and millennium. The double exhortation to give attention to Jacob’s words lays stress upon the importance of what he is about to say. His words are doubly important. In many respects, this can be seen as a picture of that Day when the believer stands before Jesus Christ. So let me ask you, “Are you living for that Day to come?” Are you living for your Lord and for those descendants that will come after you? A believer’s works during this life significantly determine the extent of divine blessing he and his descendants will receive in the future.

The words that we are about to read are not the spontaneous thoughts of a dying man, but the carefully prepared words of a prophetic poet. The purposes of Jacob’s prophetic words are: (1) to reveal the future; (2) to serve as a warning against sin; (3) to motivate us to godly living; and (4) to foreshadow the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

2. Jacob’s three oldest sons are disinherited for their unfaithfulness (49:3-7). In this section we learn that uncontrolled passions lead to personal and family ruin. Jacob begins with his oldest, in 49:3-4: “Reuben, you are my firstborn; my might and the beginning of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father’s bed; then you defiled it-he went up to my couch.” Jacob affirms that Reuben holds a special place in his heart

by virtue of the fact that he was the firstborn. The firstborn son normally had two rights. First, he became the leader of the family, the new patriarch. Second, he was entitled to a double share of the inheritance. But Reuben was not to receive this blessing because he is “uncontrolled as water.”

The Hebrew word translated “uncontrolled” means “reckless or destructive.” The picture is of water that floods its banks and goes wildly out of control. The metaphor, which literally means something like boiling over like water, suggests a certain seething of lust, an unbridled license. The result is an evaluation of Reuben that pointed to wildness and weakness, an undisciplined life.

The sins of the past have disqualified him from blessing in the future. If you recall, after Rachel died Reuben slept with Rachel’s servant-the mother of his brothers Dan and Naphtali (35:22). All the text tells us is that Jacob heard about it. We don’t know for certain why Reuben did this. This incident happened 40 years ago. Reuben, the firstborn, should have received a double portion of the inheritance. He should have been the leader among his brothers. He, above all his brothers, should have been the one to defend his father’s honor, not defile it. But his one act of indulgence robbed him of his privileges as the firstborn. Like King David after him, he paid a terrible price for a night of pleasure.

All the potential in the world won’t benefit you if you don’t develop self-control, especially in the area of sexual temptation. Satan has plenty of time to wait for you to fall. He just sets his traps and bides his time. Eventually, he knows that he’s going to trip you up. You may be preeminent in dignity and power. But if you’re as uncontrolled as water, it’s only a matter of time until your potential is swept away by the flood of lust. You may have tremendous potential in the Lord. But you’ve got a habit of flowing downstream with lustful thoughts. It’s all in your head at this point. No one else knows and no one has gotten hurt-yet. But, great gifts are worthless without godly character. I know many gifted pastors who are out of the ministry because they did not judge their lust. If you aren’t learning to take every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ, it’s only a matter of time before your great potential is ruined by reckless lust. Reuben provides a gripping illustration that the passion of uncontrolled lust leads to ruin.

True to Jacob’s prophecy, the Reubenites never produced a leader of any kind for Israel. They never entered the Promised Land (Num 23). They built unauthorized places of worship (Jos 22:10-34). About no other tribe do we know so little as about Reuben. The tribe produced no significant man, no judge, no king, and no prophet. From this first oracle, the teaching is clear that the behavior of one individual affects the destiny of his descendants. Jacob now moves on to his next two sons.

In 49:5-7, Jacob declares, “Simeon and Levi are brothers; their swords are implements of violence. Let my soul not enter into their council; let not my glory be united with their assembly; because in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they lamed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will disperse them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.” When Jacob says that these men are brothers, he doesn’t mean just biological brothers. He means that they are two of a kind. Brothers and sisters can either encourage one another to righteous living or to sin. These brothers plotted how they would get even with the Shechemites because the prince of Shechem had raped their sister. They used God’s covenant of circumcision, which should have been a channel of blessing, as the means of deceiving and slaughtering all the men in the town. Here Jacob distances himself from their treachery and pronounces a curse upon their anger. These two sons teach us that the passion of uncontrolled anger leads to ruin.

Interestingly, over 40 years later, Jacob still characterizes his sons as angry men. He doesn't say, "Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel." He says it "is" fierce and cruel. They were still angry men. Uncontrolled anger results in senseless destruction of people and property. Think of the families these men ruined by murdering all the fathers. They hamstrung some of the oxen, an act of senseless waste. The word "self-will" (49:6) has the nuance of doing as they pleased. They weren't concerned about anybody's feelings except their own. Most anger stems from selfishness. "I didn't get my way! I demand my rights!" But that kind of anger hurts everyone, including the angry person.

Jacob distances himself from these two angry sons (49:6) and prophesies that they will be dispersed and scattered in Israel. That was fulfilled as the tribe of Simeon later inherited land scattered throughout Judah's territory (Jos 19:1-9; see also 1Ch 4:28-33; 1Ch 4:39; 1Ch 4:42). The tribe of Levi became priests who had no inheritance, but were scattered throughout the rest of the tribal lands.

Even though these first three tribes suffered loss for their sins, Jacob's prophecies about them were still a blessing. They retained a place in the chosen family and enjoyed the benefits of God's promises as Jacob's heirs. Yet, they were disqualified from the reward that could have been theirs because of their failure to repent of their sin (Num 32:23-24; Eze 18:30). By demoting Reuben for his turbulence and uncontrolled sex drive, Jacob saves Israel from reckless leadership. Likewise, by cursing the cruelty of Simeon and Levi, he restricts their cruel rashness from dominating.

Perversion and anger are the two sins that men struggle with the most. Unfortunately, both sins can be handed down from generation to generation. Take anger, for example. It's interesting that Moses was a descendant of Levi. What problem kept Moses from beginning his work at first and then from entering the Promised Land? Anger! He got angry and murdered the Egyptian who was mistreating the Hebrews and had to flee to the desert for 40 years. Then he got angry with the people and struck the rock to bring forth water, when God had told him to speak to the rock. For that sin, God prevented Moses from entering Canaan. Moses was the son of Levi.

