

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

STUDY BOOK

WINTER 2024-25



**IN THE
BEGINNING**
The Book of
Genesis



Thru-the-Bible
Book by Book

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

is organized according to a systematic,
sensible plan that will take you through
every book of the Bible.

	SEPTEMBER	DECEMBER	MARCH	JUNE
2022/23	Philippians, Colossians	Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Revelation	Ezekiel, Daniel
2023/24	Mark	Psalms	Galatians, Ephesians	Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
2024/25	Acts	Genesis	1, 2 Thessalonians, Jude	Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Micah
2025/26	Luke	Exodus	1 Corinthians	Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
2026/27	Hebrews	Joshua	2 Corinthians	Isaiah
2027/28	Matthew	Judges, Ruth	1, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Jeremiah, Lamentations
2028/29	Romans	1, 2 Samuel	1, 2 Peter	Nah., Zeph., Hab., Obad., Hag., Zech., Mal.
2029/30	John	1, 2 Kings, 1, 2 Chronicles	James 1, 2, 3 John	Proverbs

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Next quarter:
1, 2 Thessalonians,
Jude

The Book of Genesis

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The Book of Genesis

Genesis is the book of beginnings. In this book we find the beginnings of the material universe, human life, human sin, divine judgment on human sin, covenant promises, and the Israelite tribes—to name just a few. Genesis provides a foundation for a great deal of what we can know about life and our Lord.

The Bible's first book has not always been called "Genesis." Following the tradition of naming a book after its opening word or words, the Hebrew title of the book was "In the Beginning." The current title comes from the word *genesis*

(found in the Greek translation of Gen. 2:4 and 5:1), which means "birth" or "genealogy" or "history of origin."

Genesis is the first of five books forming a group of their own at the beginning of the Old Testament. Together, Genesis through Deuteronomy are usually called the "Torah" (meaning "law" or "teaching") or the "Pentateuch" (literally, "five-volumed [book]"). Genesis provides the background for the Exodus and wilderness settings of the other four books.

Author

Most conservative Bible scholars credit Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, including Genesis. No less an authority than Jesus Christ provided warrant for this view when He said, "Has not Moses given you the law?" (John 7:19). (Here "the law" evidently refers to the first five books of the Bible.) As a matter of fact, numerous times throughout the New Testament, the law is called the law of Moses or Moses is credited as saying things we find in the Pentateuch.

Unquestionably, Moses had the ability to write the Pentateuch. Having been raised in the Egyptian royal household, Moses received one of

the best educations available in his day (Acts 7:22). He would have learned, among other things, languages, history, and law.

We don't know if Moses worked alone on the Pentateuch. He may have had one or more assistants. Certainly someone else added the story of his death (Deut. 34).

Whether alone or not, Moses probably worked from a variety of sources. He may have listened to oral stories that had been passed down from generation to generation. He probably had access to records that had been kept by the Hebrew community in Egypt. He may even have had documents from Pharaoh's archives.

As Moses worked from these sources, God's Spirit guided him to write only what is true. We should also not forget that Moses was a man with whom God spoke directly

and plainly (Num. 12:8). Some of what we find in Genesis and other books of the Pentateuch Moses may have heard straight from the mouth of God.

Date, Place, and Purposes of Composition

Moses lived 120 years. Most likely since Moses died at the end of the wilderness wanderings, he wrote all the Pentateuch in the last third of his life. It was during that period that he led the Israelites out of Egypt and governed them as they camped here and there on the Sinai Peninsula and in Transjordan. During that period Moses would have had time to compose a long and difficult literary work.

According to 1 Kings 6:1, work on the first temple began in the fourth year of King Solomon's reign and the 480th year after the Exodus. The fourth year of Solomon's reign is usually identified as 966 B.C. That

means the Exodus must have taken place around the year 1446 B.C. And since Moses died during the forty-year wilderness wandering period, he must have composed the Pentateuch during the period 1446–1406 B.C.

Since God was about to establish His people in the Promised Land, Moses undoubtedly felt they needed a written record to guide them. The people needed to know where they had come from. They needed to know how they had been chosen by God. They needed a law to show them how to live. These are just some of the purposes for Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch.

Structure and Contents

Perhaps the best clue to the structure of Genesis is a recurring phrase translated "This is the account of. . ." (Gen. 2:4; see also 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2). Some Bible scholars take this phrase, in each case, to be a summary of the preceding section. Many other scholars, however, take the phrase to be an introduction to the following section. If the second view is correct, then the Book of Genesis has a prologue and ten sections.

Genesis can also be looked at as

having two main parts: chapters 1–11 and chapters 12–50. The first eleven chapters cover the time from Creation to the birth of Abraham. Although in these chapters we meet certain key individuals, such as Adam and Noah, the scope takes in all humanity. But in the book's final thirty-eight chapters, the time span covered is much shorter: about three hundred years. Also, the focus has narrowed to one family called by God to receive and transmit His blessings.

From start to finish, Genesis is a book of history, and its historical account is trustworthy because it was inspired by God. But we should not expect the book to provide a complete or systematic history of time from its origin until the

Hebrews' Egyptian sojourn. The author's concern was not history for history's sake. He used true historical figures and events to teach truths about God and humankind. We should read Genesis, the book of beginnings, in that light.

How to Use the *Study Book*

This *Study Book* is meant to be used with a Bible open beside it. Before studying one of the lettered sections within a lesson, read the corresponding Bible passage. Then refer back and forth between your Bible and the *Study Book* until you

get the meaning of the passage.

Also think about your personal answer to each of the "Ask Yourself" questions. Finally, come to class prepared to discuss the Bible passage and raise any questions that have occurred to you.

1

God Creates All Things

Genesis 1-2

a God Creates the Heavens and the Earth (1:1-2)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

—Genesis 1:1-2

The Bible begins with God and His creative activity. Genesis, like the rest of the Bible, does not try to prove God's existence; it assumes that He exists. Genesis, after all, was written for a people who already believed in God. Other ancient peoples had their own creation stories involving their many gods. Genesis tells about the creation of all things by the one true God.

The Hebrew word for "God" in Genesis 1:1 is *Elohim*, a widely used plural form emphasizing God's majesty and power. The word allows for the Trinity without falling into the trap of polytheism (belief in many gods).

We are not told when God began His work, just that it was "in the

beginning." God has always existed (Ps. 90:2). The heavens and the earth, however, had a definite beginning point in time.

In Hebrew speech, pairs of opposites were often used to express totality. For example, in Psalm 139:2 David's phrase "You know when I sit and when I rise" means God knew everything about David. Similarly, the phrase "the heavens and the earth" in Genesis 1:1 means that God created all things—spiritual beings, physical beings, matter, energy, time, space. Everything.

In the Genesis account, we should notice that God is involved in but distinct from His creation. People have often made the mistake of worshipping parts of creation rather than the Creator Himself. We shouldn't try to appreciate a great painting without considering the painter, and neither should we fail to recognize God as the Master Designer of the universe.

Ask Yourself . . . While enjoying the beauty of nature, do I think of the Creator and praise Him for His wondrous works?

In its early stage, the earth was "formless and empty" (Gen. 1:2),



A Gap between the Verses?

According to a view called the gap theory, an extended period of time passed between the events of Genesis 1:1 and those of the following verse. First, God created the heavens and the earth. Later, as a by-product of Satan's rebellion against God, the earth was converted to a formless state. Then God re-created it.

Disbelievers in the gap theory declare that the temporarily formless state of the earth need not be considered in negative terms. God simply chose to create by beginning with formless matter and then giving it form. There was only one creation.

which translates the rhyming words *tohu wabohu*. The earth was chaotic, not ordered. It was confused, not organized. And because the earth was formless and empty, God would spend the days of Creation

forming it and filling it.

Verse 2 refers to the water on the surface of the earth. Water is shapeless; it is the same all over. Water suggests the formlessness of the earth in its early stage.

Meanwhile, "darkness was over the surface of the deep." This was so because, according to the events of Creation week, God had not yet created the sun and the other celestial lights.

The Spirit of God was "hovering" over the waters of the earth. The Spirit was like a mother bird brooding over her eggs. God was about to bring forth life on His new world.

b God Creates All Things (1:3–2:3)

**Thus the heavens and the earth
were completed in all their vast
array. —Genesis 2:1**

Few passages of Scripture have given rise to as many different interpretations as the Creation story. Some Christians, for example, take a highly literal approach, saying that God created everything in six 24 hour days. Others suggest that the description of a week is simply a poetic framework the writer used to describe God's creative activity. Still others hold that the six 24 hour days were the periods in which God revealed what He had created.

These are only a few of the common interpretations, demonstrating

the diversity of opinion among Christians. Yet all Bible-believing Christians agree that the universe has not always existed, nor did it come into existence through natural and impersonal forces. It was created by God in a miraculous way.

Ask Yourself . . . Do modern scientific theories or contradictory opinions ever shake my belief in Creation?

In Genesis 1:3-2:3 we have the description of seven days—a busy week for God. In the first six of the days, God created. On the seventh, He rested.

The passages describing each of the six days of Creation begin with

the phrase translated “And God said” (1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24). God created with words, and His every command was effective.

Commentators have long noticed that Day 1 seems to correspond to Day 4, Day 2 to Day 5, and Day 3 to Day 6. The first three days were days of God’s forming the earth; the second three, days of His filling what He had formed.

On Day 1, God created day and separated it from night. Later, on Day 4, He created the sun, moon, and stars that shine by day and by night.

On Day 2, God made the sky by separating surface water from

CREATION WEEK

DAY 1

Day and Night
Genesis 1:3-5

DAY 2

Sky
Genesis 1:6-8

DAY 3

A. Land and Seas
B. Vegetation
Genesis 1:9-13

DAY 4

Sun, Moon, and Stars
Genesis 1:14-19

DAY 5

Fish and Birds
Genesis 1:20-23

DAY 6

A. Animals
B. Humans
Genesis 1:24-31

DAY 7

Rest
Genesis 2:2-3

IMAGE

THE IMAGE OF GOD

clouds. Then on Day 5 God created the sea creatures that live in the water and the birds that live in the sky.

On Day 3 God separated dry ground and surface water, making land and seas. He also made vegetation. On Day 6 God created animals and humans, both of which live on land and eat vegetation.

At several points during all this creating, God saw that His work was "good" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Then at the end God saw that everything He had made was "very good" (v. 31). Whatever we find wrong with our world is the result of sin and human folly, not the result of a flaw in the original creation. God expressed satisfaction with His work.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I get satisfaction from the work I do? Why or why not?

After God spoke the living things into existence, He gave them orders. God commanded both humans and animals to reproduce, filling the earth with life. Furthermore, God gave humans the responsibility to rule over the rest of creation.

The supremacy of humans over the rest of creation is surely due to the fact that both male and female people were made in the "image" and "likeness" of God (vv. 26–27). (The two words probably refer to the same thing.) Because people, unlike animals, bear God's image, He gave people dominion over creation. God is the Great King.

God rested on the seventh day (2:2). This does not mean that God

Theologians have long debated what it means to be made in the image of God. Three common opinions focus on human reason, ethics, and dominion. Some theologians say humans are in the image of the all-knowing God because we have high mental abilities. Others say we reflect God's image when we behave morally, as God always does. Still others believe we are in God's image because we rule over the rest of creation, just as God rules over all creation.

The image of God in humans was defaced through sin. But Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 suggest that all people still bear God's image to some degree. The apostle Paul wrote that believers are having the image of God restored in them as they become more and more Christlike (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10). Christ is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3). Christ bears the image of God perfectly.

was physically tired. After all, He had created the universe with just words. Rather, His rest signifies that He had completed His work of Creation (v. 1).

"God blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (v. 3). We gather from this that God's rest was the model or basis for the sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11). The New Testament tells us that joining God in His rest is the hope of believers in Christ (Heb. 3:7-4:11).



God Forms the First Man (2:4-17)

The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. —Genesis 2:7

Beginning with the fourth verse of chapter 2, we have a second account of Creation. This account, unlike the first one, focuses narrowly on the first humans and the special place God prepared for them.

Plants had not yet sprung up and the earth was watered from the ground rather than from clouds. At that time "the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (v. 7). This verse contains a number of interesting details we should examine.

First, it contains a new name for God: *Yahweh Elohim*, translated "LORD God." Earlier we saw that in

chapter 1 God was called *Elohim*—a plural name expressing God's majesty and power. But in chapter 2 *Elohim* is combined with *Yahweh*, the personal name for God used by His covenant people, the Israelites.

Second, the word for "man" in Genesis 2:7 is *adam*. Here and in verse 20 the word could be translated either as "man" or as the name *Adam*. Also, there is a pun in verse 7, since "man" is *adam* and "ground" is *adamah*.

Third, the word for "formed" was commonly used of a potter's work (example: Isa. 45:9). God was like a potter, and the first man, formed from the dust of the ground, was like a pot made of clay.

Fourth, the man was formed out of the ground just like the animals (compare Gen. 2:7 and 19). The man had the breath of life in him just like the animals (compare 1:30 and 2:7). He became a "living being" (2:7) just as the animals were "living creatures" (1:20, 24)—the same words in Hebrew. All this goes to show that in regard to his earthly body, Adam was much like the animals. Yet he was also different from the animals because he was made in the image of God.

God had lovingly prepared a home for Adam. This was a garden occupying part of a place called "Eden" in Mesopotamia (2:8). The name *Eden* means either "delight" or "a plain"; perhaps both.

The author of Genesis clearly meant his readers to understand Eden as a real place, since he provided many geographic details.

He named the rivers that flowed from Eden's river, along with lands watered by those rivers. He even mentioned some of the natural resources of those lands. Some of the names can no longer be linked with known geographic features, but we can guess that they were all known at the time Genesis was written. The Garden of Eden itself was a lovely place with abundant food. But Adam's stay there was no vacation. He was expected to "work [the

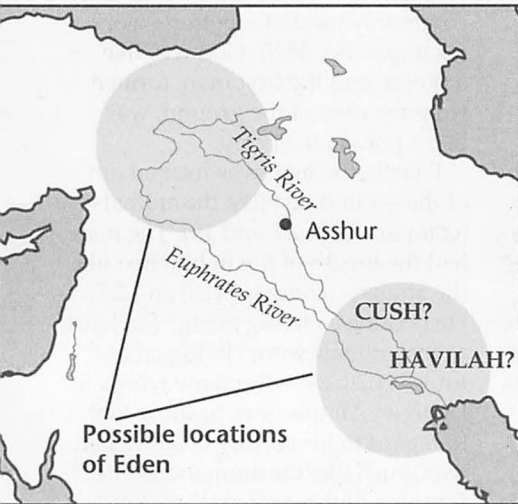
Ask Yourself . . . What practical steps can I take to help protect nature?

Eden was filled with trees, but two of the trees were special. One of these was the tree of life. We only get glimpses of this tree in the Garden of Eden (2:9; 3:22, 24). But it reappears in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2). Some theologians have suggested that the tree of life would have been used to confirm eternal life for the human race if Adam had been faithful. It will confirm eternal life for the followers of Christ in the New Jerusalem.

The other special tree was the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9; see v. 17). The meaning of this tree's name has been disputed. Probably it has something to do with the tree's ability to convey moral discernment. But the most important fact to note about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is that it was forbidden; this tree was God's tool for testing the man.

God gave the man only one restriction. If he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would suffer death (physically and spiritually).

As we will see in chapter 3, the man did eat the forbidden fruit. But before we get to that sad episode, we read about a much happier event: the creation of the first woman.



garden] and take care of it" (v. 15).

Our command to subdue nature is not inconsistent with the stewardship and conservation of nature. Christians should have a clearer understanding than anyone else of the human responsibility to take care of the world God has given us.



God Makes the First Woman (2:18–25)

For Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God . . . made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. —Genesis 2:20b–22

At first God made only one human: Adam. But He never planned for Adam to be a loner, the only one of his kind. All along, God intended to make a woman for Adam. Marriage and the family were part of God's plan from the start.

God wanted to prepare Adam for the change that would come into his life. We appreciate things more when we know we need them. The same was true for Adam. But not ever having known another creature of his kind, he needed to learn that there was a void in his life.

To help Adam learn his need for a woman, God had Adam name the animals. God brought the animals to Adam and listened to what Adam named them.

This naming activity had at least a couple of purposes. First, it was a way for Adam to exercise his God-given dominion over the rest of creation. Just as God had named day and night and other basic features of creation, so Adam named the animals. Second, the naming was a way for Adam to review the whole of the animal kingdom and discover at the end what God already knew: Adam

was alone as a human being; there was no one else like him. And "it is not good for the man to be alone" (v. 18).

What Adam needed was a "suitable helper" (v. 20). This phrase more literally means "a help as opposite him." This could only be a woman, of course, not an animal. The man and the woman would correspond to one another. They would complement and complete each other.

To be a helper in this sense is a noble calling. In fact, in most of the Old Testament passages where the same word for "helper" is used, it is applied to the Lord (example: Ps. 33:20).

Ask Yourself . . . What would my life be like without the opposite sex?

Now that Adam knew he needed a mate, God caused a deep sleep to come over him, like anesthetic for an operation. The woman was not created from the dust as Adam had been. She was formed from a part of Adam himself. Sharing the same life as Adam, she was fully a part of the human race God had started. She, along with Adam, bore the image of God (Gen. 1:27).

When Adam woke after his operation, God (like the father of the bride!) led the woman to him. Judging by the fact that Adam's declaration on this occasion is the first piece of poetry in the Bible (Gen. 2:23), he was overjoyed to see her. He said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." He recognized that here, finally, was his

Adam's 'Rib'

As the margin of the NIV says, the phrase translated "[God] took one of the man's ribs" (Gen. 2:21) can also be translated "[God] took part of the man's side." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for "rib" is more often translated "side." For example, in Exodus 25:12 it refers to the sides of the ark of the covenant.

Such usage has led some commentators to suggest that God took more than a rib from Adam when He made the first woman. God may have taken some flesh along with the bone. If so, Adam spoke quite literally when he called the woman "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23).

suitable helper. Furthermore, Adam completed his naming activity by naming the new human "woman." In Hebrew, the word for "woman" (*ishshah*) is as similar to the word for "man" (*ish*) that's found here as in English; thus it reflects the basic similarity between the first two humans.

"That is why"—that is, because men and women are made for each other—a man will leave his parents and be united to his wife and have intimate relations with her (v. 24). Adam and Eve were married from their first moment together, united for life. Their marriage set a pattern for the marriages of all of their descendants—one man and one woman for life.

Ask Yourself . . . Is my marriage as tight a unity as Genesis 2:24 suggests it should be?

At this time, the husband and wife did not need any clothing. Sin had not yet entered in, bringing with it a sense of shame and guilt. We are not told how long the two of them enjoyed the paradise in which their fellowship with God and each other was unhindered by sin.

It's enough to make one wistful, thinking of all that sin has cost the human race.

2

Disobedience Leads to Death

Genesis 3–5

a **The Couple Eat Forbidden Fruit (3:1–13)**

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. —Genesis 3:6

In last week's Scripture we were introduced to the single restriction that God imposed on Adam. The man could eat the fruit of any tree in the Garden of Eden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16–17). God was testing Adam to see whether the man would repay His goodness with obedience.

In this week's passages we see how Adam failed the test, and what the results were.

Temptation precedes sin. Adam was tempted to eat the fruit by his wife, who had been tempted by one of the creatures in the garden: a serpent.

Like other creatures, the serpent had been created good. But it was used by Satan for an evil purpose.

Approaching the woman, the serpent asked, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (3:1). In other words, he planted seeds of doubt in her mind and made God's command seem more restrictive than it was.

Next, the woman affirmed that God had put only one tree out of bounds. But she, too, exaggerated the command by saying that she and her husband were not permitted even to touch the tree. Already, the serpent's words were having an effect on her.

The serpent followed up with an outright denial of God's word, saying that God had lied about the penalty for eating the fruit—the woman would not die. The serpent also attributed a selfish motivation to God, implying that God feared the humans would become His equals if they ate the fruit.

That's all it took. The woman believed the serpent's lies and ate of the fruit. Then, apparently, it was not hard for her to talk Adam into eating some too.