The lesson is clear: Our actions determine our future blessings in God's program and the choices we make today will affect our descendants for generations to come. We must learn from Reuben, Simeon, and Levi that we cannot live recklessly. God, the righteous judge sees everything. We may feel that we have "gotten away" with something, but we haven't. We just haven't "faced the music" yet…but we will. Even though we are secure in Christ, there are still consequences to our actions. We must continually recognize that one day we will have to give an account (2Co 5:10).

I appreciate Jacob's willingness to step up and drill his sons between the eyes. Previously, he was a passive, sissified male, but in his final days he steps up. As parents, one of the things we must do is tell our children the truth. Our society has been caught up in self-esteem. We don't want to say or do anything that will jeopardize anyone's sense of worth. Yet, healthy people are disciplined. Who is the most rebellious and prideful being that has ever lived? Satan. He has always sought to have his own way. Apart from the boundaries God has placed upon him, he does whatever he wants. He hasn't turned out very well. Parents, discipline your children. Exercise tough love. You may feel like your children are little devils right now. Well, just wait. If you choose not to discipline them and speak hard words, you will find that they will become menaces to society.

3. The seven acceptable sons are given responsibilities (49:13-21, 27). In these ten verses, Jacob shares brief words with seven of his sons. True to the poetic qualities of the text, the images of the destiny of the

remaining sons are, in most cases, based on a wordplay of the son's name. The central theme uniting each image is that of prosperity. In 49:13, Jacob begins: "Zebulun will dwell at the seashore; and he shall be a haven for ships, and his flank shall be toward Sidon." Zebulun later obtained territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee. This was a thriving commercial area though Zebulun may never have had permanent "waterfront property." It is possible, however, that Zebulun and Issachar shared some territory (cf. Deu 33:18-19), so Zebulun could have bordered the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps the men of Zebulun worked for the Phoenicians in their maritime trade (cf. Deu 33:19). Zebulun will extend to the sea in the millennium when his borders will extend as far as Sidon on the Mediterranean (Eze 48:1-8; Eze 48:23-27). An important caravan route from Mesopotamia to Egypt passed through his territory.

In 49:14-15, Jacob says, "Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds. When he saw that a resting place was good and that the land was pleasant, he bowed his shoulder to bear burdens, and became a slave at forced labor." Issachar would prefer an agricultural way of life and what it produced rather than political supremacy among the tribes. Evidently Issachar was strong and capable, but also passive and lazy. In contrast to Judah, who subdued his enemies like a lion, Issachar submitted themselves as slaves to the Canaanites.

Jacob continues in 49:16-18: "Dan shall judge his people, as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path, that bites the horse's heels, so that his rider falls backward. For Your salvation I wait, O LORD." Dan would be a judge in Israel. This prophecy came to reality partially during Samson's judgeship (Jdg 13:2). Dan's victories benefited all Israel. Yet this tribe led Israel into idolatry (Jdg 18:30-31; 1Ki 12:26-30) and became known as the center of idolatry in Israel (Amo 8:14). Thus, Jacob likened Dan to a serpent (49:17), pointing to God's prophecy that the serpent would bite the heel of God's promised deliver, but the Messiah would finally crush his head and bring the long-awaited salvation (3:15). It was natural, therefore, for Jacob to cry out, "For Your salvation I wait, O LORD" (49:18). Ultimately, Jacob knows that the future of the nation of Israel does not depend on his 12 sons, but rather on God who would one day send a deliverer (Mat 1:21).

In 49:19-21, Jacob speaks very brief words to the next three sons. In 49:19, he says, "As for Gad, raiders shall raid him, but he will raid at their heels." The tribe of Gad would become tenacious fighters and would be victorious over all the foreign armies they faced (Jer 49:1).

In 49:20, Jacob says, "As for Asher, his food shall be rich, and he will yield royal dainties." Asher would enjoy some of the most fertile land in Canaan (Deu 33:24-25; Jos 19:24-31).

In 49:21, Jacob says, "Naphtali is a doe let loose, he gives beautiful words." The tribe of Naphtali would be well known for producing eloquent speakers and beautiful literature. The most famous of these was Deborah who composed a beautiful poem of military triumph in Jdg 5:1-31. Along with the land of Zebulun, Naphtali's territory was near the Sea of Galilee, the region where Jesus did much of His teaching and ministry (Mat 4:15-16). And it goes without saying that there has never been a man who spoke such beautiful, life-giving words as Jesus Christ.

The seventh acceptable son is baby Benjamin. Jacob surprises us when he states that the runt of the litter "is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil." The tribe of Benjamin had a reputation for being fierce and aggressive (Judg 19-21). He produced many warriors in Israel's history (e.g., Ehud, Saul, Jonathan, et al.) and demonstrated a warlike character among the tribes (Jdg 5:14; Jdg 20:16; 1Ch 8:40; 2Ch 14:8; 2Ch 17:17). I guess Ben learned some toughness having

eleven older brothers.

4. The two most faithful sons are given greater responsibility (49:8-12, 22-26). Since the first three brothers were disqualified from their position, the mantle falls to the fourth child, Judah. Remember, Judah wasn't exactly a spiritual giant: He lobbied to sell Joseph for a profit (37:26). He separated himself from God's covenant people (38:1). He hung around ungodly men (38:12). He was sexually immoral (38:18). He failed to keep his word to his daughter-in-law Tamar (38:26). So why did Jacob pronounce such a rich blessing on Judah? He confessed and repented of his sins (38:26). He took full responsibility for the safety of Benjamin (43:8-10). He offered himself as a substitute for Joseph (44:18ff). The blessing of Judah is a beautiful picture of God's grace to those who confess and repent of their sins (Jer 15:19).

Today, if you have a long resume of sin, God wants to give you a new job description. He wants you to experience His forgiveness. He longs for you to begin again.

Jacob's words to Judah are powerful, perhaps even staggering. Jacob declares, "Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down to you" (49:8). Judah will be preeminent among his brothers and they will praise him. This is a play-on-words since the name Judah means "praise." His hand would be on the neck of his enemies. His brothers would bow down to him. But his leadership will not be fully realized until the days of King David, some 640 years later.

Jacob continues in 49:9-10: "Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him up? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." Jacob is informing Judah that he will be the line of the Messiah (Zec 10:4; Heb 7:14). The scepter will not depart from Judah (Num 24:17). If you know the history of Israel, you know that starting with Saul, David, and Solomon every king came from the tribe of Judah. And Mat 1:2 states that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. After Christ, there have been no kings. So, even now in the book of Genesis, Jacob is pointing to Jesus as the rightful ruler. He is the One who will not only be King over Israel but over the nations! He is the One that Rev 5:5 calls "the Lion of Judah."

"Shiloh" (lit. the "bearer of rest") is an obscure word that we should probably translate "whose it (the ruler's staff) is" or "to whom it belongs" rather than transliterate it "Shiloh" (cf. Eze 21:26-27). Jacob is saying that until the One to whom all royal authority belongs comes, the tribe of Judah will always have a lawgiver in its ranks (Isa 9:1-6). Shiloh, like "seed" in 3:15, is a name for the coming Messiah.

These words are amazing! They demonstrate that God has a plan. From the first sin in Gen 3, God has been pointing His people to a Savior. And He points us in the same direction. We have the advantage of the added testimony of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. We have the testimony of those who traveled with Him and were transformed by Him. Yet, even in Gen the spotlight is on Jesus. He is the One mankind has needed so desperately. It is not something some guy dreamed up like most of the religions of the world. This is what God has been preparing from the foundations of the earth. This ought to give you and me great confidence in the Bible. It is a supernatural and prophetic book that has stood the test of time and weathered every attack!

In 49:11-12, Jacob says, "He ties his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine; he washes his garments in wine, and his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are dull from wine, and his teeth white from milk." The picture is clear: The tribe of Judah will be a victorious tribe. Judah's descendants will be

victorious in battle and will reign over the others. The descendants of Judah will be prosperous...so prosperous that the vines for wine will be so plentiful that they will use them for common purposes like tethering their donkeys or washing their clothes (Psa 16:11).

Later biblical writers drew heavily from the imagery of this short text in their portrayal of the reign of the coming Messiah. Isa 63:1-6 envisions the coming of a conquering king whose clothes are like those of one who has tread the winepresses. His crimson clothing is then likened to the bloodstained garments of a victorious warrior. He is the One who has come to carry out the vengeance of God's wrath upon the ungodly nations (Isa 63:6). In the book of Rev, this same image is applied to the victorious return of Christ. He is the rider on "the white horse" who is "dressed in a robe dipped in blood…Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations…He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (Rev 19:11; Rev 19:13; Rev 19:15).

Now that we have looked at Judah, it is time to transition to Joseph. In 49:22-26, Jacob says, "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; its branches run over a wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, and shot at him and harassed him; but his bow remained firm, and his arms were agile, from the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel), from the God of your father who helps you, and by the Almighty who blesses you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of your father have surpassed the blessings of my ancestors up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills; may they be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers." Joseph's blessing is especially abundant. The two tribes that bore his sons' names would see their fulfillment even though during his lifetime Joseph had faced much opposition. Judah received the leadership of the tribes, but Joseph obtained the double portion of the birthright (cf. 1Ch 5:2).

How was Joseph able to persevere through the challenges of life? Jacob's five names for God in this blessing are noteworthy:

1. "The Mighty One of Jacob" (cf. Psa 132:2; Isa 1:24; Isa 49:26; Isa 60:16)

2. "The Shepherd" (28:8-9; 48:15; Psa 23:1)

3. "The Stone of Israel" (cf. Deu 32:4; Deu 32:18; Psa 18:2; Psa 19:14; Isa 8:14)

4. "The God of your [Joseph's] father" (31:5; 32:9-10; 46:3)

5. "The Almighty" (17:1)

Blessing is one of the key words of Gen, occurring some 88 times in the book. Here in 49:25-26, like the finale of a fireworks display, the root occurs six times (verb 1x, noun 5x) making a brilliant climax to the last words of Jacob. The God-given blessings of the future will far outshine those already experienced.

Our passage closes in 49:28: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them. He blessed them, every one with the blessing appropriate to him." Jacob treated each of his sons differently. He disciplined and blessed them appropriately. Yet, this passage closes with three usages of the word "bless." God eagerly seeks to bless His people. Will you be a recipient of His blessing today?

This evening, we have our annual Awana awards. Every child that participates in these awards is blessed. He or she is a part of the Awana family. Many are a part of the Emmanuel family. Yet, tonight we celebrate not just participation, but faithfulness. There will be some children that worked diligently; there will be others who did not. Each child will be blessed, but not every child will be equally blessed. Some people have been critical of Awana and have suggested that it promotes “works righteousness.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Awana prepares children and adults for that Day when Jesus Christ will scrutinize our lives. On that Day, He will be looking for faithfulness. Will you be found faithful? Will you enter into your full reward or will you be disqualified from the reward that could have been yours?

In 1Co 10:11, Paul tells us that the stories of the Old Testament are examples that were written down as warnings for us. Will you heed the warning from Jacob and his sons? Will you recognize that your actions determine your future blessings in God’s program and the choices you make today will affect your descendants for generations to come?

Chapter 55

\"Death: A New Beginning\" (Gen 49:29-33; Gen 50:1-26)

Almost 2,000 years ago, Seneca (5 BC-65 AD), the Roman dramatist, philosopher, and politician, said, “It is a rough road that leads to the heights of greatness.” Seneca was ahead of his time and the timeless truth that he uttered must be remembered today. For those of us who are driven and want to fulfill all that God has for us, we must recognize that God will have us walk a rough road. Yet, it is in this rough road that God will lead us to heights of greatness. While we may not want to suffer and experience trials and tests, these are the tools that God uses to shape us into the people He wants us to be.

We have arrived at the end of Genesis-the book of beginnings. In Gen 49:29 ff., we will see that death is not the end…it is a new beginning for believers in God’s promises. In this passage, we will learn that adversities are often blessings in disguise because God uses life’s reverses to move us forward.