Ask Yourself . . . How does the woman's temptation remind me of my own temptations?

To eat some fruit—such an easy thing to do. Yet with that simple act, everything changed. The couple forfeited for themselves and for all people the life of blessing they had until then enjoyed.

The effects of the sin began to be felt immediately. Adam and his wife were ashamed of their nakedness. The serpent had told the woman that the fruit would open her eyes (v. 5). And in a way it did (v. 7)—but not at all in the way she had expected or wanted. The guilty couple made some flimsy clothing for themselves from leaves.

God, of course, sees everything. He knew immediately when the couple ate the fruit. He approached them in the garden, and the guilty pair responded by hiding.

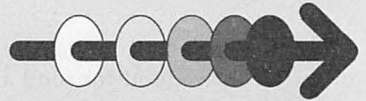
Once discovered, Adam offered his nakedness as the reason for his hiding. But his awareness of nakedness was a tip-off that he had sinned. Now he was afraid. After all, God had told him that he would die if he ate the forbidden fruit.

While God knew what had happened, He wanted the couple to confess their sin. The man and woman did not deny eating the fruit, but Adam blamed his wife, and she blamed the serpent.

Isn't that just like us when we sin? Confronted with our wrongdoing, our first impulse is to shuffle off the blame onto someone else. Yet forgiveness and healing can come only through honest confession to God.

Ask Yourself . . . How willing am I to take the blame for my own wrongdoing?

The question that must have been on the sinful couple's minds was "What will God do now?" He could justly have written off the human race as a loss, destroyed the couple and been done with it. But God would not do that. As we'll see, God had judgment in store. But He also had an astonishing plan of redemption for fallen people.



Solidarity in Adam

The New Testament helps us see that Adam's sin greatly impacted all people. "just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people," wrote the apostle Paul (Rom. 5:18).

We all have inherited a state of sinfulness, often described as original sin. Far from being "basically good," all humans are innately inclined toward evil. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul characterized the human condition as "flesh," with all humans being "deserving of [God's] wrath" (Eph. 2:3; note also Rom. 3:9, 23).

This is why God sent Christ, "the last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), to rescue sinners.



God Judges the Human Pair (3:14-24)

The LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever."

—Genesis 3:22

After listening to the excuses of the man and woman He had created, God laid out His plan for dealing with the intrusion of sin. He pronounced a curse on the serpent, the woman, and the man—in that order. He also expelled the human couple from the garden.

The curses do not describe all the effects of sin. In fact, everything in life continues to be twisted, polluted, or diminished in some way by the effects of sin.

God cursed the serpent first. The serpent would slither on the ground and would have an antagonistic relationship with people.

Jewish teachers have traditionally interpreted Genesis 3:14 to mean that previously snakes had legs. But the curse may also mean that the serpent's mode of travel, along with its closeness to dust, would now symbolize Satan's moral lowness.

In one sense, verse 15 is fulfilled by the hatred many people have for snakes. But traditionally, Christian interpreters have taken the woman's offspring to refer, in particular, to Christ. Satan struck Christ's heel,

figuratively speaking, when Christ died. But Christ crushed Satan's head, figuratively speaking, when He rose from the dead.

This verse, then, shows that in the midst of judgment, God held out promise. He would redeem sinners at the cost of His own Son's life. This was the astonishing plan in the mind of God.

Ask Yourself . . . Lately, have I thanked the Lord for suffering on my behalf?

The curse against the woman had two parts. First, she would have pain in childbirth. Second, she would desire her husband, while he would rule over her.

Presumably, if they had not eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam and his wife would have raised a family in the garden. Births, in that case, would have caused little pain. But now Adam's wife and all mothers to come after her would suffer during childbirth.

The second part of the woman's curse is interpreted differently. Some theologians take it to mean that marriage would be distorted by sexual and power politics. Others think it means that while a woman would continue to desire her husband, she would now have to submit to her husband's leadership in the family.

Adam's curse had to do with work and death. Life in the garden involved some work, but it was much easier and more fruitful than work in the fallen world. People from then on would have to work hard just to keep themselves alive.

And even with hard work, death would be inevitable.

Theologians generally believe that people would have been immortal if Adam had not eaten the fruit. Human death was introduced as part of the judgment on sin.

Ask Yourself . . . Do the curses on my earliest ancestors help explain anything in my life?

Cherubim

A cherub is a kind of angel that serves God. In Scripture, cherubim (plural of cherub) are often associated with fire and are described as having multiple faces and multiple wings.

God uses cherubim for special purposes. Example: they guarded the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24). Also, they support God's throne-chariot (Ezek. 10).

Cherubim were often shown in art. They even ornamented the most holy place in the Israelite temple.

Through hearing the curses, Adam had caught the drift of what was going to happen next. Human life would go on—it would be different and it would be worse, but it would go on. So in response, Adam gave his wife her personal name, Eve (which means “living”). He trusted God's word, implied in His curse against Eve, that she would be the mother of all the living.

Next, God provided the couple with clothing made from animal skins. The shame of sin would not go away, so the couple needed more durable clothing than that provided by fig leaves. Some theologians consider the killing of the animals for the clothing to be the first sacrifice.

God also banished the couple from the garden. They no longer had a right to eat the fruit of the tree of life, which conveyed eternal life. So to prevent them from eating it, He sent them out and had cherubim block their return.

The tree of life, flanked by guardian cherubim, was frequently portrayed in Mesopotamian art. This drawing shows the scene carved on the side of an ivory box from Nimrud, dating from about the eighth century B.C. The tree of life is depicted as a date palm.





Cain Murders Abel (4:1-16)

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. —Genesis 4:8

After being cast out of the garden, Adam and Eve apparently continued to live somewhere nearby. They made their first attempts at setting up a household and providing for their own needs under fallen conditions. Over time, they had children.

The first two sons born to Adam and Eve had symbolic names. The name Cain sounds like the Hebrew for "brought forth." This reflects Eve's exclamation "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man" (v. 1). The name Abel means "breath" or "temporary" or "meaningless." Any of these meanings could be taken as symbolic in light of Abel's tragically short life.

The two brothers grew up and pursued different occupations. Cain was a farmer; Abel, a shepherd.

Even at this early period, people brought offerings to God. Probably they burned these offerings on an altar to express devotion to God, just as the Israelites would later do. Cain brought grain from his fields as an offering, while Abel brought meat from his flocks.

"The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with



Two Sacrifices

Why did God accept Abel's offering but reject Cain's offering?

The biblical text (Gen. 4:3-5) says that Abel brought an offering from the firstborn of his flock. To match that offering, Cain would have had to bring some of the firstfruits from his fields. But the text says nothing about firstfruits. That may partially explain why Cain's offering was unacceptable.

Some theologians believe that Cain was wrong not to offer a blood sacrifice, since sinners must come to God by the way of blood. Abel's offering was in line with what God later revealed about animal sacrifice, but we have no recorded specifications about types of sacrifice in the earliest period of human history.

Certainly Cain had an attitude problem. While Abel was a righteous man who offered a sacrifice to God in faith, Cain was an evil man who offered a sacrifice as a mere formality (Heb. 11:4; 1 John 3:11-12).

favor" (vv. 4-5). This aroused Cain's anger.

God saw Cain's anger and came to warn him. Cain was unacceptable to God because he did not do what was right. But it was not too late. Cain could begin doing right. With God's help, he could get the better of the sin in his life. However, if Cain persisted in his evil ways, sin would overpower him. Sin was like a wild beast crouching to leap at him.

Ask Yourself... When has sin proved to be a wild beast lying in wait for me?

Cain did not master sin. Sin mastered him. Cain lured Abel to a field, attacked him, and killed him. To show the horror of the murder, the text repeatedly emphasizes that Abel was Cain's brother.

The Lord came to question Cain after the murder of Abel. "Where is your brother Abel?" the Lord asked (v. 9).

Cain replied with an arrogant lie ("I don't know") and a sarcastic question ("Am I my brother's keeper?"). Even when God brought the gruesome act out into the open, Cain remained defiant.

God didn't need Cain to tell Him what had happened; He knew. He said Abel's blood cried out to Him from the ground. God is acutely aware of all injustice that goes on in the world.

As a righteous judge, God passed sentence against the murderer. Cain had been a successful farmer, but no longer. He would not be able to stay in one place and gather food from the land, but rather he would have

to wander restlessly, gathering food as he might.

This sentence of exile had a profound effect on Cain. He realized that it would mean two things. First, he would be driven from the place where he had known God's presence. Second, he would be vulnerable to murder himself.

As for the second concern, Cain probably feared vengeance from family members for the murder of Abel. Much later, the law of Moses would require retribution (Num. 35:16-21; Deut. 19:4-13). No doubt by this time Eve had given birth to other sons and daughters. As time passed, the number of Cain's relatives would steadily grow, and so would the likelihood that one of them would try to even the score.

God calmed Cain's fears about revenge. For reasons of His own, God wanted to preserve Cain's life. So He swore to revenge Cain's murder, if it happened, seven times over. As word of this vow got around, it would be a strong deterrent to people with vengeance on their minds.

Furthermore, "the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him" (Gen. 4:15). With nothing more than this to go on, we can't say what the mark was. But apparently it was a clear enough sign to people of that day. To our knowledge, Cain never was killed in revenge for murdering his brother.

But as for Cain's first concern (having to leave the Lord's presence in his homeland), there was nothing God would do about this. Cain

had to depart from the area where he had been living until then. He then headed eastward for the land of Nod. According to some scholars, "land of Nod" (v. 16) may mean "land of wandering."



Adam's Family Grows (4:17-26)

[Eve said,] "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him." Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD.

—Genesis 4:25b-26

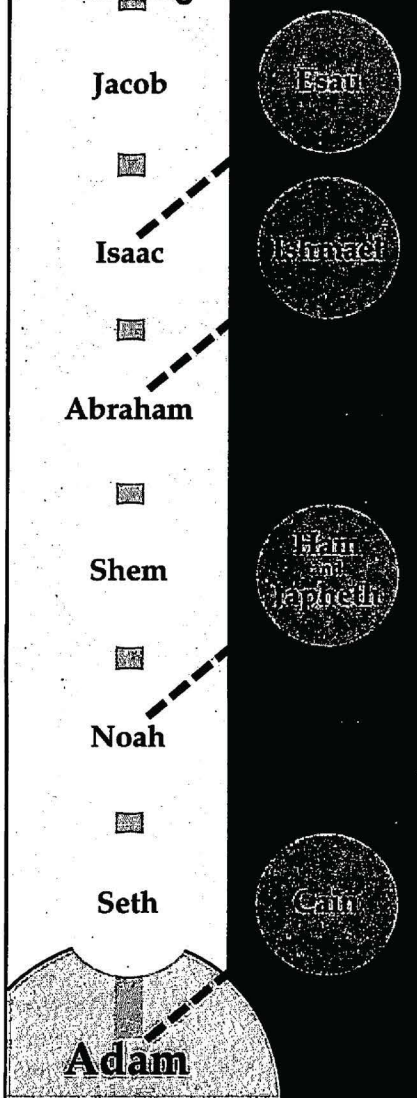
Cain evidently married a sister or niece. The two of them lived in the land of Nod together. There they raised a family.

To try to bring his wandering to an end, Cain founded a permanent settlement. This city he named after his son Enosh. Eventually several generations of the family lived in the city of Enosh.

One of the more notorious members of the family, coming several generations after Cain, was named Lamech. He had two wives, Adah and Zillah. Other men before Lamech may have had multiple wives, but he is the first one about whom this is mentioned in the Bible. It shows us that sin had already distorted God's plan for marriage.

Some of Lamech's

Line of Blessing



Genesis shows a pattern in which a line of people (such as Cain and his descendants) branches off from the line of people (including Seth and his descendants) receiving covenant blessings. Usually, Genesis describes the less blessed line briefly before describing the more blessed one in more detail.

children had special skills. Lives were frequently hundreds of years long during this period, so they would have had time to develop their abilities. Jabal was a nomadic herder. Jubal was a musician. Tubal-Cain forged tools out of bronze and iron.

If these men were anything like their father, they were fearsome indeed. One incident represents Lamech's evil. At one point he murdered a man for injuring him, and then boasted about it to his wives.

Lamech said, "If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times" (v. 24). This refers, of course, to God's promise to revenge Cain seven times over if Cain was killed. Lamech was thus putting himself in the place of God and vowing to do better. What could be more prideful—or more dangerous?

Jesus may have had Lamech's boast in mind when He spoke to Peter about forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–22). Peter wanted to know, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Ask Yourself . . . Do I go to extremes in taking revenge against others? Or do I go to extremes in forgiving others?

If Cain's family had comprised the totality of Adam's descendants, the human race would have been in trouble for sure. But a more godly line of Adam's descendants came through another son, Seth. This name probably means "granted." It reflects Eve's exclamation "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him" (Gen. 4:25).

After the birth of Enosh, Seth's son, "people began to call on the name of the LORD" (v. 26). The phrase "call on the name of the LORD" is used in the Old Testament to designate public worship. It appears then that in Seth's family, people came together for worship.

Ask Yourself . . . How regularly do I call on the name of the Lord?

Genesis 5 in Brief

Genesis 5 is a listing of Adam's descendants, in the line of Seth, down to Noah and Noah's sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The length of life was extraordinarily long. But that did not prevent death from catching up with humanity, as God had said it would.

The life of Enoch is an exception. Because of his close walk with God, Enoch did not die but was taken directly to be with the Lord.

3

God Deals with Human Sin

Genesis 6:1–11:26

Genesis 6–7 in Brief

As we have already learned, some of Adam's early descendants, such as Cain and Lamech, were ungodly people. Of course, other descendants of Adam's, such as his son Seth, were godly. But it appears that by the time of Noah, who lived many generations after Adam, wickedness had almost wholly eclipsed righteousness in the human race.

The Lord decided to bring judgment on the world. He would send a flood to destroy all life, except one godly man (Noah) and his family and the animals they would gather. God gave Noah instructions for building and stocking an ark that could rise up on the floodwaters. When these preparations were complete, the waters began to cover the earth and do their destructive work.

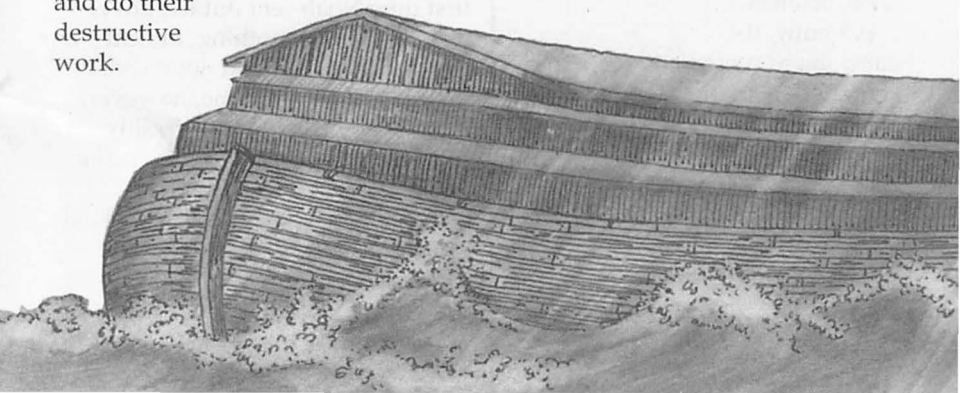
a The Flood Comes to an End (8:1–19)

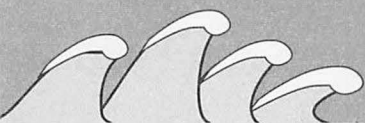
The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

—Genesis 8:3–4

If bad weather stretches on for two or three days, we are likely to begin yearning for sunshine. Imagine, then, how the residents of the ark must have felt when rain fell and the waters rose for weeks on end! But eventually even this monster storm came to an end.

When the text says that "God remembered Noah" (v. 1), it does not imply that God had forgotten about him. It means, rather, that





OTHER

FLOOD STORIES

Many cultures around the world have passed down stories about a great flood. The one that most closely resembles the biblical account is the Babylonian flood story, which exists in several forms.

In the Babylonian story, the gods in heaven grow tired of the noise made by people on the earth and decide to silence them with a flood. However, one man, warned by a god, builds a seven-decked, cube-shaped boat. This hero rides out the storm, along with his family, animals, and craftsmen. Eventually the ship comes to rest on a mountain and the hero sends out three birds. When the waters have abated, the ship's inhabitants come out and offer sacrifices.

Evidently, the Babylonians preserved an imperfect memory of the flood in Noah's time, which Genesis describes accurately.

God recognized the time had come to end the destructive part of His plan and begin the reconstructive part. The residents of the ark were part of God's plan to spread life on the earth anew.

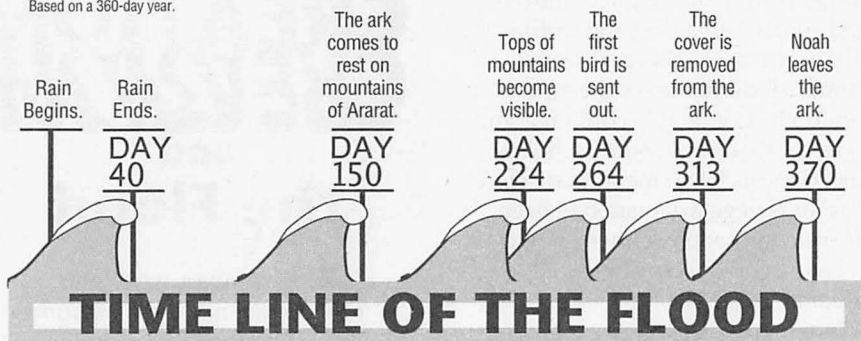
The rain stopped and the waters began to recede steadily, with some help from a providential wind. Finally, the ark grounded at a spot in the "mountains of Ararat" (v. 4). Most scholars identify Ararat with Urartu, a region now in far eastern Turkey, around Lake Van. The tallest peak in that range, Mount Ararat, is seventeen thousand feet high.

The residents of the ark did not at first try to leave the ark. Noah cautiously waited. But he was curious. What was happening in the world?

Apparently unable to see much (perhaps because of the construction of the ark), Noah used birds to test the dryness of the earth outside. First, he sent out a raven. If the raven had returned, that would mean that the water was still so high it could not find carrion to feed on. If it didn't return, the waters had receded enough to expose a food source.

Noah's second choice of bird was a dove. Doves normally will settle only on clean, dry places. The first time Noah sent out the dove, it returned with nothing, indicating that the Flood had not receded far yet. The second time, however, the dove returned with a freshly plucked olive leaf. This was encouraging; it meant vegetation was beginning to recover from the Flood. The third time Noah sent out the

Based on a 360-day year.



dove, it did not return. It had found the outside world suitable for dwelling in permanently.

When the world was sufficiently dry for habitation, God called Noah to come out of the ark with all his family and the animals. They had been in the ark for more than a year. Dry land must have been a welcome sight indeed!

Ask Yourself . . . When have I felt a relief at the end of a long wait or trial?

b God Blesses the Survivors (8:20–9:7)

God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” —Genesis 9:1

As Noah and his family came out of the ark, a new era in history began. From here on out, the small band of people would repopulate areas devastated by the Flood. It

was appropriate, therefore, that God and the people mark the occasion by reaffirming their relationship. Noah offered burnt sacrifices. Then God spoke, making a promise, pronouncing blessing, giving instructions, and establishing a covenant.

Noah’s burnt offerings were pleasing to God. The sacrifice showed Noah’s devotion, which contrasted sharply with the spiritual rebellion of the people who had been killed by the Flood.

The Lord promised never again to send such a flood upon the earth. He made that commitment in spite of humanity’s evil tendencies. Though wickedness would again show itself on the earth, He would not send another such flood to destroy all life.

God’s promise will last as long as the earth endures. We know from the New Testament that what we see now will eventually give way to “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1; also see 2 Pet. 3:3–13). But until then, the natural processes listed in Genesis 8:22 will continue.

Next, the Lord blessed the survivors. He reminded them that His

earlier command to have children and spread out across the earth was still in effect. He also reaffirmed human dominion over the animal kingdom. The people could use animals for their food. Some scholars take Genesis 9:3 to mean that before this time, vegetarianism had been the rule for people. Others, however, believe people were always allowed to eat animals.