Intro: The Death of Jacob (49:29-33). Moses writes, “Then he charged them and said to them, ‘I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site. There they buried Abraham and his wife Sarah, there they buried Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and there I buried Leah-the field and the cave that is in it, purchased from the sons of Heth.’ When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.” As he neared death, Jacob made his wishes known. He wanted to be buried in Canaan with his family in the field of Machpelah. This wasn’t the first time Jacob communicated his desires (cf. 47:29-31). He had reflected on his death-he wanted to make sure that everything was in place. We must be sure to do the same thing. Make a will and spell out your wishes very clearly. Give your stuff away while you’re living. Write down your wishes for your burial and funeral arrangements. When it’s time to die, make sure that’s all you have to do.

In these five verses, a repeated phrase serves as bookends: “gathered to my people” and “gathered to his people” (49:29, 33). This ancient expression describes Jacob’s reunion with those who had preceded him in death and had exercised faith in God. As believers we have the wonderful assurance from 2Co 5:8 that to be “absent from the body [is to be] present with the Lord.” You can have the same confidence that Jacob possessed. If you have faith in Jesus Christ, the moment you pass from this life, you will enter into eternity with God. Death is not a period-it’s only a comma.

Joseph was a man of sensitivity (50:1). “Then Joseph fell on his father’s face, and wept over him and kissed him.” What a beautiful response by Joseph. The only tears recorded in Joseph’s life were not for himself but for the plight of his brothers and now the loss of his father. The suffering that Joseph had endured had turned him into a man of love. Suffering can push us in one of two directions: it can create bitterness in us or it can soften us. Joseph was a man of tenderness and loving graciousness to others. He was very affectionate to his father and wept over him when he died. When somebody we love dies, God expects us to weep. That’s why He gave us the ability to shed tears. Normal tears are a part of the healing process (Psa 30:5), while abnormal grief only keeps the wounds open and prolongs the pain. In my pastoral ministry, I’ve learned that people who suppress their grief are in danger of developing emotional or physical problems that are difficult to heal. Don’t be afraid to express yourself when you grieve or experience loss.

Reflecting on death, it is important to be sure that you have harmonious relationships. Right relationships in life ease the sting of grief in death. Today, if things are not right between you and your dad, mom, siblings, or children, do all that you can to make sure that there is peace (Rom 12:18).

Joseph was a man of faith (50:2-7a). "Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel. Now forty days were required for it, for such is the period required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days [two days short of the mourning for Pharaoh]. When the days of mourning for him were past, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, 'If now I have found favor in your sight, please speak to Pharaoh, saying, 'My father made me swear, saying, 'Behold, I am about to die; in my grave which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.' Now therefore, please let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.' Pharaoh said, 'Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear.' So Joseph went up to bury his father." Joseph was expressing his faith and his father's faith when he buried Jacob in Canaan. While God's people lived in Egypt and were even called "Egyptians" by the people of Canaan (50:11), nevertheless, their sights were set on Canaan. Egypt was not their home. The promises of God did not concern Egypt; they were about Canaan. Can you see beyond your temporal life here on earth? Do you have faith to see all that God has for you?

Joseph was a man of honor (50:7b-11). When Joseph went to bury his father, all of Pharaoh's servants and elders and all of the elders of Egypt accompanied him (50:7b-8). In 50:9-11, Moses writes, "There also went up with him both chariots and horsemen; and it was a very great company. When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed seven days mourning for his father. Now when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning at the threshing floor of Atad, they said, 'This is a grievous mourning for the Egyptians.' Therefore it was named Abel-mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan." Joseph had reached high honor in the eyes of the Egyptians. God can do that for His people when He wants to. But it may not last. In the very next chapter of the Bible, a new king rises up in Egypt who does not know about Joseph (Exo 1:8). That's humbling! We should not get too excited about honors from the world. Fame is fleeting-it does not last. People might one day say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" but a little later be saying, "Crucify Him!" (Mat 21:9; Mat 27:23). Fame and honor is nice, but it is short-lived. Therefore, we must remember that as important as friendships are, we cannot compromise ourselves to attain popularity. Teenagers, I can assure you that your high school friendships will be temporary. So do not compromise yourself to gain friends and do not spend too much time pouring yourself into temporal relationships. In the end, you will be disappointed.

Joseph was a man who persevered in his calling (50:12-14). Moses writes, "Thus his [Jacob] sons did for him as he had charged them; for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre, which Abraham had bought along with the field for a burial site from Ephron the Hittite. After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt, he and his brothers, and all who had gone up with him to bury his father." God's promises were all connected to Canaan, but Joseph was not tempted to stay there. He knew his calling concerned Egypt. He took one look at the land of promise, which he had not seen since he was 17, and then went back to the place where God had called him. It is a personal calling that will enable you to continue to persevere in your life and ministry.

Today, you may feel a bit aimless. You may not feel like you have a real sense of calling. Ask God to give you a calling or confirm the calling upon your life. I have a calling from God to preach and teach the Bible. Lori has a calling to home school our children. We will do anything to fulfill these specific callings. If we

have to spend money on education, training, or supplies we will spend it. If we have to make sacrifices in our schedule, we will make sacrifices. If we become discouraged and defeated, we will pray for the strength to “buck up” because we have callings upon our lives. What is your calling? Are you prepared to fulfill it?

Joseph was a man who trusted in God’s sovereignty (50:15-21). In 50:15-18, Moses writes, “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘What if Joseph bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong which we did to him!’ So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father charged before he died, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to Joseph, ‘Please forgive, I beg you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did you wrong.’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.’ And Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also came and fell down before him and said, ‘Behold, we are your servants.’” In these four verses, Joseph’s brothers exhibited some negative and positive responses. Initially, they respond negatively due to guilt, fear, and paranoia. They couldn’t comprehend Joseph’s forgiveness. They assumed that Joseph was simply biding his time out of respect for his father Jacob. But now that Jacob was gone, they were gripped with the terrifying expectation of punishment for their sins at the hand of Joseph. So they falsely claimed that Jacob had issued a charge for Joseph to forgive his brothers. However, Jacob never did this because he recognized that Joseph had completely forgiven his brothers. Fear often causes us to take matters into our own hands. When this happens, we can say and do things that are carried out with impure motives. In this case, the brothers are trying to “save their skin” when they should be trusting in the Lord.

Positively, the brothers own their sin against Joseph. They did not call their sin a mistake or a lapse in judgment, as is common today. The brothers use words like “wrong” (50:15, 17), “transgression” (50:17), and “sin” (50:17). They then beg for forgiveness, bow down before Joseph, and offer themselves up as slaves (50:17-18). These men are repentant!