In light of the present permission to eat animals, and in light of the recent destruction of many lives, God took this opportunity to reaffirm the sanctity of life—both animal life and human life. While people could eat animal flesh, they were not to eat blood, since life is identified with blood. They would have to drain animal carcasses of blood before eating them.

More importantly, human life was to be honored and guarded. God would demand an accounting from each animal and person who treated human life lightly. Since people are made in the image of God, God decreed that murder would receive the punishment of death.

A person's life—any person's life—is not something to be taken lightly.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I have a proper respect for animal life and human life?

Lastly, God renewed His instructions for people to have children. Human life, which is sacred in God's eyes, was to be spread abroad throughout the earth.

CREATION and the Flood

Bible scholars have long noted that the Flood account corresponds in a number of ways to the Creation account. For instance, in the Flood, water came from the sky as well as from the earth (Gen. 7:11). This detail suggests that the separation of water from water, which occurred on the second day of Creation, was in a way overcome in the Flood. In other words, Genesis presents the Flood as a kind of de-creation of the world.

But through the Flood, God did not merely destroy; He also re-created. Noah was a kind of Adam. His family and the animals were given a renewed command to multiply (8:17 and 9:1; compare 1:22, 28). Also, Noah's family members were given renewed dominion over the rest of creation (9:2–3; compare 1:28–30). The image of God in humans was reaffirmed (9:6; compare 1:26–27).



God Makes a Covenant (9:8-17)

"I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." —Genesis 9:11

Earlier, the Lord had decided never again to send a flood to destroy all life (8:21). As He wound up His speech with Noah, He solemnly confirmed that decision with a covenant. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow.

Throughout history, God made several covenants with people. These covenants came at God's initiative, and He Himself fixed the terms and conditions (if any).

In the case of the covenant made after the Flood, God established an unconditional covenant with all people and all animals. He would never again use water to destroy all life. People and animals don't have to do anything to ensure that God will keep this promise. Of His own mercy, He permits even the wicked to live on the earth as long as it lasts.

After the traumatic experience of the Flood, Noah's family needed the reassurance God gave them. Without it, every time rain began to fall, they would have wondered about the possibility of another flood. God reassured Noah's family about the future of the human race, which would consist of their descendants.

Types of Covenants

Several types of covenants existed in the ancient Near East. One type, the royal grant covenant, consisted of a king's granting land or some other benefit to a servant.

Normally, the terms were unconditional for the one benefiting from the gift.

Another type of ancient covenant was the suzerain-vassal covenant. In this covenant a powerful ruler (suzerain) pledged to protect a weaker king's (vassal's) realm as long as the weaker king remained loyal to him. This covenant's continuance depended on the behavior of the weaker king.

Covenants between God and people resembled either the royal grant or suzerain-vassal type of covenant. The Noahic covenant was of the royal grant type; in it God made an unconditional promise never again to send a flood to destroy all life.

Ask Yourself . . . How has God reassured me?

Covenants often had a sign or seal of some kind to commemorate them. For example, the sign of God's

covenant with Abraham was circumcision (Gen. 17).

The sign of God's covenant with Noah was the rainbow. Some scholars believe that until this period in history there had never been a rainbow. Others believe that rainbows had always been appearing near rain clouds, but that after the Flood, God invested this beautiful arch of color in the sky with a new and special meaning.

According to Genesis, the rainbow would function as a reminder to God that He should limit the damage any rainstorm could do. He should not allow the water to continue rising on the earth until all living things had died.

Although the text does not mention it, the rainbow can also function as a reminder to people. It can reassure us of God's goodness to all people, whether or not they worship and obey Him. James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." God's goodness gives men and women a chance to repent and recognize what He has done for them.

Sadly, few people recognize the significance of the rainbow when they see it. It means patience and mercy—for now. God's nature does not allow Him to delay judgment forever. If people do not respond to His goodness and His offer of salvation in Christ, they will receive the just punishment for their sins.

Genesis 9:18–10:32 in Brief

This portion of Genesis begins with a sad episode in Noah's life. He became drunk and lay naked in public. One of his sons, Ham, advertised his nakedness, while the other two modestly covered their father. For this, Noah prophetically cursed Ham's son Canaan, but blessed Shem and Japheth.

Genesis 10 lists descendants of Noah's sons, along with sketchy facts about their locations and languages. The only person who receives extended comment is Nimrod, a hunter and empire builder.

d God Confuses Language (11:1–9)

The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

—Genesis 11:6–7

After the Flood, God promised never again to destroy all life with water. But that did not mean He would never again intervene to deal with human sin. The episode of the Tower of Babel shows us a unique example of divine judgment on evil: God confused human language and scattered people.

Over time, the descendants of Noah grew in number and spread out in different directions. Verses 1–9 of Genesis 11 focus on one

group of people who settled in "a plain in Shinar" (v. 2). Shinar is another name for Babylonia, an area in Mesopotamia now a part of Iraq.

In the plain of Shinar, the people decided to bring a halt to their expansion across the face of the

earth. Instead of being scattered about, they would congregate in one place. They would build a city.

For building materials, the Babylonians decided to use sun-baked or kiln-baked bricks, with tar for mortar. Presumably, they had to use these materials because their region offered no better materials. However, the text contains a hint of sarcasm that the Babylonians expected to carry out their grandiose building scheme without even having stones and true mortar.

There was nothing inherently wrong with building a city (unless, as some say, these Babylonians were deliberately disobeying God's command to fill the earth). But where fallen people are concentrated, there evil is concentrated too. The builders of Babel expressed their evil in pride. They decided to build a tall tower that would impress others. Furthermore, their description of the planned tower as one that "reaches to the heavens" (v. 4) probably indicates a belief that they could make themselves equal with God.

Archaeologists tell us that the builders of other towers (or ziggurats) in Mesopotamia had similar pretensions. The ziggurat of the god Marduk built later at Babylon was called *Etemennanki* ("House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth"). The ziggurats at Nippur, Larsa, and Sippar were each called *Eduranki* ("The House of the Bond between Heaven and Earth").

What a contrast heaven-defying pride is to the biblical plan of salvation! In Christ, God came down

Babel/Babylon

Scholars believe Babel, the location of the infamous tower, was at or near the site of the later city of Babylon. *Babel* sounds like *Babylon*. Furthermore, Babel was built in "Shinar" (Gen. 11:2), or Babylonia, the region which had Babylon as its capital.

Babylon became a symbol of evil to Jewish and Christian writers, probably because of the tower and because of the exile of Jews in Babylon much later. Revelation says of this city, which once planned a tower that would reach the heavens, that its "sins are piled up to heaven" (Rev. 18:5). In contrast to Babylon, "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, [will come] down out of heaven from God" (21:2).



to a helpless humanity. The Lord desires that we humbly acknowledge the futility

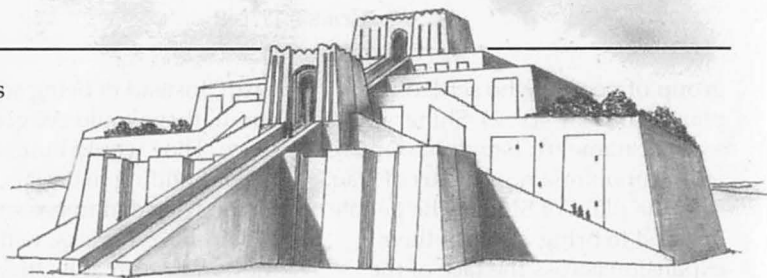
of our own efforts and rest solely on Christ's sacrificial work on our behalf. God opposes the proud, but lifts up the humble.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I counting on my own efforts to reach heaven? Or am I resting in the completed work of the Savior?

God watched the progress of the builders in Babel. He knew full well their selfish motives. So He decided to prevent the completion of the project by scattering the people. This dispersal would eliminate a concentration of evil.

Since all the people were descendants of one family, the family of Noah, they spoke the same language. God recognized that this common language was a chief reason that the people were able to cooperate in an evil plan. In fact, if they continued to communicate with one another, they might cooperate in yet more evil projects.

So God "confused the language of the whole world" (v. 9). Evidently this means that different groups of people could no longer understand each other's speech; each group now had its own language. Obviously, this verbal isolation contributed to social isolation and resulted in the scattering of peoples.



The story of Pentecost provides a thrilling counterpoint to the story of the Tower of Babel. At Pentecost, God overcame the divisions of speech by enabling Christians to speak and understand many languages (Acts 2:5–11). This represented the way the Gospel can speak to people in every one of the world's language groups. In Christ, God does not separate people to dilute their evil but rather unites believers in righteousness.

Genesis 11:10–26 in Brief

These verses are a genealogy from Shem, the son of Noah, to Abram (Abraham). After explaining the diversity of peoples and languages in the world, Genesis from now on will focus our attention on one family—the family of Abraham.

4

God Promises Canaan to Abram

Genesis 11:27–14:24

a God Calls Abram to Canaan (11:27–12:9)

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."

—Genesis 12:1

Many years after the Flood and the Tower of Babel, God began a new approach in His dealings with humanity. He began to devote special attention to one family (later to become a nation) that would bear His name before all the world's peoples. Then, from out of this nation, He would raise up the Messiah, who would achieve salvation for all who would believe in Him.

To set in motion this grand scheme, God needed one man to become the father of the holy nation. God chose Abram of Ur for the role. We can't be sure why God called Abram and not someone else. From later events in Abram's life, we know that he had many fine qualities. But he was by no means perfect. In fact, Joshua 24:2 tells us that at the time he was living in Ur, his family

was worshipping false gods.

God's call to Abram was demanding. Abram was to leave his country, his people, and his father's household, and he was to go to a land he did not know (Gen. 12:1; Acts 7:2–3). In other words, Abram was to be lifted out of the familiar and placed in the unfamiliar. This must have seemed painful and risky to him.

From time to time, God may ask us to do something special for Him. Perhaps He wants us to get involved in a church ministry that is new to us. Or perhaps He wants us to speak about Jesus to a hostile relative. God's call may scare us. But when we are as certain of the Lord's will as we can be, we must respond in faith. He will give us the strength to do what He asks.

Ask Yourself . . . Is God asking me to do something for Him? If so, how will I respond?

Along with Abram's call came a blessing that must have acted as a powerful incentive for Abram to obey God. The blessing came in the form of a series of seven promises (seven was the symbolic number of perfection). God promised (1) "I will make you into a great nation,"

(2) "I will bless you," (3) "I will make your name great," (4) "you will be a blessing," (5) "I will bless those who bless you," (6) "whoever curses you I will curse," and (7) "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:2–3).

From our perspective in time, we can see some of the ways these promises were fulfilled. Abram became the father of the Hebrew nation. In his own day he was rich, and ever since he has been famous. His descendant Jesus Christ has spread God's blessings to people from all nations.

But Abram didn't know about these fulfillments. He had to accept the blessing and obey the call by faith (Heb. 11:8–10).

Abram was part of a family in the

lineage of Shem, the son of Noah. He presumably left behind many of his relatives in Ur when he headed west for Canaan in obedience to God's call. He traveled with his father, his wife, and a nephew.

Abram's small band completed the journey to Canaan, the land God had promised to show Abram, in two stages.

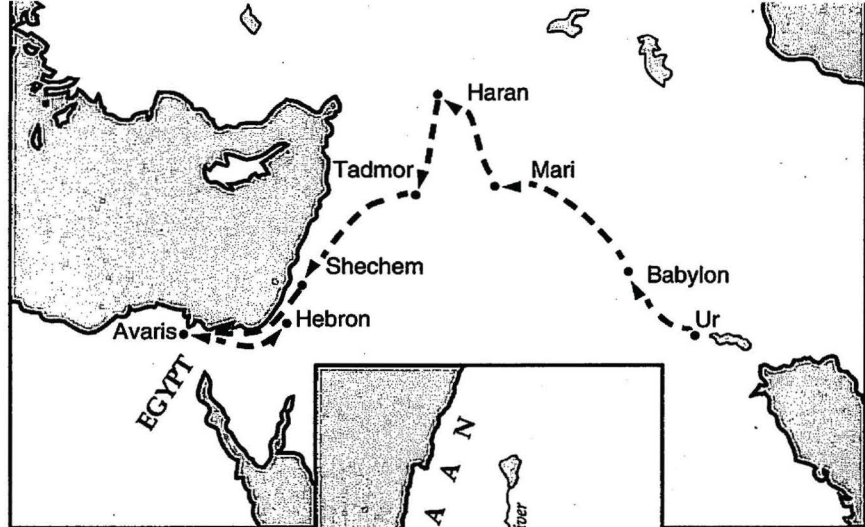
Traveling seven hundred miles along the ancient Fertile Crescent trade route, they arrived in Haran. Here they apparently stayed for a while. The text says they "settled there" (Gen. 11:31) and accumulated possessions and servants (12:5).

We don't know why the family group stayed in Haran. Maybe Abram's father, Terah, was too weak to travel farther. Or maybe Terah

Ur of the CHALDEES

The city of Ur was a thriving commercial center in Abram's day. It had a population of at least 300,000 people. Excavations done at the site have revealed high cultural standards. Musical instruments and statuettes found in the royal tombs indicate the fine craftsmanship of the time. The precious stones, gold, and silver testify to the vast wealth in the city.

Ur was protected by walls averaging thirty feet in height. Elaborate temple buildings could be found in the city. Several of the homes were two stories high, containing the best comforts available in the ancient world. Travelers came from all over the world to conduct trade in the city.

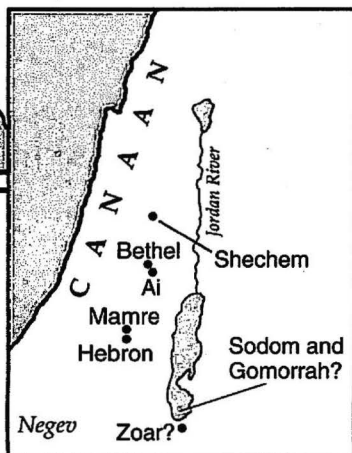


didn't want to leave this outpost of the Chaldean culture, which the family was used to.

At any rate, once Terah was dead, Abram—the new head of the clan—called for his group to set out on the second stage of their journey. It was about another 400 miles to Canaan.

When Abram arrived in Canaan, the land was thinly populated by a variety of peoples who had descended from Canaan, the grandson of Noah. Nomadic tribesmen moved through the hill country and valleys. Some urbanization had begun to take place at fortified cities. Generally, the area was far behind the standard of civilization Abram had left behind in Ur.

Traveling through the land from north to south, Abram stopped at Shechem, Bethel, and the Negev



area.

While Abram was at Shechem, the Lord appeared to him and promised to give the land of Canaan to his descen-

dants. To our knowledge, this was the first time God explicitly made this promise to Abram. The promise must have meant a lot to Abram, now that he could see the land of Canaan all around him.

In response to the Lord's appearance, Abram built an altar at Shechem and offered sacrifices to the Lord. At Bethel, Abram built another altar and again worshiped the Lord. Then he continued south to the Negev. In that southernmost part of Canaan, he may have settled with his family for a while.



Abram Lies about His Wife (12:10-20)

As [Abram] was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

—Genesis 12:11-13

The Bible never disguises the weaknesses and failures of its characters. Instead, it presents the characters as the real people they are. In this passage of Scripture, for example, we see Abram at his worst.

While Abram was living in Canaan, a famine struck. So he decided to move his clan to Egypt temporarily. The Genesis record doesn't explicitly say there was anything wrong in Abram's relocating to Egypt. In fact, this was a common reaction of Canaanites to famine. Canaan depended on rain for its

crops, but Egypt had the annual flooding of the Nile River to supply water.

Abram's wrongdoing began as he was about to enter Egypt. He feared that the Egyptians would kill him to steal his beautiful wife for themselves. At this point Abram should have trusted God to take care of him. But instead, he trusted in his own devices.

Abram's plan was to pass Sarai off as his

Sarai's Beauty

Sarai must have been at least 65 when she went with her husband to Egypt. Many people have expressed surprise that at such an age Sarai was considered so beautiful she was added to Pharaoh's harem.

Perhaps to understand the event we should keep in mind that some people in that period lived a long time. Abram lived 175 years. Possibly Sarai's appearance at 65 was comparable to that of a woman in her thirties or early forties today.

sister and not as his wife. As a matter of fact, Sarai was his half-sister (see 20:12). But in this case a half-truth equaled a whole lie: Sarai was first and foremost his wife. Furthermore, by telling Sarai to back up his story, he was asking her to sacrifice her honor for his own advantage.

Sometimes we, too, are tempted to practice deception. We fear that if the truth were told, something awful might happen to us. A lie seems the easiest way out. But falsehood is not God's way. If we trust in Him, He will honor our attempts to live truthfully before all people.

Ask Yourself . . . Are there any lies on my conscience right now? If so, why don't I confess them before another minute goes by?

No doubt Abram hoped he would never have to put his plan into action. But as it turned out, Abram's suspicions were well founded. The Egyptians noticed Sarai's beauty. Some government officials told Pharaoh about her, and Pharaoh took her into his palace, apparently as a member of his harem.

Abram profited from Pharaoh's interest in Sarai. His wealth increased greatly while he was in Egypt. That was small compensation, however, for the concern and sense of loss he must have felt over Sarai. More than likely he had begun to realize his sin in not trusting God.

Abram and Sarai may have been willing to accept their separation, but God was not. Since it was part of God's plan to have Abram and Sarai give birth to a son, He did not stand

for Sarai's residence in the Egyptian palace. God afflicted Pharaoh and others in Pharaoh's household with diseases. This was an attempt to convince Pharaoh to release Sarai to Abram.

We don't know how Pharaoh found out that Sarai was Abram's wife, nor how Pharaoh linked the diseases with Sarai and Abram. Perhaps Sarai confessed the deception. However that may be, Pharaoh summoned Abram into his presence and berated the foreigner for lying to him and letting him in for divine punishment. Now Pharaoh couldn't get rid of Sarai fast enough. He sent the foreigners on their way.



Abram and Lot Separate (13:1-18)

The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. —Genesis 13:11b-12

Expelled from Egypt, Abram returned to Canaan with his wife and his nephew, along with all their servants and possessions. Pharaoh evidently had let Abram keep the possessions he had brought to Egypt as well as those he had accumulated while there. Abram was now a rich man. The Lord had blessed him materially despite his moral failure in lying about his wife.

Though rich, Abram had no fixed home. He was still a nomad; he let

his animals graze here and there. For a while, Abram lived in the Negev. After that, he worked his way northward to one of his earlier campsites—a spot between Bethel and Ai. Here, a year or more before, Abram had built an altar to the Lord (12:8). As before, Abram worshiped the Lord at this place.

Apparently Abram had bounced back from his failure of faith in Egypt.

Like Abram, believers today make mistakes and sin against the Lord. We must follow his example, as well, by coming back to the Savior to seek forgiveness and a restoration of our relationship with Him.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I need to come back to the Lord at this time?

Abram's nephew Lot had been blessed materially too. He had his own flocks and herds and tents. But his increased wealth created a problem. The land could not support two large collections of livestock in addition to the flocks and herds of the more established residents of the land, the Canaanites and Perizzites. Inevitably, quarreling broke out between the servants of Lot and the servants of Abram over the limited water and grazing.

The quarreling disturbed Abram. He didn't want economic competition to damage his relationship with his nephew. He knew that if the two of them stayed together, and if their flocks and herds continued to grow, the friction between the two groups would only increase. So Abram decided that the two of them



The Plain of the **JORDAN**

When Abram offered Lot his pick of land, Lot chose the "plain of the Jordan toward Zoar" (Gen. 13:10). Some scholars believe this plain was the Jordan River Valley north of the Salt Sea (now called the Dead Sea). But other scholars believe this plain was the area eventually covered by the shallow southern end of the Dead Sea.

Some archaeologists believe that in earlier times, the Salt Sea was smaller than it became later. Archaeologists working in areas of Jordan near the southern end of the Dead Sea have found the ruins of culturally advanced towns dating from Abram's era.

would have to part ways. There was enough land for both if they were separated. Although Abram undoubtedly would miss his nephew, it was better to part with good feelings now than to part with hard feelings later on.

Living closely together, the members of any family are apt to get on each other's nerves and have run-ins from time to time. Yet family bonds are precious. It is worth just about any sacrifice we have to make to preserve good relations with our family members.

Ask Yourself . . . How can I help settle conflicts in my family, or prevent conflicts from happening?

Abram approached Lot with his solution to their problem. Abram was the elder of the two; he was the one God had called to Canaan. Consequently, he could have insisted on taking the pick of the land for himself. But instead, Abram generously offered the first choice to Lot.

Lot accepted Abram's offer. He chose the "plain of the Jordan toward Zoar" (v. 10). This could have been the area that later was covered by the southern end of the Dead Sea. Genesis calls this place "well watered" and compares it to Egypt, parts of which were lush with vegetation because of irrigation, and to the Garden of Eden. To Lot, the plain of the Jordan looked like the ideal place for an up-and-coming rancher.

Acting on his decision, Lot headed off and pitched his tent near Sodom. Once Lot discovered the

exceeding wickedness of this town, he could have left. No one was keeping him there, but he decided to stay. It was a mistake he would pay for dearly.

Ask Yourself . . . How careful am I in considering the implications of the choices I make?

Once Lot had left, God appeared again to Abram. The patriarch remained in the land of Canaan. So the Lord used this opportunity to repeat His promise that Abram's descendants would one day possess the whole of Canaan. An implication of this was that Abram should continue living in Canaan.

The Lord also assured Abram that his offspring would be "like the dust of the earth" in number (v. 16). That was quite a promise for a man who was over 75 and had no children. In later chapters of Genesis, the question of when Abram would have children comes to the fore.

The Lord invited Abram to walk through the land his descendants would occupy. Abram was to inspect the property that, in a sense, he already possessed—through God's promise.

Presumably, Abram did this. Then he settled for a while at Hebron. Nearby was the town of Mamre, whose "great trees" (v. 18) were probably used in Canaanite worship. Near this center of false worship, then, Abram offered sacrifices to the true God.

Genesis 14 in Brief

Genesis 14 reveals the first unfortunate consequences of Lot's decision to move to Sodom. When powerful armies from the east defeated the cities of the plain, Lot was captured. Abram, however, was able to defeat the enemy and rescue Lot, along with all the other people and the goods taken from the cities of the plain.

After the battle, Abram received two offers from two kings. Abram accepted food and a blessing from the priest-king of Salem, to whom he paid a tithe. But Abram refused the king of Sodom's offer to keep the recovered possessions (not wanting anyone but God to get the glory).

5

God Makes a Covenant with Abraham

Genesis 15:1–18:15

a

Abram Believes God's Promise (15:1–6)

Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.
—Genesis 15:6

Abram was approaching the age of 85. He had gotten involved in regional politics and had tipped the balance of power. He may have begun to worry about whether he would survive much longer and have offspring, as God had promised (12:2, 7; 13:15–16).

Abram needed comforting. So God came to him in a vision at night and told him not to be afraid. Furthermore, God made two claims about what He meant to Abram. First, God said He was Abram's "shield" (15:1). God was going to protect the man He had called to Canaan. Second, God said He was Abram's "very great reward." Abram had accumulated worldly wealth, but God was his real source of blessing.

After such a message, Abram dared to complain. How can You be my very great reward if I remain

childless? Abram asked (see vv. 2–3). In that day, the desire to have children—especially sons—was great. With no clear understanding of immortality, people believed that children provided the opportunity for a kind of earthly immortality. A son could carry on his father's name and take over the family's possessions. Abram was expecting that he would have to leave his estate to a favored servant, Eliezer of Damascus, rather than to a son of his own.

God did not go along with Abram's plan to make Eliezer his heir. Instead, God affirmed that a son of Abram's not yet born would become the patriarch's heir.

But that was not all. While Abram was looking ahead just one generation, God saw the whole future and knew about the multitude of people who would call Abram father. So in a dramatic move, God led Abram out of the tent and beckoned him to look upward at the Palestinian sky. Let's remember that this was an age before electric lights. On a clear night, the stars shone brilliantly against the blackness of space; thousands upon thousands

Clay Tablets at NUZI

Between 1925 and 1941, more than 4,000 clay tablets were discovered among the ruins of Nuzi, near the modern city of Kirkuk in Iraq. These tablets provide fascinating glimpses into everyday life at the time of the patriarchs.

Some of the tablets reveal that in Nuzi it was customary for a childless man to adopt someone to carry on his name and inherit his property. That's just what Abram planned to do with Eliezer of Damascus before Isaac was born (Gen. 15:2).



One of the informative clay tablets found at Nuzi in northern Mesopotamia.

of points of light were visible in the heavens. "So shall your offspring be," declared the Lord to Abram (v. 5).

At this, something happened in Abram's heart. Previously doubtful

about having a child, Abram finally believed the Lord's promise.

The text says Abram's faith was "credited . . . to him as righteousness" (v. 6). The apostle Paul used those words as evidence that righteousness comes through faith and not through obedience to the law of Moses (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6). Abram, therefore, is the father—that is, the spiritual ancestor—of all who believe (Gal. 3:7).

It's a perennial temptation to think we have to earn God's approval. We tend to think, "If only I try a little harder, He'll accept me because of my goodness." But in reality, there has always been only one way to feel the smile of God's favor on us. That way is by putting our faith in Jesus Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I trusting in Jesus—and in nothing else—for salvation?

b God Makes a Covenant with Abram (15:7–21)

The LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates." —Genesis 15:18

God's covenant with Abram had two main provisions: descendants and land. With the matter of the heir settled, God reminded Abram of His promise of the land to which God had called him. The people as numerous as the stars would need a place to live, and that place was the land of Canaan.

Abram asked how he could be sure he would receive the land. Probably we should not take this as a sign of weakened faith on his part. Abram just wanted some kind of pledge of God's intention.

Graciously, God was willing to give Abram the reassurance he sought. God chose to copy a common practice of that time used to confirm covenants. He is always eager for His truths to be presented in ways that people can understand.

In Abram's day, covenants were accompanied by confirming and binding oaths. The parties to a covenant would agree to certain punishments if they were to fail in their responsibilities as spelled out by the covenant. These oaths were represented by a symbolic passage through death. By walking between the parts of dead animals, the parties to the covenant symbolically said, "May I die like these animals if I am untrue to the covenant."

At God's instruction, Abram gathered animals and split the larger ones in two. He laid them on the ground, forming a corridor between the animal parts. Then Abram waited till the end of the day, driving away birds when necessary.

Early in the evening, as Abram slept enveloped in thick darkness, the Lord spoke to him. Since Abram would not live long enough to see how his descendants would possess the land, God explained what would happen. He foretold the Hebrews' sojourn in Egypt, the Exodus, and the conquest of the Promised Land. Abram himself, however, would die in peace at an old age.

God's mention of the "sin of the Amorites" in His prediction (v. 16) gives us some clues as to how His providence works. The Hebrews' conquest of the Promised Land would have a secondary purpose in punishing the Amorites (standing for all the sinful residents of Canaan). Archaeologists have shown that the people of Canaan were involved in such evil practices as child sacrifice, idolatry, religious prostitution, and divination. Yet God was patient with them and would not judge them until the proper time came. This shows that while God weaves together strands of purpose in a fabric too complicated for us to fully understand, His actions are rich in mercy.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I trust God to work things out in the right way at the right time?

At the conclusion of God's predictive speech to Abram, God enacted the ceremony for which Abram had prepared. The Lord's holy presence, symbolized by a smoking firepot and a blazing torch, passed between the animal

pieces. The covenant was now legally binding. God had ratified His intention to fulfill all His promises to Abram.

In human covenants, both parties to a covenant usually passed between the dead animals. But in this case, only the Lord did so. That's because God's promises were unconditional. Since the fulfillment of the promise depended

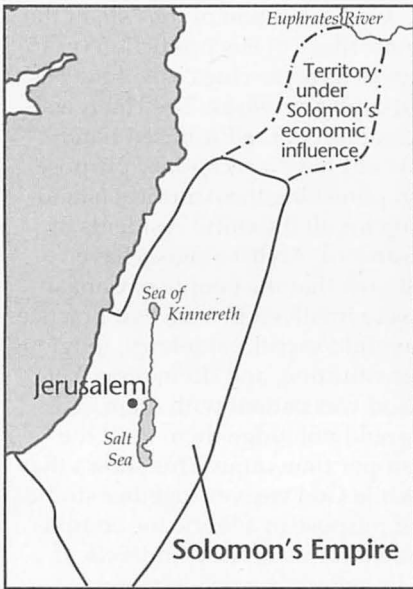
the river of Egypt (probably one of the seasonal rivers in the Negev) in the south to the Euphrates River in the north. At that time, this land was occupied by at least ten different people groups.

Genesis 16 in Brief

Genesis 16 describes how Abram and Sarai sought to produce an heir following a custom of their time. Sarai gave Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, to Abram as a concubine. Hagar became pregnant with Abram's child.

A dispute soon erupted between the two women. Sarai made life difficult for Hagar, causing her to run away.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar, telling her to return to Sarai. The angel also told Hagar about her future son, Ishmael, promising that Ishmael's descendants would be numerous.



According to some scholars, during the reign of Solomon, the Israelites occupied or dominated all the land promised to Abram. Other scholars also see a future fulfillment.

C God Requires a Covenant Sign (17:1–14)

"You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you."

—Genesis 17:11

on the Lord alone, Abram was merely a spectator.

God defined the extent of the land He would give. It lay between

Thirteen years had passed since the birth of Ishmael. Abram was now 99 years old. He still did not have the son promised to him by

the Lord. By this time, he thought Ishmael would be his heir.

Now the Lord appeared again to Abram to reaffirm the covenant and confirm it with name changes and the sign of circumcision. But first the Lord encouraged Abram to walk before Him and “be blameless” (v. 1). This suggests that apart from a context of spirituality and morality, circumcision would be a meaningless rite.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I set high enough goals for my own morality?

As Abram lay in the facedown posture of humility, God changed his name from Abram, which means “exalted father,” to Abraham, which means “father of many.” This change was appropriate because Abraham would be the father of multitudes through his yet-to-be-born son.

Once again God listed the provisions of the covenant: Abraham would have many descendants, who would possess the land of Canaan. God wound up this recital with the promise “I will be their God” (v. 8). The close relationship between God and Abraham would be mirrored by the relationship between God and Abraham’s descendants.

Previously, Abraham requested a sign confirming the covenant, and God had responded by sending a firepot and a blazing torch through the pieces of animals. This time, however, God asked for a sign. He told Abraham to be circumcised and to circumcise all the males of

his household. This practice was to be repeated on all Abraham’s male descendants as well as others in the covenant community.

Circumcision was not unknown at that time. In fact, anthropologists tell us that tribes in America, Africa, and Australia practiced circumcision from earliest times. In Abraham’s day some Egyptians and perhaps others in the Near East practiced circumcision. But for Abraham’s household, circumcision was new and represented the covenant.

Like the dead animal ceremony, circumcision represented an oath affirming the covenant. Circumcision meant, “May I be cut off like my foreskin if I am untrue to the covenant.” The cutting of circumcision and the splitting of animals both reflected the literal meaning of the phrase for “to make a covenant,” which is “to cut a covenant.”

Much later, some Jewish rabbis put too much emphasis on circumcision. Some early Jewish Christians disrupted the church because of the practice. But properly understood and practiced, circumcision was a meaningful sign of the covenant.



God Promises a Son to Abraham (17:15–27)

God said, “Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlast-

ing covenant for his descendants after him.” —Genesis 17:19

Abraham was not the only one to get a name change. The Lord changed his wife’s name too, from *Sarai*, which means “my princess,” to *Sarah*, which means “a princess.” The change emphasizes Sarah’s role as the ancestress of royal figures.

When Abraham heard God say that Sarah would bear a son, he laughed. He believed that God would give him offspring, but he certainly didn’t think the descendants would come through a son of Sarah’s. He and she were both too old for children. A birth now seemed ridiculous.

Abraham thought he had worked out a way for God’s promises to be fulfilled: Ishmael would be his heir. So Abraham suggested this option to God. “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” (v. 18).

The Lord was prepared to bless Ishmael, the son whom Abraham had gotten out of impatience with God’s delay. Ishmael, like his father, would become the head of a great nation. This nation would have twelve rulers (v. 20; see 25:16).

But none of this changed God’s intention for Sarah soon to have a son, who would help fulfill the promises of the covenant. The Lord told Abraham to name his son Isaac, which means “he laughs.” This name was appropriate because it commemorated Abraham’s laughter at the news about Sarah’s imminent pregnancy. But the name was appropriate also because Sarah

would laugh in a similar situation (18:12), and Isaac’s birth would bring about the laughter of joy (21:6).

Abraham responded to the Lord’s speech by immediately obeying God in the matter of circumcision. That same day Abraham, Ishmael, and all other males in their household were circumcised.

Sometimes we take a wrong turn in life, as Abraham did when he decided to produce an heir on his own. But once we learn about our mistake, we cannot be too quick to reverse direction and begin obeying God with a better understanding. He is always pleased to accept those who repent and turn toward Him.

Ask Yourself . . . Have I been hesitating about making a needed change in my life?

Abraham Entertains Three Visitors (18:1–15)

[The LORD] said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” —Genesis 18:10

Not long after the males in Abraham’s household had been circumcised, Abraham had three unexpected visitors. The visitors looked like men, but in fact two of them were angels, while the third was called “the LORD” (v. 1). This

third figure may actually have been God in human form, or may have been an angel who in some special sense represented God. Abraham likely did not at first guess the heavenly nature of the three “men” who appeared at his tent (see Heb. 13:2).

The three figures arrived “in the heat of the day” (Gen. 18:1), or at midday, when people traditionally rested and waited for the sun to go down. Perhaps God chose this time for the arrival to test Abraham’s willingness to welcome guests, even though they had come at an inconvenient time. Hospitality was (and still is) a much-prized virtue in the Near East.

If the timing of the visit was a test, Abraham acquitted himself admirably. Despite the heat, he hurried to meet his guests’ needs, and made sure his wife and servants hurried too. He showed respect and welcome by bowing low to the visitors. He begged them to stay with him. He washed their feet and offered them a seat. He provided food in great variety, quality, and quantity. He declined to be seated until the visitors had finished their meal.

Abraham’s example shows us that a home can be a place of ministry to others. With the modern proliferation of motels and restaurants, the need for hospitality in the home may have diminished. Still, sometimes we should open our doors to strangers and friends in Jesus’ name.

Ask Yourself . . . Should I plan a get-together in my home? Whom could I invite?

The meal prepared by Abraham’s household was served outside, beneath a tree. In keeping with tradition at that time, the woman of the household, Sarah, kept out of sight. She stayed inside the tent, but was able to hear the talk outside.

Sarah must have been surprised to hear herself mentioned in the conversation. Using her name, the visitors asked about her whereabouts. If (as it appears) Abraham had not yet mentioned his wife’s name before the visitors, this may have been the first clue that the “men” were out of the ordinary. The next clue came when the Lord prophesied that Sarah would have given birth to a son by the time He returned to the household in one year’s time.

Sarah heard the prediction and laughed to herself. Either Abraham had not told Sarah yet about the birth God had promised, or else she had not believed him. She was about 89 at this time and had never given birth. Her husband was 99. The idea of the two of them having a child struck Sarah as funny.

Apparently, Sarah kept her laughter and her thoughts to herself. Those outside the tent heard nothing from her. Yet the Lord revealed that He knew what was going on in Sarah’s mind. Thus He let out another clue to His divine nature.

Sarah had long ago given up hope of having a child. The idea of

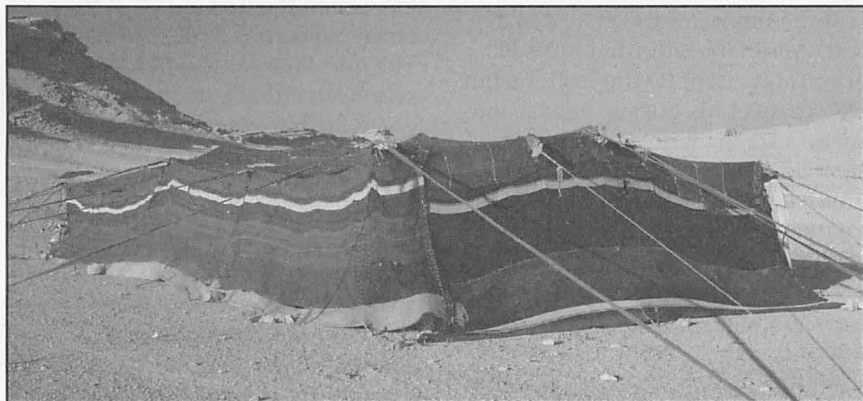
it seemed impossible. But with the Lord, all things are possible. The Lord repeated His prediction that within a year Sarah would give birth.

Many times we find ourselves in trying situations where we find it difficult to trust the Lord. If we look at the circumstances, our problem seems insoluble. But, like Sarah, we must learn to look at what our powerful Lord can do. He can see us through even "impossible" experiences.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I keeping my eyes on the Lord, who is able to help me?

For Sarah, there was no longer a point in hiding. The Lord knew she was there. Afraid of Him, she lied about laughing. But the Lord insisted on truth, as He always does.

This was not the end of the visit the Lord and the two angels made to earth. They had accomplished one of the purposes of their visit: to renew God's promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah. But they had one other purpose, involving a judgment on some wicked cities.



Abraham's tent may have looked something like this modern tent belonging to Bedouin (nomadic Arabs).



God Destroys the Cities of the Plain

Genesis 18:16–20:18

a God Informs Abraham of the Coming Judgment (18:16–33)

The LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

—Genesis 18:20–21

According to Isaiah 41:8, the Lord considered Abraham His friend. The discussion that went on between the two concerning the impending judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah confirms the closeness of their relationship. God told Abraham what He was planning to do. Abraham, for his part, interceded on behalf of the people of the plain.

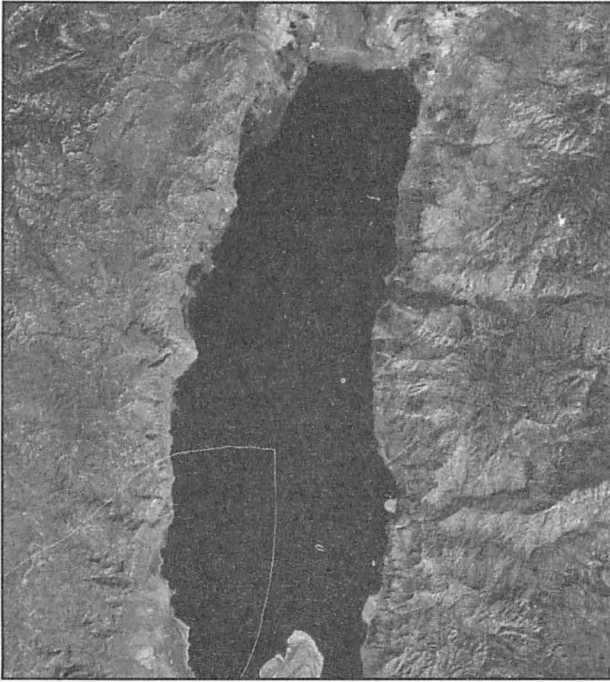
As we saw in Lesson 5, Abraham had three visitors at his tent in Hebron. During the course of a meal, it became obvious that the three were not mere men. If Abraham did not know at first, he soon discovered that two of his guests were angels and the third was an even greater figure called the Lord.

As the three heavenly figures walked with Abraham in the direction of the plain of the Jordan, the Lord debated with Himself over whether He ought to let Abraham in on His plan of judgment against the cities of the plain of the Jordan. The Lord took into consideration Abraham's position as head of a future nation. Possibly the opportunity for the coming judgment to become an instructive example for future generations of people influenced God's decision to tell Abraham of the plan (see Jude 7).

Ask Yourself . . . How can I help teach others to "keep the way of the LORD" (Gen. 18:19)?