Sociologist James Davison Hunter has observed that schoolteachers are being taught to no longer say anything as pointed as, “Stop it, please! You’re disturbing the class!” Those are now considered judgmental words. Instead, if a strong-armed youth is rattling classroom windows with his tennis ball, the teacher will say something like: “What are you doing? Why are you doing it? How does it make you feel?” Hunter goes on to say that the word “sin” finds its home mostly on dessert menus. “Peanut Butter Binge” and “Chocolate Decadence” are sinful, but lying is not. Our society has fudged away the meaning of sin. The word “sin” is no longer a meaningful word to most people in our culture. That’s why so many guilty people are walking around in our world today. There’s no way to get rid of guilt until you first acknowledge having done wrong. Our Christian forefathers understood the word “sin.” They feared it, hated it, grieved over it, and fled from it. It’s time to rediscover sin, that we might reclaim forgiveness and revel in grace! If you have sinned against someone else, for God’s sake and for your own, call it what it is! Don’t marginalize it or make excuses for yourself. God honors a man or woman with a humble and contrite spirit (Isa 57:15; Isa 66:2 b; Mat 5:3-4; Luk 18:13-14). In many cases, those whom you have sinned against also find genuine confession irresistible.

In 50:19-21, Moses records Joseph’s powerful response: “But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” Joseph’s response to the wickedness of his brothers is nothing short of divine. But it is also the proper response of every Christian

man or woman who is confronted with unjust suffering or persecution (Luk 6:27-28; Col 3:13). Let's break down Joseph's three-pronged response.

1. God is the ultimate judge of all things. "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place?" Joseph asks. All wrongs are to be righted by Him, not by men. One thinks at once of the well-known text in Rom 12:19, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (cf. 1Th 5:15; 1Pe 4:19).

2. God is the ultimate governor of the universe, the one who holds the strings of divine providence. One is reminded by Joseph's words here of the words that he spoke in 45:5, a classic statement of the principle of providence, "And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because YOU SOLD ME here; for GOD SENT ME before you to preserve life." "You sold me" represents the human side of things, while "God sent me" represents the divine side (cf. Joh 18:11; Psa 76:10; Act 2:22-24; Act 4:28; Act 13:27; Rom 8:28; Rom 8:32; Rom 8:38-39; Php 1:12). Even evil events have their ultimate cause in the purposes of the sovereign of the universe, although He is not the author of evil, in the sense that evil proceeds from His being. That He causes evil for purposes of greater good for His people and His world is patent from the cross, determined by Him before the foundation of the world. And who can dispute the fact that the wickedness of men in the crucifixion of the Son of God is the greatest wickedness the world has ever seen or known? The texts that prove that God may use evil for greater good include Act 2:22-24; Act 4:28, and the present passage. Divine providence involves both preservation of the universe and its parts, as well as its operation or government (cf. 28:15; Heb 1:3). In other words, God's attention is concentrated everywhere. His providence is also said to be general, in that it has to do with all objects, all things, together with the creatures of the universe (cf. Psa 103:19). And it is also said to be special, having to do with all men (cf. Psa 66:7; Dan 2:21; Dan 4:25; Pro 16:9). All of this is necessary, if God is to accomplish His purposes, for often His purposes depend upon the minutest of events and details.

God's purposes for Joseph and his family were good (cf. Gen 1-2). Consequently, he behaved with tender compassion toward his brothers. He proved to be his brothers' keeper (cf. 4:9). Genesis opened with a couple, Adam and Eve, trying to become like God; it closes with a man, Joseph, denying that he is in God's place. With this reply, Joseph summarized God's activity throughout Gen. God the Creator is sovereign. His purposes to bless mankind through the chosen line of Abraham-the line of promise-are accomplished in spite of the actions of His people. What a great use of bookends by Moses. God wants us to understand that He is God and we are not! He wants us to trust Him. He is sovereign and He has a plan for our lives. He can use life's reverses to move us forward.

Undoubtedly, there were nights when Joseph cried out, "Why Lord?" "What have I done to deserve this?" And the same may also be true of you. You might be asking: Why did my spouse die? Why do I have cancer? Why did I have to bury my child? Why, why, why? We all have questions like that, but where you go next in your thinking is critical. You can either allow your doubts to cripple your relationship with God and cause you to spiral in fear and self-pity, or you can believe God by putting your confidence in His promise that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

As we consider the remarkable life of Joseph, we are faced with one of life's universal questions:

"Why do bad things happen to good people?" The premise of the question is flawed, because "there aren't any good people." The problem in understanding suffering has to do with our beginning point of reference:

(1) If we begin with the premise that man and his happiness is the ultimate goal, then life will present us with a never-ending string of challenges and disappointments. (2) But if we begin with the premise that God and His happiness is the ultimate goal in life, then life begins to make sense and takes on an eternal perspective that the Bible teaches.

The doctrine of providence is not very popular today. When difficult circumstances come our way many contemporary folks are quick to jump to God's defense. They proclaim, "God had nothing to do with it!" or worse, they will say, "God couldn't do anything about it."

But there are two problems with these statements. First, there is no comfort in them at all. What is comforting about knowing that God is powerless to control the things that happen in your life? And second, in this attempt to safeguard God's reputation they make God less than God. God's promises, His plans, and His purpose are now subject to the arbitrary whims of man. If He is God, of course, He could have done something about it. God is never powerless! So the question becomes: What is God doing in bringing about or in not stopping certain events. Joseph contends that God's actions or inaction (in some cases) is due to His providence.

3. Evil is to be repaid with forgiveness and affection. Joseph acknowledged the evil motives of his brothers: "You meant evil against me" (50:20a). He does not minimize their sin! However, Joseph promises these same brothers, "So therefore, do not be afraid; I (emphasis in the original text) will provide for you and your little ones," Moses adding, "So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (50:21). The personal aid that Joseph promises and the manner in which he promises it anticipate the Christian teaching of the New Testament (cf. Luk 6:27-38). From a human perspective, Joseph had the "right" and the ability to punish his brothers. Yet, he not only refused to do so, he went far beyond what could be expected and returned grace and kindness for their wickedness (Rom 12:19).