The Lord began His revelation to Abraham by saying that He had heard the "outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah" (v. 20). He may have meant He had heard the outcry of innocent people against the wicked cities. Or He may have meant the wickedness of the cities impressed itself on His awareness, just as the blood of Abel had cried out from the ground.

Through His angels, God intended to test the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. Of course, the all-



The Dead Sea area, where Sodom and Gomorrah are thought to have been located.

knowing Lord already knew the extent of wickedness in those cities. But by sending the angels there, He would prove that destruction was justified, because He had given the people a chance to show goodness. In fact, as we'll see, the visit of the angels to Sodom touched off an outbreak of evil that by itself was sufficient evidence of the city's ripeness for judgment. Furthermore, the angels' visit to Sodom allowed some of Abraham's relatives to escape.

When the angels departed for Sodom, Abraham and the Lord were left alone in the hills high above the

plain of the Jordan. The possibility of destruction coming to people and places he knew disturbed Abraham. While God's judgment is always just and right, it is never an easy thing to contemplate.

Earlier, Abraham had intervened on behalf of the cities of the plain when he successfully pursued and defeated their conquerors from the east. Now he intervened for them in another way. With a combination of coaxing, flattery, and humility, Abraham bargained with God

for the conditions that would prevent the cities' destruction. Finally, Abraham got God to agree that if ten righteous people were found in Sodom, He would withhold judgment from the cities.

In Abraham's bargaining with God, we see his concern for others as well as his willingness to speak with the Lord on their behalf. People all around us are experiencing hardships and times of despair. Are we concerned? Do we intercede for them? If we see a problem, we need not wait for a request from them to begin praying.

Ask Yourself . . . What hurting people do I know? Have I taken the time lately to remember them and their needs before the Lord?

The Middle East has a long tradition of haggling over prices at markets. Some commentators have seen in Abraham's conversation with God a kind of high-stakes haggling. That may have been how Abraham saw it too. But from God's perspective, something more was going on. God was not being coaxed into behaving any more mercifully than He already intended. He was just giving Abraham a role in His plan for judgment.

God is gracious and merciful. Ezekiel 33:11 says, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." In his bargaining, Abraham appealed to God's preexisting willingness to avert judgment if possible.

Some critics attempt to separate the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament. But the Lord's conversation with Abraham argues against that attempt. Here in Genesis is the same God described in 2 Peter 3:9 as "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Sadly, however, both testaments describe situations in which people's refusal to repent makes judgment necessary.



Angels Visit Lot (19:1-13)

The two men said to Lot. . . "Get [your family] out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it."

—Genesis 19:12-13

When the angels arrived in Sodom, Lot was seated by the gate of the city. In ancient times, judges and people with authority often sat at the city gate. There they could observe passersby and render judicial or political decisions as needed. Lot apparently had risen to a place of prominence in Sodom. Perhaps his relationship with Abraham, who had rescued the city from captivity, enabled him to move up into a responsible position.

Lot displayed as much hospitality to the angelic visitors as Abraham had earlier in the day. And like Abraham, Lot may not have known at first that he was addressing angels (Heb. 13:2). Lot approached the angels and humbly bowed before them. He offered to let them wash up and spend the night in his house.

The angels declined Lot's invitation at first, saying they would sleep in the town square. This made it sound as though they did not want to inconvenience Lot. But in reality they may have been testing the sincerity of Lot's invitation. Was he a righteous man?

Lot knew the dangers of letting

HOSPITALITY PRACTICES

Lot, like his Uncle Abraham, entertained heavenly visitors. In the ancient Near East, hospitality was taken seriously. A guest—whether a friend or a stranger—was treated with the utmost courtesy.

When a person came to another's home, the following traditions were usually observed. First, the host would show respect by bowing to the guest, perhaps even falling at the guest's feet. Then the host would wish his guest peace, and the guest would respond with the same wish. The two would kiss one another's cheeks. Next, the host would invite the guest to remove his shoes and have the dust washed from his feet. Sometimes the host would anoint the guest's head with olive oil, possibly mixed with spices. Finally, the host would offer the guest a drink of water and prepare a meal for him.

unsuspecting men spend the night in a public place, since Sodom was filled with homosexuals who might come after them. After some effort, Lot succeeded in persuading the strangers to come to his house, where he prepared a feast for them. Now Lot must have begun to breathe easier.

The danger was not past, however. Men in the city had observed the visitors going into Lot's house. Later in the evening, a crowd gathered at Lot's door, brazenly demanding Lot to release the strangers to them for sexual abuse.

We live in an age in which homosexuality is promoted by some as an acceptable "alternative lifestyle." The Bible, however, states clearly that the practice of homosexuality is not acceptable to God (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–10).

While homosexual practice is sin, it does not disqualify a person from ever receiving forgiveness. God sent His Son to die for all sinners. We should reach out to homosexuals with the message of forgiveness in Christ.

Ask Yourself . . . Does my attitude toward homosexuals stand in the way of my seeing them as God sees them?

Lot stepped outside his door and tried to address his fellow citizens. Incredibly to us, he offered his two virgin daughters to the Sodomites on the condition that they leave his guests alone. We can only imagine how his daughters must have felt if they heard this!

The rules of ancient hospitality demanded that when a man took in strangers, he was to protect them. Lot was willing even to put his daughters in great danger to protect his guests. Apparently Lot's value system suggested to him that this course of action was acceptable.

Both Abraham and Lot followed customs of their day, and were often led astray by them. That reveals for us the need to evaluate our actions in the light of God's Word. For instance, there's a prevailing attitude in society that we should do everything we can to accumulate wealth for ourselves. Yet Scripture says that we need to keep wealth in perspective, and that sometimes we ought to cheerfully give away some of our income (2 Cor. 9:7). Or to take another example, the custom of celebrating special events by getting drunk is a clear violation of the Bible's prohibition on drunkenness (Eph. 5:18).

Obviously, not all present-day customs are wrong, but we must not mindlessly follow the crowd. We should learn to evaluate our behavior by the standards of Scripture.

Ask Yourself . . . How often do I stop to consider whether my actions conform to the principles of God's Word?

Lot's offer only heightened the intensity of the crowd at his door. They criticized Lot as a stranger who tried to be their judge. Having a spot in the city gate, Lot may have thought he was accepted and influential in the city. But the Sodomites knew he was different from them, and they thoroughly rejected him. They threatened Lot and pressed upon him at the door.

The angels intervened to save Lot. They pulled him back inside and blinded the men at the doorway (probably temporarily). The men tried to find Lot's door, but were unable to do so.

By this time, Lot must have recognized that his visitors were more than men. He listened as the angels informed him of their mission: they were going to destroy Sodom at God's orders. The angels strongly encouraged Lot to get his entire family out of town.

C Lot and His Family Flee Sodom (19:14–29)

When God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived.

—Genesis 19:29

To his credit, Lot believed the angels and took action. He visited the men engaged to marry his daughters and told them what

the angels had said, but those men would not believe him. They thought he was joking. Who wants to believe disaster is just around the corner?

We don't know if Lot tried to warn others besides his prospective sons-in-law. But if he did, he failed to convince them. He would leave Sodom with only his wife and two daughters.

It's sad to think that Lot was able to influence not one inhabitant of Sodom in the direction of righteousness. Whatever credibility he had once had, he had lost.

Ask Yourself . . . When might involvement with sinners be more dangerous for me than it's worth?

The catastrophe was scheduled for early morning. As dawn arrived, Lot and his family were still in their home. The angels informed Lot that there was no more time to wait.

Lot "hesitated" (v. 16). Why? Like his prospective sons-in-law, did he too have trouble believing in the reality of the coming judgment? Was he unwilling to leave behind friends and family? Or was he so attached to his possessions that he couldn't tear himself away?

The angels had to literally pull Lot and his wife and daughters away from the city. It was a rescue by compulsion. From Genesis 19, we can see that none of the four was a model of virtue, but "the LORD was merciful to them" (v. 16).

One of the angels gave Lot and his family their orders. They were to flee to the mountains without

stopping or looking back.

Lot objected. Apparently he didn't feel up to a dash for the mountains, which may have been at a considerable distance. He asked, instead, to be allowed to go to the nearby town of Zoar. He pointed out that Zoar was small, implying that it wouldn't matter much if God spared it, sparing Lot at the same time. Lot's manner in addressing his request to the angels reveals that he was now sensitive to God's kindness in saving him.

The angels, on God's behalf, graciously granted Lot's request, only urging Lot to make his way to Zoar in a hurry.

As Lot reached his destination, God destroyed the cities of the plain, including both the people and the vegetation. In all, the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim were destroyed (Deut. 29:23). Zoar, the fifth city of the plain, was spared, just as the angel had promised.

God's judgment fell mightily, raining burning sulfur on the cities. Many believe that God caused a great earthquake in which gases and asphalt escaped from underground, ignited, and fell to the earth. There's no conclusive evidence for that view. But even if that's what happened, it does not take away from the supernatural aspect of the event. The timing of the calamity, as well as the sparing of Zoar, demonstrated God's control over nature. The destruction was an intervention by God.

Amid the general catastrophe,

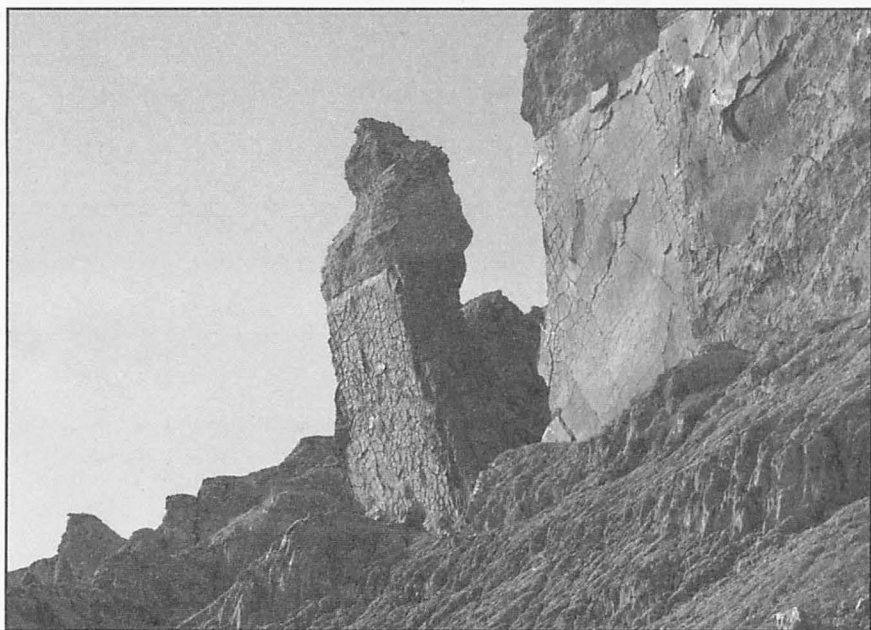
Lot experienced a personal tragedy. His wife disobeyed the angel's command not to look back. Curiosity about what was going on behind her back was too much for her, and she turned around. For her disobedience, "she became a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:26). This perhaps means that she was covered by minerals falling from the sky.

Lot's wife's end was horrible, yet she serves as a useful warning to those who have trouble separating themselves from the things of the world. As Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks

back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). For Christians, the way leads forward.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I ever return to things God has called me away from?

From Hebron, Abraham watched the dense smoke rising from the plain. It takes only a little imagination to picture the tears in his eyes. His bargaining had done no good — even ten righteous people could not be found. But though Abraham may not immediately have known it, his beloved nephew Lot was safe.



Salt formations in the Dead Sea. Since the Dead Sea has no outlet, it has dense concentration of minerals. The salt formations remind us of how Lot's wife "became a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:26).

Genesis 19:30–20:18 in Brief

According to Genesis 19:30–38, Lot's two daughters, both of whom had lost their fiances in the destruction of Sodom, settled on a plan to preserve their family line. On separate nights, each got her father to drink wine and have sexual relations with her.

Both of Lot's daughters had sons by their father. The Moabites and Ammonites descended from those two sons.

In Genesis 20, we see Abraham repeating a sin he had committed

earlier (12:10–20). After moving into the Negev, Abraham again identified Sarah as his sister in order to protect himself. Abimelech, the king of Gerar, took Sarah into his harem.

Before long, God warned Abimelech to return Sarah to Abraham. For a second time, Abraham found himself reprimanded by a pagan king for lying. But then Abimelech gave Abraham benefits and cleared Sarah's name.

The stage was now set for the long-awaited birth of Abraham and Sarah's son.

7

God Fulfills His Promise to Abraham

Genesis 21:1–25:18

Genesis 21 in Brief

As promised, Abraham and Sarah did indeed have a son of their own. At the age of 90, Sarah gave birth to a boy whom her husband named Isaac. Abraham, who was 100 years old, circumcised Isaac in obedience to the Lord.

Later, at the feast celebrating Isaac's weaning, Sarah caught Ishmael mocking Isaac. Speaking to her husband, Sarah insisted that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. God assured Abraham that He would make Ishmael into a great nation. This was as much as saying that Abraham could send his older son away in good conscience.

After leaving Abraham's household, Hagar and Ishmael began to suffer from thirst. But then when hope was almost gone, the Lord provided water and told Hagar what He had earlier told Abraham about Ishmael's future.

About the same time, the Philistine king Abimelech established a treaty with Abraham for peaceful coexistence. Abraham stayed on at the treaty-making site, Beersheba, in southern Canaan.

a God Commands Abraham to Sacrifice Isaac (22:1–8)

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, who you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

—Genesis 22:1–2

The Lord often tests the faith of His followers. Although He does not tempt us to do evil (Jas. 1:13), He does allow trials to come into our lives for various reasons, including to prove the authenticity of our faith (1 Pet. 1:6–7). In our present text we see how God tested the faith of Abraham. The Lord required him to demonstrate confidence in the promises of the covenant.

Abraham's test could hardly have been more severe. The Lord began His instructions to Abraham by emphasizing the unique place Isaac occupied in his life as his only son by Sarah. Abraham loved Isaac, and

yet God called upon Abraham to sacrifice his son.

How contradictory that command must have sounded to Abraham! It must have seemed inconsistent with everything God had promised him. How could he slay the one through whom, according to God's own word, the promises of the covenant would be fulfilled?

Yet the command from God was clear. Although Abraham did not know what was ahead for him, he chose to obey God and take Isaac to

the region of Moriah to offer the boy as a sacrifice.

Abraham's prompt obedience to the Lord's command provides us with a challenge. How long does it take us to put into practice the teachings of God's Word? There may be times when, from our perspective, obedience to Scripture seems contradictory to what we believe is the best path for us to follow. But God still expects us to obey His Word without delay.

Why Go to Moriah?

When Abraham got the command to sacrifice his son, he was living in Beersheba, at the southernmost point of the Promised Land (Gen. 21:33-34). Genesis 22 does not tell us where the "region of Moriah" (v. 2) is, but it does say that Abraham traveled three days to get there (v. 4). That's about how long it would have taken him to travel from Beersheba to the vicinity of what is now Jerusalem. And in fact, according to 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon built the temple on Mount Moriah. Thus the spot (approximately, at least) where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son became the place where for hundreds of years of his descendants would sacrifice animals. And it was the place where his greatest descendant, Jesus Christ, would become the all-sufficient sacrifice. At Moriah God spared Abraham's son but not His own.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I refusing to obey the Lord in some area of my life? Has it become a test of my faith?

As the travelers came closer to the appointed place, Abraham left his servants behind and proceeded with Isaac alone. Abraham displayed confidence in God by telling his servants that he and the boy would both return. Although he still intended to obey God, Abraham believed the Lord would raise his son from the dead (see Heb. 11:19). Abraham was confident that God would do whatever was necessary to fulfill His covenant promises through Isaac.

Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice (remarkably like Christ would later carry the wooden beam of His cross), while Abraham carried some coals to ignite the fire and a knife to kill the sacrifice. But those items were not all that were needed to make a burnt offering. Isaac noticed this and asked about the lamb that was traditionally used for a sacrifice. Where was it? Abraham replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (Gen. 22:8).

For the moment, Abraham’s confident response must have encouraged his son. Both of them knew that their trust in God would not be disappointed. Their attention was focused on God’s character. He is the great provider, even when we seem to have no hope.



God Substitutes a Ram for Isaac (22:9–19)

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

—Genesis 22:13

Abraham knew no other plan than to proceed with the sacrifice. He built the altar on the site God had designated.

We should not think of Isaac as a small boy at the time of the sacrifice. The Hebrew word for “boy” (v. 12) can refer to a man old enough to serve in the military. Many commentators believe that Isaac was in his late teens or early twenties when he was taken to Mount Moriah. He was able to carry the wood to the appointed place.

From all appearances, Isaac quietly and willingly went along with the sacrifice. By now he knew the promises regarding him and his descendants. He realized that he was the only one in line to transmit the great covenant blessings. His obedience to Abraham as he prepared for the sacrifice reveals Isaac’s confidence in God. Like his father, he believed God in spite of what seemed about to happen. Some regard this as Isaac’s finest hour.

Just as Abraham was about to plunge the knife into Isaac, the angel of the Lord called down from heaven to stop him. Abraham had made

the decision to sacrifice his son; he had passed the test. It was not necessary for him to actually kill the boy.

After the Lord told him to stop, Abraham saw a ram caught by

its horns in a nearby thicket. He sacrificed this God-provided ram “instead of his son” (v. 13).

Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin

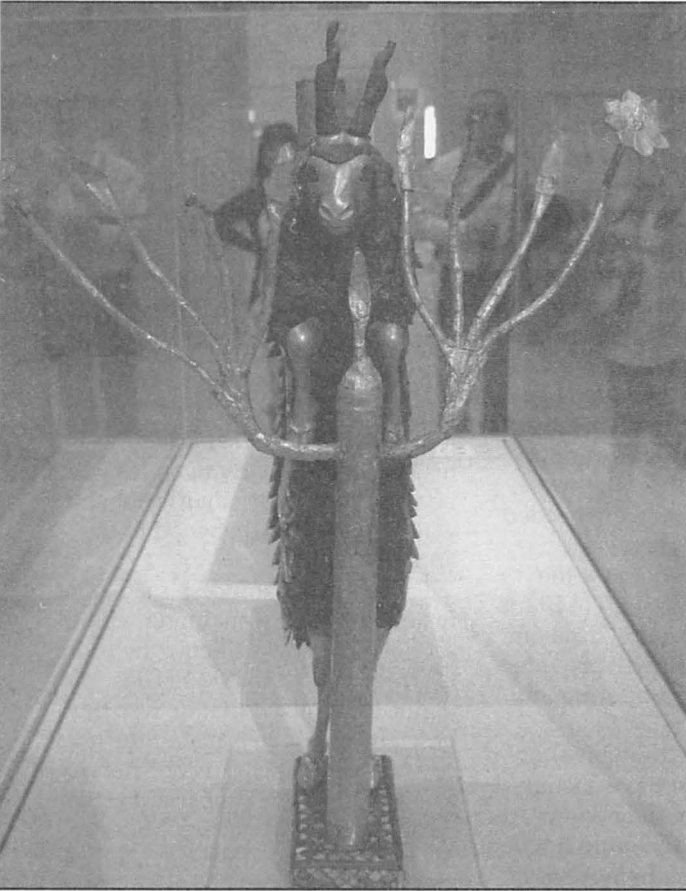
[Christ] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Just as the ram took the place of Isaac, the Lord Jesus took our place on the cross. And because of that, our sins can be forgiven and we can possess the righteousness of God.

Ask Yourself . . . Which people in my acquaintance still need to hear that Jesus died for sinners?

Before the sacrifice, Abraham had told Isaac that God would provide an animal for the offering (Gen.

22:8). And he had been right. So he called the place of the sacrifice “The Lord Will Provide” (v. 14).

Abraham’s obedience demonstrated his confidence in God’s



This figurine, representing a ram caught in a thicket, is one of a pair found in a tomb at Ur. It can remind us of the ram that God sent to take the place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13).

covenant promises. The Lord again called to him from heaven with a resounding confirmation of those promises. He emphasized the blessings ahead for Abraham and the numerous descendants who would come from him. God was clearly pleased with Abraham's obedience.

With his son safe and with the reaffirmation of the covenant ringing in his ears, Abraham must have returned home a happy man.

The Lord may be leading us along paths that seem illogical to us. With our limited perspective, we cannot see God's purpose in what He sends our way any more than Abraham could understand why God would call him to sacrifice his son. Nevertheless, we can trust the Lord completely, knowing that He cares for us. And someday we will be able to see all He has accomplished in our lives.

Genesis 22:20–23:20 in Brief

Sometime after the sacrifice, Abraham received news about his brother Nahor and Nahor's family. One of Nahor's sons, Bethuel, had a daughter named Rebekah.

At the age of 127, Sarah died. Abraham made arrangements to bury her in the Promised Land. He bought the cave of Machpelah and the field that went with it. This purchase represented Abraham's first possession of land in Canaan.

C Abraham Sends Out a Servant (24:1–14)

[Abraham] said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will . . . get a wife for my son Isaac."
—Genesis 24:2–4

After the death of Sarah, Abraham was concerned about who Isaac would take for a wife. He did not want Isaac to marry a woman from among their neighbors, the Canaanites. The Canaanites had no clear knowledge of the true and living God. Abraham did not want his descendants corrupted by heathen idolatry.

God Himself would often echo that concern. In the law, God warned that if the Israelites began marrying heathens, they would be tripped up by idolatry (Deut. 7:3–4). But many Israelites did not heed the warning. Even King Solomon allowed his heart to be turned away from God because of the idolatry of his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:4).

The problem confronting Abraham was real, but he had a plan. He called his chief servant to him, commissioning the man to go to his relatives and find a wife for Isaac. The chief servant may have been Eliezer, whom Abraham had earlier sought to adopt as his heir (Gen. 15:2). If so, we can see why Abraham regarded Eliezer so highly. In

the course of his assignment from Abraham, this servant displayed good discernment and trust in God.

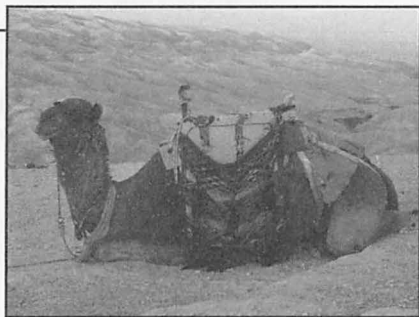
Abraham required his servant to take an oath to ensure that his wishes would be followed with-

out exception. Because of the length of the journey ahead of the servant, Abraham realized that he might die before the servant returned. He wanted to guarantee that his instructions would be followed, no matter what happened to him.

To take the oath, the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham. That "vow of posterity" was a custom designed to guard against any act of disloyalty. It was a solemn way of saying that if the promise was violated, the descendants of Abraham would avenge the broken vow.

The servant worried that the selected woman would not want to travel so far with him to meet Isaac. But Abraham would not let Isaac leave the Promised Land. If the woman refused to travel back to Canaan with the servant, then he would be free from the oath. Abraham assured him that the angel of the Lord would go before him to make his trip successful. So the servant left with a caravan of camels bearing gifts for the future bride.

We are not given any details of



Abraham's servant took a caravan with ten of Abraham's camels to Nahor on his trip to find a wife for Isaac.

the 450-mile journey. The servant went directly to the place where Abraham's relatives lived. The "town of Nahor" (24:10) is either Haran

or another city nearby. There the servant prayed

for a sign to help him find the right woman.

The deep faith of the servant is evident in the account. He trusted the Lord and looked to Him for guidance in completing his mission. Abraham's faith had profoundly influenced the chief servant, who prayed to God as the "God of my master Abraham" (v. 12).

Our faith is not simply a private matter between us and the Lord. It is to be lived out publicly and passed on to others. A life of faith will attract others to the Lord. The faith of the servant tells us that Abraham practiced his faith at home.

Ask Yourself . . . What influence does my faith have on those closest to me?

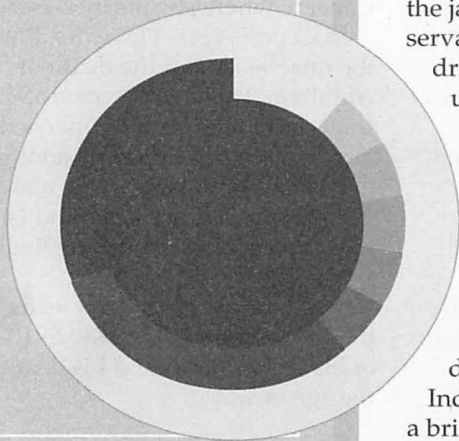
In his prayer, the servant described the conditions he hoped God would fulfill. He did not want to make a mistake. He looked to the Lord to identify just the right woman for Isaac.

He did not have long to wait.

Wells

Wells were an important feature of ancient life. They were often the subject of disputes (Gen. 26:19-22). A town's well became a busy, sociable place as evening approached and the local girls came out to fetch water for their families.

Some wells were wide holes dug down to the water table and encircled with stone steps, which allowed access to the water. This seems to have been the kind of well Rebekah used (24:16).



d The Servant Finds Rebekah (24:15-27)

Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel son of Milkah, who was the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor. —Genesis 24:15

The Lord anticipated the prayer of Abraham's servant. Before the servant had finished making his request for a woman to offer water for him and his camels, the young and beautiful Rebekah was already approaching the well.

The servant had planned to ask a water gatherer to get water for him (v. 14). But Rebekah was too quick for him. Before he could address her, she went down into the walk-in well and filled her jar of her own accord.

When she came back up with the jar on her head or shoulder, the servant met her and asked for a drink. She gave it to him and volunteered to fill the nearby water trough for his camels. Since a thirsty camel needs five gallons of water, and the servant had ten camels with him, Rebekah must have made many trips to the well.

Throughout this passage the willingness of Rebekah to do manual labor is highlighted.

Industry was a desirable quality in a bride at that time; beauty was one thing, but a man needed a wife who would work hard. Rebekah was one

of the first girls out to the well that evening. She performed her tasks quickly, even at a run. And she did not shrink from doing extra work for a visitor.

While Rebekah was drawing water, the servant observed her closely. Then he brought out expensive jewelry, a gold nose ring and two gold bracelets, and put them on her. The nose ring weighed a *beka* (about one-fifth ounce) and the bracelets weighed ten *shekels* (about four ounces total). The gift of jewelry was to thank her and to pay for both the lodging he and his companions needed and for the feed their animals required. Although Rebekah didn't know it at the time, the gift was also a down payment on her bride price.

When Rebekah fulfilled the conditions of his prayer by giving him and his camels water, the servant's hopes must have risen high that he had already found a bride for Isaac. But he did not yet know if she fulfilled the requirement of being a relative of Abraham's. Once she identified herself, he knew that his trip had been a success.

The servant immediately bowed down to worship and thank the Lord. He did not delay in giving praise to God for answering his prayer so quickly.

When God answers our prayers, how do we respond? The Lord may not answer instantly, as He did in the case of Abraham's servant. Sometimes He makes us wait. But He does not forget our needs. And when He grants us our request, we

must be careful to thank Him and give Him the credit He deserves.

Ask Yourself . . . How has God responded to a prayer of mine lately? Have I thanked Him for His answer?

Genesis 24:28–25:18 in Brief

The remainder of Genesis 24 describes the visit of Abraham's servant at Rebekah's home. The servant went into considerable detail in narrating his requests to God and their fulfillment. The Lord had led him to Rebekah.

Rebekah's father, Bethuel, and brother, Laban, agreed that the matter was from God. They decided to let Rebekah go to the promised land with the servant of Abraham, although Laban and Rebekah's mother, Milkah, favored a 10-day delay. Rebekah herself was willing to forgo the delay. She and Abraham's servant traveled back to Canaan, where she married Isaac.

In Genesis 25:1–11, we read about the final years and the death of Abraham. He lived 35 years after Isaac and Rebekah were married. He also had children through another marriage. But finally, at the age of 175, Abraham died. Isaac and Ishmael cooperated in burying their father.

The mention of Ishmael leads to the accounting, in Genesis 25:12–18, of his descendants and his death at the age of 137.

8

Jacob Deceives Esau and Isaac

Genesis 25:19–27:40

a Esau and Jacob Are Born (25:19–26)

When the time came for [Rebekah] to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.

—Genesis 25:24–26

We can be sure that Isaac knew about the covenant concerning him and his descendants. But for a while it looked as though he might not have any descendants. He did not marry until he was 40. Then for many years his wife, Rebekah, bore no children.

As time wore on, Isaac became more and more concerned about

his lack of children. The Lord was testing Isaac's faith as He had previously tested Isaac's father's faith. Many years earlier, Abraham had waited impatiently for Isaac's birth.

The text tells us that Isaac prayed for a son. The Lord responded to this plea. God knew all along what He would do, but He waited to do it in cooperation with the prayers of Isaac.

God gave Isaac not one son but two. Prior to birth, "the babies jostled each other within [their mother Rebekah]" (v. 22). Although it is common for pregnant mothers to

Present-day Beersheba. Abraham and Isaac and their families lived near this spot.



feel their children move about within them, Rebekah sensed that the motion of her children had a special meaning. But she didn't know what the meaning was.

Both Isaac and Rebekah displayed faith by bringing their matters of concern before God. Isaac prayed diligently, and Rebekah sought an answer from the Lord concerning her situation.

God is interested in our problems. He will listen to us. He wants us to bring our worries before Him in prayer (Phil. 4:6).

Ask Yourself . . . What am I anxious about? Have I spent time bringing that concern before my Father in heaven?

The Lord responded to Rebekah's inquiry. The Lord said that just as the babies jostled one another in her womb, so they would be rivals as adults. The two sons within Rebekah would be the fathers of great nations. But contrary to custom, the older would serve the younger. The younger son's people would be the stronger. The younger son would receive the blessings of the covenant.

The importance of the Lord's statement cannot be overemphasized. In His sovereignty, God chose Jacob over Esau (Rom. 9:10–13). Although it would be many years before Jacob displayed maturity in his relationship with God, the characters of Esau and Jacob would eventually confirm the wisdom of the Lord's decision.

The birth of Esau and Jacob was the first biblically recorded birth of

twins. But there was nothing identical about them. They were different in behavior and in appearance.

The name *Esau* probably means "hairy," referring to the fact that he was covered with hair from birth. But he was also called *Edom*, which means "red." That was a reference to his appearance at birth and to the red lentil stew for which he traded his birthright (Gen. 25:30). The nation that came from Esau was named Edom.

The name *Jacob* means "he grasps the heel," a reference to Jacob's position at birth, holding on to Esau's heel. The name also carried the idea of outwitting or deceiving another person. Jacob's life would give new meaning to that idea.



Esau Sells His Birthright (25:27–34)

Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

—Genesis 25:34

Esau became the sportsman of the family. He loved to be outdoors hunting game. He also became the favorite of Isaac, who enjoyed eating the wild game Esau brought him.

Jacob was different from his brother. He enjoyed the quiet life with his mother among the tents, where he evidently became a good chef and shepherd. Rebekah enjoyed

the company of Jacob over that of Esau.

The displays of favoritism by the parents caused a great many problems in the home. It deepened the rivalry between the brothers, and eventually broke the family apart.

The sad results of the partiality in Isaac's family serve as a warning to parents today. Human nature has not changed since the time of Isaac and

Rebekah. It is easy to play favorites with children, and the resulting strife from such actions still occurs today. Favoritism is usually a guarantee of trouble.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I fair in my dealings with the members of my family?

One day Esau came in from the fields feeling ravenous. He saw that Jacob was cooking lentil stew, and demanded that supper be served immediately. He thought his hunger would not wait.

Jacob was willing to give his brother the stew, but only if Esau would accept it as the price for his birthright. No doubt Jacob had heard that "the older will serve the younger" (v. 23). Jacob was ready for this prophecy to come true; he wanted to secure the birthright.

According to custom, the oldest son enjoyed special privileges even while his father was still alive. He took precedence over all his brothers. At the father's death, the birthright entitled him to a double portion of the inheritance as well as superiority over the rest of the family. In Isaac's family, the birthright also

The lentil is an annual plant bearing white and violet flowers. These are followed by small flat pods holding the lentils, which are the size of a small pea. Through boiling, lentils can be made into a soup or stew.

included the promises of Abraham's covenant made by God.

Foolishly, Esau confirmed the sale of his birthright. If he had been patient, someone would have fed him. It is difficult to believe that he was really close to death from starvation. And later, he demonstrated his ability to prepare a meal (27:31).

In Hebrews 12:16 we read, "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son." The writer of Hebrews attached spiritual significance to Esau's giving up of the birthright. God regarded the sale as a valid transaction.

If Esau had valued the great covenant blessings given to Abraham and Isaac, he would not have considered selling his birthright under any circumstances. Although there were material benefits to the covenant, the promises revolved mainly around God's redemptive program. We can assume that Jacob wanted to be a part of that; he desired a place in God's plan to bless the whole world. But Esau had little regard for God's work.

The incident of Esau and Jacob gives us the opportunity to examine our values. Are we driven by our appetites? Or does the prospect of knowing God in a closer and more personal way motivate our hearts and lives?

Ask Yourself . . . What is the driving force in my life? Do I seek God's kingdom first?

Genesis 26 in Brief

Isaac is overshadowed in Genesis by his father, Abraham, and his son Jacob. But in Genesis 26, we read about one period in Isaac's life.

A famine struck. Isaac moved his clan to the Philistine town of Gerar. Evidently, he was planning to keep going all the way to Egypt, but the Lord told him to stay where he was. The Lord also reviewed the covenant blessings.

While in Gerar, Isaac became involved with the Philistine king in a conflict over Isaac's wife, Rebekah. Nevertheless, Isaac grew wealthy in Gerar. For this reason, Isaac was forced to move back to the vicinity of Beersheba. There he built an altar to the Lord and reestablished peaceful relations with the Philistines.

C Rebekah Schemes for Jacob (27:1–17)

"Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies."

—Genesis 27:8–10

Old and expecting death, Isaac decided to bless Esau. This blessing would seal the birthright.

Isaac had at least three good reasons not to bless Esau. First,

the Lord had earlier indicated that Jacob was to receive the blessing (25:23). Second, Isaac probably knew about Esau's frivolous sale of his birthright (25:33–34). Third, Esau had shown his lack of concern for spiritual matters by marrying Canaanite women (26:34–35).

Isaac was also mistaken about the closeness of his death. He was about 137 years old at this time. Perhaps because his half-brother Ishmael had died at 137 (25:17), Isaac thought his time must also be drawing near. But Isaac would live another 43 years.

Despite his mistakes, Isaac intended to bless Esau. It was customary at that time to mark solemn occasions with a feast. Isaac thought it would be appropriate to celebrate Esau's blessing with a feast. So he sent Esau out to hunt.

Rebekah overheard Isaac's conversation with Esau, probably by eavesdropping. Quickly, she devised a plan for Jacob to steal the blessing. If Jacob and Rebekah were to prepare domestic meat for Isaac, the blind father might mistake Jacob for Esau and bless the younger son before the older could return from hunting.

Since Isaac was nearly blind, he would recognize Esau with other senses. Rebekah made the food to taste like the wild game Esau would hunt. Goat-skins made Jacob's arms

feel hairy, like those of his brother. With Esau's clothes, Jacob would even smell like his brother.

Jacob expressed some reluctance at first. He was concerned that his father would discover the trick and curse him rather than bless him. Rebekah, however, said that if Isaac did utter a curse, the curse would be on her. She was confident that her plan would work. After all, God had stated that the older son, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob.

Isaac and Esau were attempting to do the wrong thing—to give Esau his father's blessing. Rebekah and Jacob were seeking to do the right thing—to get Jacob the blessing—but in the wrong way. We do not know how God would



have handled the matter without the scheme Rebekah devised. But under other circumstances, He could have diverted the blessing to Jacob without the serious consequences of the deception.

To her credit, Rebekah believed what the Lord said about Jacob. But when she stepped in to “help” God, she went astray.

God does not condone the use of deception. Ephesians 4:25 says, “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” The standard for believers is to be truthful at all times.

Ask Yourself . . . Have I used deception in an attempt to accomplish what I thought God would want to be done? Was I really trusting God at that point?



Isaac Blesses Jacob (27:18–29)

So [Jacob] went to [Isaac] and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him.

—Genesis 27:27

While Jacob may at first have been hesitant about deceiving his father, once he agreed to his mother’s plan, he worked hard to make the deception successful. Many of his statements to Isaac were completely false. He even associated God’s name in one of his lies. Clearly, that was not the way God

wanted him to receive the blessing.

When Jacob went into his father’s tent posing as Esau, he raised some questions in Isaac’s mind. How had Esau been able to hunt and cook the meat so quickly? Was this really Esau? Isaac thought he was hearing the voice of Jacob.

But the deception worked just as Rebekah had planned it. Isaac ate the food, drank the wine, and began the blessing by asking for a kiss. Because Jacob was wearing Esau’s clothes, the younger son smelled like the older. That finally convinced Isaac that he was blessing Esau.

Even though Isaac thought he was blessing Esau, his inspired words brought Jacob the clearest indication yet of what God would do through the younger son. Isaac’s words called for Jacob to be blessed by God and by people, and to have a position of superiority.

Jacob received the blessing because God wanted him to have it, not because of his trickery. The Lord had many lessons to teach Jacob in the days ahead. As the years passed, He slowly removed the crust from Jacob’s life to reveal a heart that sought the Lord.

Like Jacob, we also are in the process of being shaped as servants of God. He may have to deal with our rough spots, as He did with Jacob’s. But we can trust God to perform His work so that our lives reveal the genuineness of our faith.

Ask Yourself . . . Is my faith more mature than it was a year ago?

e

Isaac and Esau Realize the Truth (27:30–40)

Isaac trembled violently and said, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed!" —Genesis 27:33

While Jacob was going through with the elaborate deception, Esau was getting ready to receive Isaac's blessing. Esau prepared the game he had gotten for his father. In eager anticipation, he brought the meal in to Isaac.

Esau just missed seeing Jacob leave wearing his clothes, but it did not take him long to discover the deception. The blessing had been stolen!

Overcome with emotion, Isaac began shaking as he comprehended what he had done. His excessive trembling may have stemmed primarily from a fear of God. The Lord had overruled his plot to give Esau the blessing. Isaac may have realized that he had brought the deception upon himself through his foolish choice to favor Esau.

Isaac felt the grief of his son Esau, but though Esau begged him, he could do nothing to change what had happened. Oral blessings given on a deathbed were considered legally binding. They possessed the same force as a signed contract would today. Presumably, Isaac also knew that God had directed the

Last Will and Testament

Discoveries at the town of Nuzi in Mesopotamia have verified the importance of an oral blessing. A Nuzi court record tells the story of a man named Tarmiya who inherited a slave girl from his father. Tarmiya's two older brothers, however, contested the claim.

Tarmiya argued that his father gave the girl to him while the father was sick and lying on a couch. After an examination of witnesses, the judges decided in favor of Tarmiya. They ruled that the oral promise of the father, before his death, was legally binding.

blessing to Jacob.

Referring to the symbolic meaning of Jacob's name, Esau complained about his brother's deceiving nature. But the real tragedy was his ignorance of the sacredness of the blessing. He desired only the material blessing. He did not realize that God was watching when he sold the birthright.

Esau reminds us of many today who want the "good things" of Christianity without a surrender

of their life to Christ. They want the privileges, but are unwilling to forsake their sins and make Christ the Lord of their lives. True faith seeks the spiritual benefits of knowing God.

Ask Yourself . . . What is my real motive for serving the Lord? Do I desire to know Him above all else?

Isaac gave Esau a blessing, but it was inferior to what Jacob received. The sense of verse 39 is that the dwelling place of Esau would be unfruitful in contrast to the Promised Land. Although the mountainous country of Edom contained some fruitful valleys, much of it

was a barren wasteland.

Isaac could not promise Esau freedom from the domination of Jacob's people. The older was destined to serve the younger, as God had said. But Isaac saw a repeated struggle for freedom that at times would be successful. The historical relationship of Edom to Israel was a cycle of servitude, revolt, and resubmission.