Now, I know what you may be thinking. How can I forgive like this? Let's get practical for a moment. Did you know that animals can hold grudges and struggle with anger too? Consider the camel. Camels are capable of building up a pressure cooker of resentment toward human beings. And when the lid suddenly blows off, watch out. In Asia, when a camel driver senses trouble, he gives his coat to the animal. The camel rips the coat to shreds-jumping on it, biting it, tearing it to pieces. Soon enough the camel feels vindicated and they can continue in harmony again.

Is there someone's coat you wouldn't mind trampling across? No matter how we like to shrug off the seriousness of revenge, the truth is that it is like poison to our soul. The Bible is very clear about the consequences of bitterness. You may be surprised to discover that King David, a man after God's own heart, had resentment. At the end of his life, he was still concerned with wrongs that were done to him years earlier. Don't let hurt and anger become your entire life! Find a constructive way to let it go. I use a heavy bag and boxing gloves. When I feel angry, bitter, or resentful, I take my frustrations out with fists of fury. Find a profitable activity (besides eating) that diffuses anger. Maybe you need to take up tennis or golf. These two sports will allow you to blow off some steam. As you do so, reflect on the grace God has given to you that you can give to others. Remind yourself that vengeance is not yours-it belongs to God. Pray that you will handle resentment in a way that your relationships do not suffer.

Joseph was a man that experienced God's blessing (50:22-26). It is only fitting that the book of Gen ends on a note of blessing since "bless" and "blessings" are the key words of the book. In the final five verses, Moses writes, "Now Joseph stayed in Egypt, he and his father's household, and Joseph lived one hundred

and ten years. Joseph saw the third generation of Ephraim's sons; also the sons of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were born on Joseph's knees. Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.' Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.' So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt." More than 50 years elapsed between 50:21 and 22. During this period, God abundantly blessed Joseph with three blessings.

1. God gave Joseph long life (50:22). He lived 110 years. An expert in Egyptian history has collected at least 27 references to the age of 110 years. It was considered an ideal age. Joseph's first 17 years were spent as a young man in Canaan, the next 13 years as a slave in Egypt, and the last 80 years as a ruler of all Egypt.

2. God gave Joseph the privilege of seeing his great-great grandchildren (50:22-23). For more than 20 years Joseph had missed his family for the sake of what God was doing through him, but now what he had lost is made up to him. He lived to see God's blessing on his children's children (cf. 48:11). It was a part of God's reward (Psa 128:6). As Pro 17:6 says, "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged" (ESV). The above two blessings are not guarantees to those who are faithful. As the old Billy Joel song goes, "Sometimes the good die young." But these are general principles that are frequently true.

3. God gave Joseph remarkable faith (50:24-26). Joseph told his brothers four important things: First, God would come to Israel's aid. Twice Joseph repeats the phrase, "God will surely take care of you" (50:24-25). These are the words that you and I need to leave with our loved ones. Don't promise them financial wealth or security. Assure them of God's care. He is all they need! Second, God would take them up out of Egypt. Although God's people would spend 400 years in Egyptian bondage, Joseph sees a brighter day. Third, God would bring them to the Promised Land. Fourth, God would fulfill his oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Heb 11:22). In light of his great faith, Joseph made his wishes known to be buried in the Promised Land (50:25). It was an expression of faith and confidence that God's covenant promises would come to pass. He died and was placed in a coffin in Egypt (50:26). Unlike his father, Jacob, Joseph's body wasn't buried immediately. Instead, his coffin lay aboveground for over 400 years until the people of Israel took it back to Canaan as they left Egypt under Moses' leadership. So there it sat in Egypt for 400 years as a silent witness of Joseph's confidence that Israel was going back to the Promised Land, just as God had said (Exo 13:19). This expression of Joseph's faith in God's promises to his forefathers provides a fitting climax for the book of Gen and the formative period of Israel's history.

Genesis begins with creation and ends with a coffin. It begins in a garden and ends in a grave. It begins with the living God and ends with a dead man. Why? It is the Holy Spirit's final commentary at the end of this foundational book of Gen displaying the condition of man and outcome of sin. The message of the Bible is this: You and I are sinful and God seeks to restore sinners. Since He cannot overlook sin, He sent His Son, Jesus Christ (the Messiah), to pay the penalty for man's sin.

Similarities between Joseph and Jesus

• Both men were loved by their father (Gen 37:3; Mat 3:17).

• Both men were shepherds of their father's sheep (Gen 37:2; Joh 10:11-16).

• Both men were sent by their father to their brothers, but Joseph's brothers hated him and sought to kill him and Jesus' blood brothers rejected him and his spiritual brothers sought to kill him (Gen 37:13 ff; Joh 7:3; Luk 20:47).

• Both men had a personal robe that was taken from them (Gen 37:23-24; Joh 19:24).

• Both men spent time in Egypt (Gen 37:25-28; Mat 2:14-15).

• Both men were sold for the price of a slave (Gen 37:28; Mat 26:15).

• Both men were bound in chains (Psa 105:18; Gen 39:20; Mat 27:2).

• Both men were tempted (Gen 39:7-10; Mat 4:1-11).

• Both men were falsely accused (Gen 39:16-17; Mat 26:59).

• Both men were placed with two other prisoners, one of whom was saved and the other lost (Gen 40:2-22; Luk 23:32-43).

• Both men began their ministries at the age of thirty (Gen 41:46; Luk 3:23).

• Both men were exalted by God after a season of suffering (Gen 41:41-43; Php 2:9-11).

• Both men forgave those who harmed them (Gen 45:1-15; Luk 23:34).

• Both men were sent by God to save many (Gene 45:7; Mat 1:21; Mar 10:45).

• Both men understood that God turned evil into good (Gen 50:20; Rom 8:28).

Chapter 56

\"From the Garden to the Grave\" (Genesis 1-50)

Study By: Keith Krell

What do Americans like to do in their spare time?1 USA Today recently reported that 96% of Americans like to watch TV. Now, I want you to think back to the last time you watched your favorite television program. Were you drawn in? Did you pay careful attention to the episode? Did your spouse or children attempt to talk to you, but you did not respond? If we are honest, most of us would have to say “yes” to these questions. When we are watching a program that we like, many of us can be oblivious to our surroundings.

This reality can also apply to the Scriptures. We have devoted 53 Sundays to studying the book of Gen. I have enjoyed our journey through the first 2400 years of human history.2 Yet, a potential drawback to a lengthy and detailed study of Gen is that we may miss the forest for the trees. Don’t get me wrong, examining the forest’s remarkable trees has been beneficial, but we need to step back so we can see the magnificence of the forest itself. This we will attempt to do as we conclude our study through Gen.3

We must begin with a summary statement for Gen. I would suggest the following: God has graciously redeemed us from the curse of sin so that we may be His channel for blessing all people. This defines the forest (or the big picture) of Gen. Since it is difficult to succinctly summarize 50 chapters, I will recap Gen in this way: Genesis tells us who God is, who we are, and what we must do.

1. Genesis tells us who God is. Genesis begins with these simple, yet profound words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1). In the opening verse of the Bible, we are brought face to face with the eternal God who spoke the universe into existence (Psa 33:6). There is no introduction to lead up to that point, no argument to prove His existence, no room for speculation or curiosity. You must either accept God as the source of all or reject Him. Of course, the revelation of God’s awesome power in creation might tend to put us off, to make us feel like we can’t approach such a powerful God. Yet, the early chapters of Gen show that this creative, all-powerful God is also a personal God who communicates with the people He has created. He talks with Adam and gives him meaningful work to do in the garden. He knows Adam’s need for a helper and creates Eve for his wife. The first couple communes with God each day in the garden. But just when we’re starting to relax and feel like we might be able to approach this awesome but personal God, sin enters the picture and we see God pronouncing curses on the serpent, the woman, the man, and the ground. We learn that God does not take sin lightly as He expels the fallen couple from the garden. Then, as sin spreads through the fallen human race, we recoil at God’s terrible judgments in the flood and again at the tower of Babel. We see that God is a holy God who must judge all sin. But in all of this, there is hope. Rather than striking the fallen couple in the garden dead on the spot, God graciously offered them hope in the promise of the seed of the woman. He would bruise the serpent’s head, although the serpent would bruise him on the heel (3:15). This is the earliest promise in the Bible of the coming of Christ the Savior, born of a woman (not a man, through the virgin birth). In His death, He was bruised on the heel, and it seemed as if Satan had triumphed. But Christ’s resurrection turned what seemed like Satan’s victory into his defeat, as the seed of the woman bruised the serpent’s head.

Then God graciously provided animal skins to clothe the fallen couple (3:21). This provided for their physical nakedness, but obviously it went far beyond that. Just as man's nakedness goes beyond the physical and points to the exposure of the soul resulting from sin (3:7), so God's provision of clothing went beyond the physical need for garments. It is a beautiful illustration of what God would do through the Lord Jesus Christ to provide salvation for all who stand shamefully exposed before Him in their sin. God's provision of the animal skins shows us four things:

1. We need a covering for our sin. The thought of standing with my sin exposed in the light of God's holy presence is more intolerable than the thought of showing up for a job interview at the White House stark naked. I need some sort of covering.

2. Our attempts at covering ourselves are inadequate. Adam and Eve made fig leaves, but that wouldn't do. Modern man tries the fig leaves of good works to cover his sin and to make himself presentable to God, but God cannot accept that.

3. Only God can provide the covering we need for our sin. He takes the initiative in properly covering our sin and guilt. Adam and Eve were passive; God did it all. We cannot receive God's salvation as long as we offer Him our fig leaves. We must let Him provide everything, as He has in fact done in Christ.

4. The covering God provided required the death of an innocent substitute. An animal had to be slaughtered to provide this covering for Adam and Eve. If, as we can probably assume, Adam and Eve witnessed this slaughter, it must have shocked them. This was the first time they had witnessed death. As they saw the animals having their throats slit and writhing in the throes of death, they must have gained a new awareness both of the seriousness of their sin and of the greatness of God's grace in not requiring their own immediate death for their sin. They learned that without the shedding of blood, there is no adequate covering for sin, but that God would accept the death of an acceptable substitute. In light of subsequent revelation, we know that the substitute is Jesus Christ, to whom these animals pointed as a type. So Gen shows God as the almighty Creator who yet can be known personally. Genesis shows God as the holy Judge of all sin, yet the Savior who Himself provided the payment of the penalty for our sin.

The book of Gen also shows us several other attributes of God.4

God is all-powerful (Genesis 1-2). In the book of Gen He speaks creation into existence. He brings a universal flood. He destroys Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day. He brings a famine in Joseph's day. He opens the womb. He performs miracles. The God of Gen is an amazing God, capable of any display of power. This God has not changed; He is still powerful. You can call on Him today.

God is all-present (Genesis 26; 28; 32; and 39). God told Isaac, "I will be with you" (26:3, 24). God's presence with Isaac was so obvious to the Philistines, they declared to Isaac, "the Lord has been with you" (26:28). Four times in the Joseph narrative we are told that the Lord was "with" Joseph (39:2, 3, 21, 23). Even when it seemed that God was a million miles away, He was present in power with His people. He is present with you today through the power of His Holy Spirit. Even when you go through dark and challenging times, He is right there with you.

God is all-knowing (Genesis 16 and 18). One of the clearest expressions of God's omniscience is found in 6:5: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Only God could make such a statement. In Genesis 16 and 18, God speaks with Hagar and Sarah and demonstrates that He knows all about their lives. God

understands what you're going through. He sees all the injustices that have been done to you. He knows your motives. He will care for you.

God is sovereign (Genesis 15 and 25). God is sovereign in history, life, and grace. Whatever He predicts comes to pass. He chooses to open wombs when He pleases. He picks and chooses the younger over the older. He answers to no one. He is in complete control.

God is providential (Genesis 45 and 50). God is so sovereign that He can use even human sin to accomplish His purposes (45:7-8; 50:20). God can take the lemons of your life and make lemonade. Thus, when difficult circumstances enter your life, recognize that God can take your trials and tragedies and use them to accomplish His glory and your good (Rom 8:28-29). We serve such a great God that there is never any need to fret. He will protect us; He will provide for us. He is more than able to work His will in our lives. We can trust Him completely, knowing that He is a good God and only wants the best for us.