As one can easily imagine, the episode of the stolen blessing left a bad taste in Esau's mouth. Thoughts of revenge began to fill his head. As we'll see in next week's lesson, Isaac's family would never be the same again.

2

Jacob Joins Laban's Family

Genesis 27:41–31:55

a Isaac Sends Jacob to Laban (27:41–28:5)

Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau.

—Genesis 28:5

Lesson 8 showed us that through deception, Jacob received his father's blessing in the place of his brother, Esau. We should not be surprised to read in this week's Scripture, therefore, that "Esau held a grudge against Jacob" (27:41). Officially, Jacob was now the more prominent of the two brothers, though he was the younger, and Esau didn't like it.

Esau's grudge was so serious that he wanted to kill Jacob. He knew he could never profit from killing his brother while their father still lived. But probably because of Isaac's own expectation of dying soon (27:2), Esau thought he would not have long to wait before he could put his murderous plan into effect.

Ask Yourself . . . What trouble has a grudge produced in my life?

Rebekah seems to have had a knack for learning family secrets and scheming out responses. Hearing about Esau's plan to kill Jacob, she took it seriously. She feared that she might lose both sons, probably reasoning that if Esau killed Jacob, another member of the clan would kill Esau in revenge. So Rebekah warned her favorite son. Her advice for Jacob was to hide out among her relatives until Esau's anger cooled.

It would be better if Jacob were to leave home with his father's permission, rather than to desert the family suddenly and without warning. So Rebekah approached Isaac on Jacob's behalf. Rebekah chose not to tell Isaac about Esau's plan of murder, perhaps because Isaac would not have believed such a tale about his favorite son. Instead, Rebekah slyly hinted at another reason for Jacob to leave.

Many years earlier, when Isaac himself had been ready to marry, his father had carefully sought a wife for Isaac from among their relatives (Gen. 24). Isaac, however, until this point had neglected to do the same for his sons. As a result, Esau had married women

from among the Hittites (26:34–35). Jacob, at the age of 77, had not yet taken a wife.

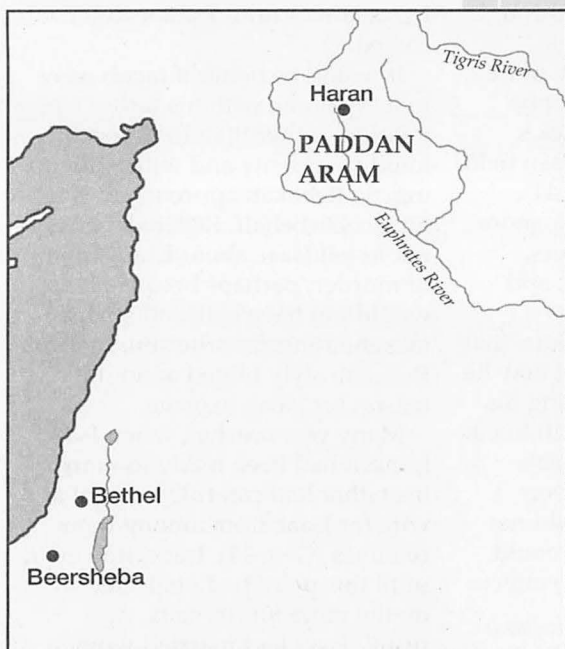
According to a custom of the time, Rebekah undoubtedly worked on household chores with the other women of her extended family. Rebekah told her husband that their daughters-in-law, the Hittite wives of Esau, were making her life unbearable. Things would only get worse if Jacob also married a Hittite woman.

Isaac agreed with her. In fact, Isaac ordered Jacob to go just where Rebekah wanted her son to go: Paddan Aram. Jacob was to find and marry one of his cousins on his mother's side.

Isaac also repeated the blessing on Jacob. When Isaac had blessed Jacob before, he had thought he was blessing Esau. Now, by repeating the blessing, Isaac indicated his belief that the blessing really belonged to Jacob.

Paddan Aram

The name *Paddan Aram* [PAD-an A-ram], which means "Plain of Aram" or "Field of Aram," was given to the area around Haran (Gen. 28:2). Another name for this area was *Aram Naharaim* [NAY-hah-RAY-im], which means "Aram of the Two Rivers" (24:10). Paddan Aram lay between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in northwestern Mesopotamia. It was occupied largely by Arameans.



This time, the blessing sounded more like the covenant God had made with Abraham. Before, when Isaac thought he was blessing Esau, he did not clearly specify the terms of the covenant (27:27–29). But now, knowing that the promised blessings belonged to Jacob, he proclaimed the covenant to him (28:3–4; compare 17:6–8).

Probably for the first time in Jacob's life, he left home. Jacob needed this opportunity. The trials and problems ahead would strengthen his faith.

God still uses trials to test and strengthen the faith of His people. Peter wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet. 4:12). It is not easy to rejoice in the midst of suffering. But as believers, we can take heart because God is in control, working to accomplish His purpose in our lives.

Ask Yourself . . . Has God brought a difficult experience into my life lately? If He has, how did I respond to the experience?

Genesis 28:6–9 in Brief

Even though Isaac had blessed Jacob a second time, Esau did not yet lose all hope of recovering his former status. Esau tried to please his father by marrying a woman to whom he was related by blood, just as Jacob was going to do.



Jacob Dreams at Bethel (28:10–22)

[Jacob] had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

—Genesis 28:12

Jacob set out on his 450-mile trip from Beersheba to Haran. One of his stops on the way was at a place near the town of Luz. It is doubtful that he made it there on the first day of his journey. Ordinarily it would have taken three or four days to travel the 70 miles from Beersheba to Luz. But some have suggested that since Jacob was fleeing from Esau, he might have traveled that far before stopping.

The traveler chose Luz for his night's stopover because darkness overtook him there. Many years earlier, Jacob's grandfather Abraham had built an altar near there (12:8). We do not know whether Jacob recognized the significance of his resting place, but Bethel would become a special place for Jacob as it had been for Abraham.

Weary from his journey, Jacob fell asleep. His use of a stone to support his head may seem strange to us, but in ancient times, stones and even pieces of metal were commonly used as headrests.

As Jacob slept, he dreamed. In this dream he saw a sort of "stairway" (28:12). The word for

Bethel

Bethel was 12 miles north of Jebus (later Jerusalem). The place was originally known as Luz. Jacob changed its name to Bethel, which means "house of God" (Gen. 28:17, 19). By Jacob's day, the bare mountaintop near Bethel had served as a center of worship for hundreds of years.

"Bethel" may have been the name for the mountaintop sanctuary, while "Luz" referred to the town nearby. Genesis 28:19 seems to refer to Bethel as a place and Luz as a town. Early Hebrew manuscripts of Joshua 16:2 indicate that Bethel and Luz were separate but close localities.

"stairway" was used to depict a mound thrown up against a city wall by invaders, enabling them to get to the top. The stairway in Jacob's dream reached all the way to heaven.

In Jacob's dream, angels were using the stairway to travel between earth and heaven. This travel symbolized the fellowship between God and His people. Heaven and earth are not separate but connected.

The busy stairway was an appropriate backdrop for the message of

the Lord that climaxed Jacob's dream.

As Jacob began his trip to Haran, he must have been wondering about many things. What would become of him? Would he ever see his home again? Was he really in line to receive the covenant blessings?

In the dream, the Lord addressed Jacob's concerns. God confirmed that Jacob would inherit the blessings of the covenant. The Lord promised to watch over him and bring him back to the land of Canaan. The Lord said He would be with Jacob until He had fulfilled all His promises to him.

We sometimes think our struggles are too small to be of concern to God. But He is concerned. We are His children, and He cares for us as a father cares for his children. No problem is too small to bring to God in prayer.

Ask Yourself . . . When was the last time I truly understood God's concern for the details of my life?

When Jacob woke up, he realized that his dream had been more than the product of his own brain. God had really spoken to him. Jacob reasoned that the place where he had chosen to spend the night was especially sacred.

Jacob responded to the dream by setting up his headrest stone vertically. This stone would remain after him as a memorial of the vision he had seen there. Jacob consecrated

the stone by pouring oil on it.

He also responded to the dream by making a vow to God. He promised that if God would take care of him, as God promised, he would worship Him and tithe to Him.

We can imagine that Jacob left Bethel with a much lighter heart than he'd had when he'd arrived there.

having to go as far as the town of Haran (located in far northwestern Mesopotamia), he unexpectedly met up with the very people whom he had been seeking.

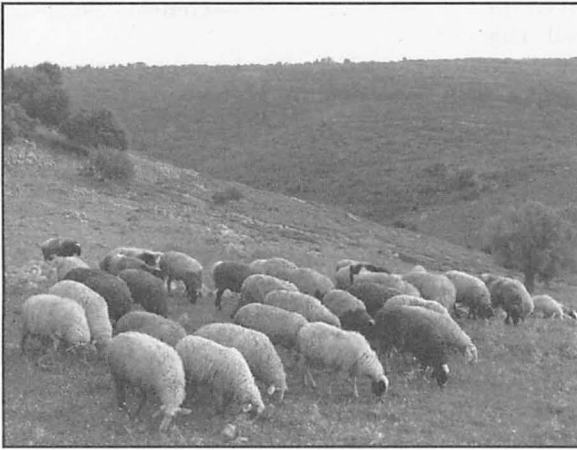
One day while in the land of the Eastern peoples, Jacob came to a well in a field. Shepherds were gathered there, waiting for other flocks to arrive before watering their sheep.

Naturally, Jacob struck up a conversation with the shepherds. Finding out that they were based in Haran, Jacob asked if they knew his Uncle Laban.

Much to Jacob's surprise and pleasure, the shepherds not only knew their neighbor Laban but pointed him out. Laban himself, with his daughter Rachel, was heading for the well!

Rachel seems to have been well out in front of her father. Perhaps Jacob could see Rachel's beauty from where he stood. His father had told him to marry a daughter of Laban (28:2), so Jacob probably guessed that this young woman was the woman he had traveled so far to find.

Jacob tried to hurry the shepherds along. He encouraged them to water their sheep and leave, pointing out that there was still plenty of time for grazing left in the day. One reason for Jacob's



C Jacob Comes to Laban (29:1-14a)

As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he hurried to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his home. —Genesis 29:13

Many days after leaving Bethel, Jacob was traveling through the "land of the eastern peoples" (v. 1), which lay between Canaan and Mesopotamia. Here, without

behavior may have been that he hated to see workers wasting time. But a more romantic alternative may have been that he wanted some privacy for his first meeting with Rachel.

Despite Jacob's urgings, the shepherds were content to wait until all the sheep had gathered, as was their custom. But now Jacob's attention was directed elsewhere. Rachel had reached the well. With his own hands, Jacob removed the large stone covering the well. This demonstrated his strength to Rachel and enabled him to be of service by watering his uncle's sheep.

Genesis does not record the words with which Jacob revealed his identity to his future wife. But it must have been an emotional meeting for both. Jacob wept. He probably was already beginning to fall in love with Rachel.

Contrary to a popular opinion, God does not frown upon romantic love. While the perversion of love by immorality is not acceptable to God, He created us to love. As we leave childhood behind, a lasting romantic attachment can help us become the well-rounded adults God wants us to be.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I have a healthy, biblical view of romantic love?

Since Laban still had not reached the well, Rachel ran to tell him about Jacob. Laban warmly welcomed the son of his sister, and publicly acknowledged their kinship. Jacob had found a new home.



Jacob Marries Leah and Rachel (29:14b-30)

Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work."

—Genesis 29:26-27

Jacob quickly began to participate in the routines of Laban's family. No doubt Jacob had much experience working with his father's sheep and goats. Now he helped take care of Laban's flocks.

After a month, Laban raised the issue of Jacob's wages. So far, he had paid Jacob nothing. He knew he could not expect Jacob to work for room and board indefinitely.

By asking Jacob to name the wages he wanted, Laban probably expected to start a haggling process in the Eastern tradition. But Jacob didn't request money or livestock or any other wage that could be haggled over. He wanted a specific reward.

Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. The older, Leah, lacked the beauty of her sister. Leah's eyes did not have the luster that men of that day looked for in a woman. Rachel's exceptional beauty may have been one reason Jacob fell in love with her. But before we accuse him of preferring one sister for superficial reasons, we should note

that Jacob appears to have fallen in love with Rachel before he met Leah (29:10–11).

Jacob offered to work seven years for Laban in exchange for receiving Rachel in marriage at the end of that period. A man could create a lot of wealth in seven years. Perhaps Jacob made such a generous offer because he had no dowry (bride price) to give for Rachel.

Ask Yourself . . . To what lengths have I gone for love?

Laban was not so foolish as to reject such an offer. He agreed to Jacob's terms.

Because of Jacob's intense love for Rachel, the seven years of work seemed like only a few days to him. The lengthy engagement gave Jacob and Rachel time to develop their relationship so that they could be as ready as possible for marriage.

At the end of the seven-year period, Jacob reminded Laban that it was time for him to receive his wife. The passing of the years had done nothing to change Jacob's mind.

The years had, however, given Laban the chance to come up with a selfish scheme. He planned to deceive the great deceiver Jacob. Laban didn't want to lose Jacob as a worker. With Jacob's help, his flocks had been steadily increasing. So at the end of the wedding feast, Laban switched Leah (who had not yet married) for Rachel.

Did Laban Adopt Jacob?

Since the discovery of clay tablets at Nuzi containing ancient legal records, some commentators have regarded the agreement between Laban and Jacob as an adoption. The absence of any mention of Laban's sons in the story of Jacob's arrival may indicate that they were not yet born. And if that was the case, then Laban would certainly have been concerned about having a male heir.

According to the Nuzi tablets, one man could adopt another in order to gain him as an heir. One Nuzi tablet records an instance in which an adopted son received the father's daughter in marriage. According to the tablet, if sons were born to the father after the adoption, then the inheritance would change—some of the laws of the firstborn would apply. If Laban's sons were born after his agreement with Jacob, that would help to explain the later change in the relationship between Jacob and Laban.

We can only guess Rachel's feelings as she found out her father's plan. All her hopes and plans were being cruelly disrupted.

Obviously, Leah cooperated in her father's plan. Perhaps she said little or nothing that night, so that Jacob would not recognize her voice. Darkness in the tent would also have helped Leah carry out the deception.

At any rate, Jacob did not discover the substitution until morning. At that point, he stormed up to Laban and demanded an explanation. What was the meaning of this?

Laban's excuse was that local custom did not permit him to marry off a younger daughter before an older one. Once again, Jacob got into trouble because of rules favoring older children over younger.

We don't know whether or not Laban was truly concerned about the custom of marrying the older daughter first. But even if he was, that did not justify his deception. If Laban had wanted, he could have told Jacob about the custom before the wedding.

Laban offered to give Rachel to Jacob at the end of the traditional week of wedding festivities. But in exchange, Jacob would have to work for him another seven years.

Jacob agreed; he had little choice. At least this way he could soon be united with the woman he loved.

God certainly did not approve of Laban's deception. But He used it as one of several lessons meant to teach

Jacob that it is better to rely on God than to trust in one's own devices.

Genesis 29:31–31:55 in Brief

Jacob's having two wives inevitably led to rivalry between the sisters, especially over childbearing. In the end, Leah bore six sons (and a daughter, Dinah) for Jacob. Rachel bore two. And in periods when Jacob's wives were not having children, he had sexual intercourse with their servant women. Between them, Bilhah and Zilpah bore Jacob four more sons.

At the end of the second seven-year period of work, Jacob and Laban entered into a new agreement. Jacob would work in return for some of Laban's animals. Despite Laban's cheating, Jacob prospered because of God's help.

Amid rising tension between Jacob and Laban's family, God ordered Jacob to return to Canaan. Jacob did so without telling Laban.

Having learned about the departure, Laban hurried after Jacob and caught up with his son-in-law. He accused Jacob of stealing his household gods. Although Rachel had taken these gods, Laban did not manage to find them.

The two men established their future relationship with a covenant. Jacob promised to take care of his wives; both men promised to keep apart and not harm one another.

10

Jacob and Esau Are Reconciled

Genesis 32–36

a Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau (32:1–21)

[Jacob] instructed the [servant] in the lead: “When my brother Esau meets you and asks, ‘Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?’ then you are to say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.’”

—Genesis 32:17–18

As Jacob left Laban after their agreement, one family conflict was behind him. But another might be before him. Jacob certainly had not forgotten that his brother, Esau, had vowed to kill him (27:41). Did Esau still feel the same way?

Wisely, Jacob chose to settle the question once and for all before settling in Canaan. He hoped to reconcile with his brother. So he headed for Esau’s new homeland, Seir, by traveling southward on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

As we read the story of Jacob’s reconciliation with Esau, we should consider whether we need to be reconciled to anyone. Jacob knew that

both he and Esau bore some responsibility for their rupture. Similarly, there usually is guilt on both sides of our broken relationships. Yet just as Jacob sought reconciliation with Esau at great risk to himself, we may need to take the first steps toward reconciliation despite our reluctance. If so, we shouldn’t wait twenty years, as Jacob did!

Ask Yourself . . . Who, if anyone, should I try to reconcile with?

Jacob had seen angels when he was leaving Canaan (28:12), and he saw angels when he returned to the area (32:1). Like the first angelic vision, the second one must have encouraged Jacob at a time when he needed some encouragement. His upcoming meeting with Esau must have weighed heavily on his mind.

Jacob gave a new name to the place by the Jabbok River where angels met him. The name *Mahanaim* [may-hah-NAY-im], meaning “two camps,” memorialized the fact that two groups had taken up a position there: Jacob’s caravan and the collection of angels. Jacob would not have to face his brother alone. God and the hosts of heaven would be with him.

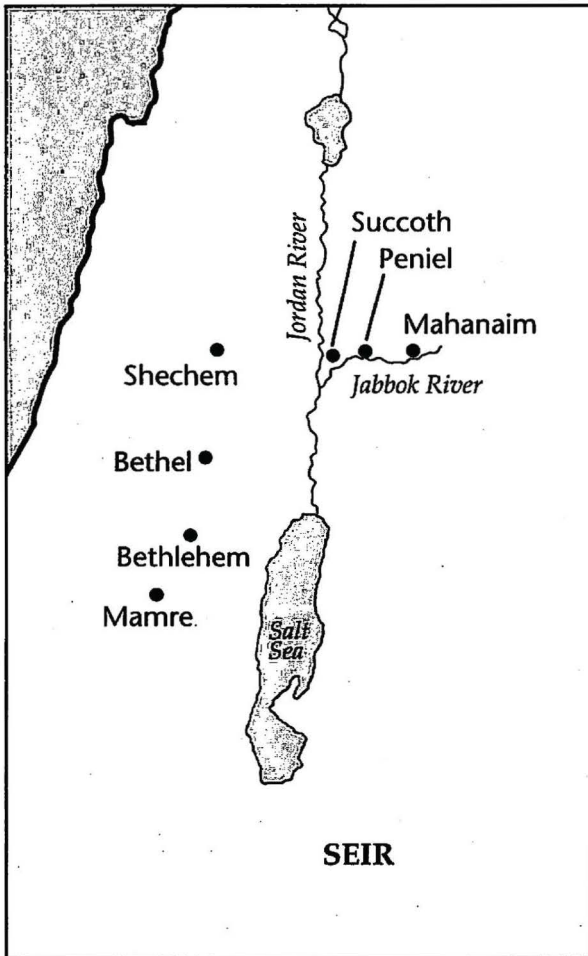
From Mahanaim, Jacob sent servants bearing a message to his brother in Seir. The humbly worded message informed Esau that Jacob and his people had separated from Laban. It also expressed Jacob's desire to set things right with his brother.

The servants faithfully performed their mission. When they returned, they did not (apparently) have a reply for Jacob from his brother. But they did carry the news that Esau was coming to meet Jacob—and was bringing with him a large force.

This did not look at all good to Jacob. Perhaps Esau intended to attack him and his people! Jacob was none too sure of his ability to defend against his brother and his brother's four hundred men.

In Jacob's day, it was customary for an endangered caravan to divide into separate companies. If one company was attacked, the other could escape. Jacob took that normal precaution. Then he went to the Lord in prayer.

Jacob thanked God for all the goodness God had shown him since he had left home some 20 years earlier. From being a lone exile with no property, Jacob had become a man rich in family and in possessions. Jacob knew he owed all he had to God.