2. Genesis tells us who we are. The British skeptic, George Bernard Shaw, in response to the German concentration camps, reluctantly concluded, "There is only one empirically verifiable doctrine of theology-original sin." While that doctrine looms large in Gen, it is not the first picture of man. The first statement about man is God saying, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (1:26). While the image of God in man was marred by the fall, it was not obliterated. We know this because after the flood, God establishes the death penalty for murder, basing it on the fact that man was created in God's image, a truth that still applies (9:6). That great truth lies behind the proper Christian view that every human being should be treated with respect. It lies behind Christian opposition to abortion and euthanasia. It is the motivation behind Christian hospitals and health care. It lies behind Christian charity toward the poor and underprivileged. It lies behind a proper Christian respect of men for women and of women for men, since 1:27 distinctly states that God created man in His image as male and female. It hints at what the second chapter confirms-the basis for Christian marriage and family relationships. It forms the basis for the proper understanding of one's self, showing that we each have a unique role in God's purpose.

But Gen also shows us as fallen in sin, alienated from God. The devastating effects of sin are displayed in full view throughout the book. The beauty of the first couple, innocent in the garden, is destroyed as they are expelled because of their sin. Their oldest son, the first man born into the first family on the earth, jealously murders his younger brother. In Noah's time, the sinful condition of the human race is summed up: "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). So our view of self has to be molded not only by the encouraging truth that we have been created in God's image, but also by the sober reality that our hearts are inclined against God and toward sin. While it may not be a pleasant thing to look into the mirror that Gen holds before us, it bears witness with reality. You read the book of Gen and come away saying, "Yes, that is what human nature is like. Even more, that is what I'm like!" Apart from the work of Jesus Christ in my life, I am completely sinful. Due to my relationship with Christ, I am no longer a sinner by nature…I am a saint. However, I continue to sin because I have a wicked flesh that remains inside of me.

How does a worm get inside an apple? Perhaps you think the worm burrows in from the outside. No. Scientists have discovered that the worm comes from inside. But how does he get in there? Simple! An insect lays an egg in the apple blossom. Sometime later, the worm hatches in the heart of the apple, then eats his way out. Sin, like the worm, begins in the heart and works out through a person's thoughts, words, and actions.5 It is ugly and we must recognize just how severe our sickness is. Fortunately, Gen doesn't leave us there. That would be hopeless. Instead, Moses weaves a message of faith and promise

throughout Gen.

3. Genesis tells us what we must do. Genesis shows us, as we've already seen, that God offers us redemption and how we must respond. I'd like to illustrate it from the first instance of faith, when Adam believed God's promise of redemption. After God pronounced the curse for man's sin (3:14-19), there is a verse that at first seems to be out of context. Gen 3:20 reads, "Now the man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living." Then the text goes on to tell of God's provision of animal skins and of His expelling the couple from the garden. But after the grim words of 3:19, which inflict toil and death upon the human race, you would not expect 3:20. At best, you would think that it would read, "Now Adam called his wife 'the Grim Reaper,' because she was the mother of all the dying." It was ultimately because of her sin that death came to the human race. Yet Adam calls her "Eve," which means life-giver or mother. And, remember, this was before she had any children. What does 3:20 mean? It is Adam's response of faith to God's promise to send a Savior through the seed of the woman (3:15). Adam heard and submitted to God's penalty of death (3:19), but he also grabbed on to God's promise that there would come forth from the woman a descendant who would bruise the serpent's head. And so by faith, before his wife had conceived, Adam named her Eve, the mother of all living. Salvation is now and always has been by faith in God's promise. Before Jesus Christ came into the world, a person's faith had to look forward to the promised Savior (Rom 3:25). Since Christ, faith looks back to the Savior who has come. Salvation has never been based on keeping the commandments or on a person's good works balancing out his sins. We are made right with God by trusting what He has said concerning His Son, Jesus Christ, the only Savior, who took our penalty on Himself on the cross.

A healthy faith always results in obedience. Noah didn't just say, "I believe you, God, that you're going to send a flood to destroy the earth." His faith resulted in 100 years of hard work and ridicule as he built the ark and got on board when God told him to. Healthy faith always affects our behavior in this evil world. That means that we will commit ourselves and all the resources God has graciously entrusted to us to His great purpose of blessing all the families on earth through the seed of Abraham, who is Jesus Christ. If we really believe what Gen teaches about God's judgment on sin and about His provision in Christ, we cannot be complacent as billions go into eternity without Christ. Rather, we will do all we can to be channels of God's blessing to those who are lost and perishing.

An old man, walking along the beach at dawn, noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. Catching up with the youth, he asked what he was doing. The young man answered that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish," countered the old man. "How can your effort make any difference?" The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. "It makes a difference to this one," he said.

In Rom 10:12-15, Paul tells us that the Lord is "abounding in riches for all who will call upon Him; for 'whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!'" God wants those beautiful feet to be your feet!

What are your summer plans? Will you commit today to invest in being a blessing to others? Genesis tells us who God is, who we are, and what we must do. God has graciously redeemed us from the curse of sin

so that we may be His channel for blessing all people. Will you respond to the message of Gen? Will you be blessed and be a blessing?

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2 Genesis spans more time than any other book in the Bible. It covers more than all 65 books of the Bible put together. The total duration is from the time of creation (?) to the time when the Israelites arrived in Egypt and grew into a nation (about 1800 B.C.). The date of Gen is sometime after the Exodus during the 15th century B.C.

3 In this summary sermon, I have greatly appreciated the insights of Steven J. Cole, “From the Garden to a Coffin: Genesis Recap”: http://www.fcfonline.org/site/content/1/sermons/112397m.pdfhttp://www.fcfonline.org/site/content/1/sermons/112397m.pdf; R. Kent Hughes, Genesis: Beginning & Blessing (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 579-624.

4 The names of God in Gen are worthy of careful study. E.g., Elohim; Yahweh; the angel of the Lord; El Roi (the God who sees); El Shaddai (God Almighty); El Elyon (God Most High); the fear of Isaac; the God of Jacob; etc.

5 David Jeremiah, Grace for the Day, Turning Point Daily Devotional, 4/5/06.

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