Continuing his prayer, Jacob admitted his fear that his brother would attack him and his family. He asked God for protection. Since God had taken care of him in the past, God could take care of him in the present.

In the prayer, Jacob recalled both of God's promises to him recorded in Scripture. Appearing to Jacob in Bethel, God had promised to prosper him and give him many descendants (32:12; compare 28:13–15). Later, when God had called Jacob to leave Paddan Aram, He had promised to prosper Jacob in the Promised Land (32:9; compare 31:3). Jacob realized that neither of these promises could be fulfilled if he and his family were wiped out by Esau.

Ask Yourself . . . How might I be able to improve the prayers I offer in times of difficulty by making them more like Jacob's prayer?

Jacob picked out 550 animals of different kinds as gifts for his brother. Furthermore, Jacob arranged things so that Esau would receive those valuable animals in herds, one after another. Each time Esau received a herd, one of Jacob's servants would deliver a courteous message from their master. Clearly, Jacob's plan was to build goodwill toward himself before he and his brother met.

But before that meeting could take place, God had some personal business to take care of with Jacob.



Jacob Wrestles at Night (32:22–32)

Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

—Genesis 32:24–26

Jacob and his people were camped on the north side of the Jabbok River. Esau was approaching from the south. So Jacob had his people and animals ford the river and camp on the south bank to meet Esau.

Jacob himself, however, stayed alone on the north bank at a point west of Mahanaim. We don't know why Jacob stayed behind. Perhaps he intended to spend more time in prayer.

Suddenly, out of the dark appeared someone who began wrestling with Jacob. Even though this surprise opponent had the appearance of a man, most commentators believe He was God.

Throughout his life thus far, Jacob had been a struggler. As we have seen, he pitted himself against his brother, Esau, and his father-in-law, Laban. But those struggles were just reflections of his continuing struggle with God over who would control his life.

Jacob had long relied on his own wits to take care of himself. God wanted Jacob to acknowledge his

The Identity of the Wrestler

Although Genesis 32 refers to Jacob's opponent as a "man," the wrestler was probably a figure known elsewhere in the Bible as the angel of the Lord. Like regular angels, this figure took on the form and some of the limitations of a man when He appeared to humans. But many commentators think He was not only more than a man, He was more than an angel: He was God Himself.



This view seems to be confirmed in the prophet Hosea's account of the wrestling bout. Hosea said both that Jacob "struggled with God" (Hos. 12:3) and that he "struggled with the angel" (v. 4).

need for God's care. Therefore, at this critical point in Jacob's life, with possible death approaching from the south, his spiritual struggle with God became a physical struggle.

During the nighttime wrestling match, God evidently limited His own physical strength to that of a normal man. Thus He was unable to get the better of Jacob as hour after exhausting hour went by.

But God still had all His supernatural power in reserve. At dawn God used a little of His power to dislocate Jacob's hip. Now all Jacob could do was hold on to the Lord. The wrestling was over.

At this point, we should ask ourselves the question "Who won the wrestling match?" On the one hand, God Himself admitted that He had been overcome by Jacob (v. 28; see Hos. 12:4). With temporary human limitations, God could not best Jacob. But on the other hand, Jacob wound up with a damaged hip

and could only hold on to God in a desperate embrace. If Jacob had let go in his damaged state, God could have won.

The match's conclusion is a perfect image of Jacob's spiritual relationship with the Lord. Although Jacob had been fighting against Him, now he was holding on to Him. Thus God won the match in the sense that He had shown Jacob his need to hold on to Him spiritually. (If Jacob's hip dislocation was permanent, it became a reminder throughout his days of his need to rely on God.)

All who study the story of this wrestling match should take a cue from it and cease struggling with God. Even now He is within arm's length waiting for us to reach out to Him and hold on tight.

Ask Yourself. . . Do I spend more time fighting against God or holding on to Him?

Held fast in Jacob's grip, God said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak" (Gen. 32:26). Some commentators have suggested that God wanted to end the conflict at daybreak because He did not want Jacob to look on Him. As the light came up, Jacob would be able to get a good look at his opponent for the first time.

Although during the wrestling bout Jacob may not have been sure that he was wrestling against God, at some point he realized that his foe was more than a man. So when God asked to be let loose, Jacob insisted on a blessing. He thought he could get something from his supernatural opponent in return for release. Hosea said Jacob "wept and begged for [God's] favor" (Hos. 12:4).

Before the Lord blessed Jacob, He changed Jacob's name. Jacob was henceforth to be known also as Israel. God told him his two names were appropriate because "you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome" (Gen. 32:28). The name *Jacob* means "he grasps the heel" (figurative for "he deceives"), and thus it points to Jacob's struggle with people. The name *Israel* means "he struggles with God" and commemorates the wrestling match with God. (It was, of course, from Jacob's new name that the nation descended from him became known as Israel.)

The Lord had asked Jacob's name; now Jacob asked the Lord's name.

Different theories have been proposed for the reason the Lord replied: "Why do you ask my name?" (v. 29). Perhaps God said

this because the name was beyond Jacob's understanding (compare Judg. 13:18). Or perhaps He said this because Jacob really already knew the identity of his opponent and didn't need to ask.

Although the Lord did not tell Jacob His name, He did finally bless him. We don't know what form this blessing took. Perhaps it was a repetition of the blessings belonging to the Abrahamic covenant.

Now, if not before, Jacob knew for sure that he had wrestled with God. He named the place *Peniel* [peeNIGH-el], meaning "face of God." In the light of early dawn, Jacob had glimpsed the face of his opponent. According to common belief, catching a sight of God was supposed to cause death (Judg. 13:22). And yet God had let Jacob survive.

Ask Yourself . . . How have I encountered God in the midst of my everyday life?

The story includes an interesting comment about the dietary custom that developed out of Jacob's struggle with God. Jews would not eat "the tendon attached to the socket of the hip" (Gen. 32:32)—probably the sciatic muscle—of animals. This prohibition is not part of Old Testament law, but teachings of rabbis written hundreds of years later mention it.

A new day of trust in God dawned for Jacob. He limped toward the river and the encounter that would soon occur beyond it. Would Esau treat him like a brother or like an enemy?



Esau Greets Jacob Warmly (33:1-20)

Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. —Genesis 33:4

Apparently on the same morning that God blessed him and gave him a new name, Jacob saw Esau's men approaching. There could be no mistaking them even at a distance. Who else would be traveling in a group of four hundred?

Not knowing Esau's intentions or how the gifts of livestock had been received, Jacob provided maximum protection for those he loved most. Earlier, when he had divided his people into two companies, he evidently had kept all his wives and children in his own company. Now he put Zilpah and Bilhah with their children in front, and behind them Leah and Rachel with their children. If Esau attacked, those in the back had the best chance of escape.

Limping out in front went Jacob, bowing respectfully seven times as he came closer to Esau. According to ancient records recovered by archaeologists, it was customary to bow seven times when approaching a king. Jacob thus demonstrated his respect for Esau, who had become a ruler in a region of the south.

We do not know what Esau's intention was as he approached his brother. Probably he never planned to attack Jacob. He may have brought the four hundred men with him both to impress Jacob with his

power and to defend against Jacob in case Jacob attacked.

Whatever his original intention, Esau was filled with emotion at the sight of his brother. He ran to Jacob and showered him with signs of affection. The 20-year interval since the two had seen each other had wrought changes in the older twin as well as the younger. Esau's former bitterness had been replaced with a gracious and tender spirit toward his brother.

What relief and joy Jacob must have felt! His brother was his brother after all, and not his enemy.

This meeting between the two men goes to show that we can start afresh in our relationships with others. By God's grace, wounds can be healed, slights can be forgiven, and love can be rekindled.

Ask Yourself . . . Should I be praying for a new beginning with someone?

After the tears stopped flowing, the brothers naturally began to catch up on one another's lives. For the first time, Esau met Jacob's wives and children. The members of Jacob's family all showed Esau respect, as Jacob did.

With the introductions finished, Esau brought up the subject of the herds Jacob had sent him (32:13-21). Of course, Jacob's servants had told Esau that the herds were gifts. But Esau politely inquired to be sure of Jacob's intentions for the animals.

Then ensued a battle of courtesy (far better than a real battle!). Esau declined the generous gift, saying he did not need the animals because he

already had many. Jacob insisted.

Jacob had at least a couple of reasons for wanting Esau to accept the gift. First, custom decreed that by receiving the gift, Esau would be confirming his kind intentions toward the giver. Second, since the word for “present” (33:11) can also mean “blessing,” Jacob was in a sense repaying Esau for the blessing Jacob had stolen from him.

Ask Yourself . . . If I were to reconcile with a former friend, what kind of restitution might I need to offer?

Esau was the first to suggest that the two groups move on. Now Jacob found out that Esau was assuming that Jacob and Jacob’s people would return with him to Seir.

Jacob had other plans. He preferred to maintain his independence from his brother. He may have figured that they could better preserve their newly restored relationship if they lived apart.

Diplomatically, Jacob excused himself from traveling with his brother by saying—truthfully, no doubt—that his caravan could not move as fast as Esau’s. Jacob promised, however, that he would visit Esau in Seir. (We don’t know when, if ever, Jacob kept this promise.)

Esau wanted at least to leave

some guards with Jacob. But Jacob refused that offer also. He already had an unseen company of angels journeying with him; he did not need additional help.

As Esau headed back southward toward Seir, Jacob recrossed the Jabbok River and settled a short distance to the west at Succoth.

Evidently, he spent several



The present-day city of Shechem.

months or years there, since he built shelters for his people and livestock (*Succoth* means “shelters”).

After leaving Succoth, Jacob crossed the Jordan and went to the city of Shechem. He bought some property and again settled down. This was the first time he personally owned some of the land that had been promised to his descendants.

Jacob called the altar he built there *El Elohe Israel* (meaning “Mighty is the God of Israel”). Using his new

name, Jacob acknowledged that the God who had wrestled with him at Peniel and had protected him from his foes is great in power.

Genesis 34–36 in Brief

These chapters carry the history of the brothers Jacob and Esau on into their old age.

Genesis 34 contains a sad record of rape and revenge. While Jacob was living near Shechem, his daughter Dinah was assaulted by a son of Shechem's ruler. Jacob's sons showed their resemblance to their deceitful father by tricking the Shechemite men into submitting to circumcision. Then while the men were recovering, two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, killed them

and looted the town of Shechem.

After this, Jacob's family had to leave Shechem. As Genesis 35 tells, they next went to Bethel. But before leaving, Jacob purged his family of idol worship. In Bethel, he built another altar to the Lord. There God confirmed Jacob's name change and covenant.

Later, Jacob headed for his father's home in Mamre. Rachel died in childbirth along the way (traditionally on the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem), giving birth to her son Benjamin, the only full brother of her other son, Joseph. Isaac died a few years later and was buried by Esau and Jacob.

Genesis 36 is a listing of Esau's descendants and the rulers of Edom, their nation.

11

God Establishes Joseph in Egypt

Genesis 37–41

a **Opposition to Joseph Builds (37:1–11)**

[Joseph's] father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. —Genesis 37:10–11

Most of the narrative in the last 14 chapters of Genesis is devoted to the life of Joseph. The faith this son of Jacob showed in the midst of distressing circumstances has encouraged believers through the centuries.

The first 11 verses of chapter 37 explain the friction that developed between the teenage Joseph and other members of his family.

First, we learn that Joseph, at the age of 17, told on his brothers. The brothers had done something they shouldn't have (we have no idea what) while away from home tending the flocks. Joseph saw the wrongdoing and let Jacob know about it.

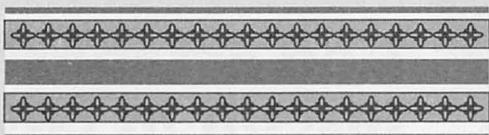
Commentators take different views of Joseph's reporting to his father. Some blame him, calling him a tattletale. Other commentators defend Joseph, saying he was only acting as a son should.

Although the biblical text does not tell us so, the brothers might have had hard feelings toward Joseph because of his reporting on them.

Jacob increased the friction between the older brothers and Joseph by showing his preference for Joseph. According to Genesis, Jacob loved Joseph more because Joseph was born in his old age. As a matter of fact, Joseph was his youngest son, next to Benjamin. Jacob may also have preferred Joseph because Joseph was the first son of his favorite wife, Rachel.

Jacob revealed his favoritism by giving Joseph a special outer garment. As Joseph wore the robe, it must have become a constant irritation to the other brothers. It reminded them that their father loved Joseph best. They were jealous.

When Jacob had been younger, his mother had liked him better than Esau, while his father had preferred Esau. This show of parental favoritism had led to threats of murder



Joseph's Robe

What made Joseph's outer garment special? We can't be sure; the Hebrew word describing it is uncertain. Here are three translations of the phrase in Genesis 37:3:

- "an ornate robe" (New International Version);
- "a multicolored tunic" (New American Standard Bible);
- "a special tunic" (New English Translation).

Regardless of what the robe looked like, its significance is clear: the robe set Joseph off from his brothers.

and to a deep rupture between Jacob and Esau. Having seen the damage favoritism can do, Jacob should have known better than to show favoritism to Joseph.

Ask Yourself . . . What mistakes in my upbringing should I be careful to avoid repeating?

Next, we read about two dreams. In the ancient world, dreams were widely believed to predict the future. This belief was right in the case of Joseph's dreams. God sent the dreams to show the superior blessings He would give Joseph.

In the first dream, Joseph saw himself and his brothers binding sheaves of grain in a field. This was a normal harvest scene. But suddenly, his brothers' sheaves bowed

down to Joseph's sheaf.

When Joseph told his brothers about his dream, the brothers correctly interpreted it to mean that one day they would bow down to Joseph. This literally happened when Joseph became a ruler in Egypt. Of course, the brothers did not like the idea of serving their younger brother. Because of the dream, the brothers' hatred of Joseph rose a notch higher.

In Joseph's second dream, he saw the sun and moon and 11 stars bow down to him. This time Joseph described the dream to his father as well as to his brothers. Now even his indulgent father was upset with Joseph. Jacob accurately interpreted the dream to mean that he and his wife Leah (Joseph's mother, Rachel,

had died by this time) and his sons would all bow down to Joseph. This dream, too, referred to the future when Joseph would be a ruler in Egypt.

In relating the dreams, Joseph was only telling the truth. But some commentators suggest that he was unwise to mention them, being motivated by pride. As we'll find out later, Joseph had the ability to interpret dreams, so he probably knew what these dreams meant. Joseph could have kept his mouth shut about them, but he did not.

(Of course, regardless of whether Joseph was wrong to tell about the dreams, the brothers were wrong to nurse feelings of jealousy and hatred against him.)

For our part, it is important that we learn to be sensitive to the feelings of others. Most of the time there is no good reason to advertise our achievements or to point out the flaws of others. By exercising some self-discipline, we can limit our speech to words that do not hurt others or tempt them to jealousy.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I careful to regard the feelings of others when I speak?

The biblical text says that Jacob did not forget his son's dreams. But the next event in Joseph's life made their fulfillment seem impossible.

b Joseph Is Sold into Slavery (37:12–36)

When the Midianite merchants came by, [Joseph's] brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. —Genesis 37:28

Shortly after Joseph's dreams, most of Jacob's sons took his flocks many miles to the north. A desire to get away from Joseph may have



been one reason why they traveled so far from their home in the Valley of Hebron. But if so, it did no good. Jacob sent Joseph after them to find out how they were doing.

Neither the son nor the father

could have known that more than 20 years would pass before they would lay eyes on each other again.

Joseph caught up with his brothers near Dothan. Seeing Joseph approach, the brothers formed a plan to kill him and blame his death on a wild animal. Uncontrolled jealousy and hatred had brought them to such an intention.

Later, the apostle Paul wrote, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger. . . . Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:31-32). We must learn to deal with jealousy and hatred before they destroy us.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I holding a grudge against anyone? If so, what might be the cost of not forgiving that person?

The oldest brother, Reuben, offered an alternative to the plan of immediately killing Joseph. He suggested that they put Joseph in a nearby cistern—a stone-lined hole in the ground used to store water. Currently, the cistern was empty.

Reuben made this suggestion because he hoped to rescue Joseph later on. Reuben was hardly a model of morality (Gen. 35:22). But as the firstborn, he evidently felt some responsibility for Joseph.

The brothers adopted Reuben's plan. But before they put Joseph in the pit, they took from him the robe that had so inflamed their jealousy.

At dinnertime, Judah suggested that the brothers sell Joseph to some Midianite merchants who were

passing by their camp. As he pointed out, that way they could avoid the sin of fratricide (brother-killing) and make some money at the same time. The brothers liked this idea.

Ishmaelites and Midianites

In Genesis 37 the terms "Ishmaelites" and "Midianites" are used interchangeably. Some Bible scholars think the term "Ishmaelites" designated many Eastern peoples, including the Midianites.

Technically speaking, Ishmaelites were the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar (21:13). But evidence suggests that all the desert tribes living east of the Jordan River were known as Ishmaelites.

The Midianites were the descendants of Midian, a son of Abraham and Keturah (25:2). The Midianites seem to have been centered in northwest Arabia, but in some periods they may have been found over a much larger area.

Slavery was a common practice in the ancient world. Surviving records tell us that 20 pieces of silver (the amount paid for Joseph) was the usual price for a boy between five and 20 years of age. An older slave would generally bring 30 pieces of silver.

Reuben was not present when his brothers sold Joseph. Perhaps he was with a different part of the flocks. Or perhaps he was off making plans to rescue Joseph. At any rate, when he got back, Joseph was gone.

Since it was too late to help Joseph, Reuben went along with his brothers in their plan to trick Jacob, the great trickster. They dipped Joseph's robe in goat's blood and, when they returned home, showed it to their father. They knew full well that Jacob would interpret the bloodied robe to mean that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast.

Thinking his favorite son dead, Jacob went into mourning. His grief was uncommonly powerful. No one could comfort him. He looked forward to his own death, because he imagined that then he would be reunited with his beloved Joseph.

But, of course, Joseph was not dead. He was in Egypt, where the Midianites resold him. Far from home, Joseph found himself the slave of Pharaoh's "captain of the guard" (37:36). This title perhaps means that Potiphar was in charge of the soldiers who guarded Pharaoh's jail and carried out executions as ordered.

Genesis 38 in Brief

Genesis 38 is a diversion from the record of Joseph. It tells of sins in the family of Judah. These sins emphasize, by contrast, Joseph's moral excellence.

Judah had three sons—Er, Onan, and Shelah—by a Canaanite wife. First, Er died for his wickedness (not described). Then Onan died for refusing to fulfill his customary duty of marrying Er's widow, Tamar, and raising up children by her that would be counted as Er's.

After Onan's death, Judah's third son, Shelah, should have married Tamar. But Judah was afraid for Shelah's life and postponed the union. Meanwhile, Tamar disguised herself and tricked Judah into making her pregnant.

Tamar gave birth to the twins Perez and Zerah.



Potiphar's Wife Tempts Joseph (39:1–10)

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused.

—Genesis 39:6b–8a

Once Joseph became the slave of Potiphar, the quality of his character began to show itself. He did not wallow in self-pity but energetically carried out the tasks set before him.

The text emphasizes that the Lord was with Joseph. Although Joseph was separated from everyone and everything familiar to him, still God was with him. Therefore, his sadness did not turn into despair. He responded positively to the turn of events in his life, and God blessed his work.

As an experienced leader of men, Potiphar was not long in noticing Joseph's abilities. He promoted Joseph from common house servant to personal attendant and then to steward of the entire household.

In each position, Joseph's work was blessed by God. Soon Joseph had Potiphar's complete confidence. Without supervision, Joseph ran everything in the house.

The apostle Paul urged slaves, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters" (Col. 3:23). Joseph demonstrated the value of that biblical principle long before Paul was born. Joseph gave himself wholeheartedly to his tasks.

Ask Yourself . . . How do I respond to distressing circumstances at work?

Joseph's smooth sailing eventually became turbulent.

Like his mother, Joseph was good looking. He was probably in his late teens when he came into the service of Potiphar. As he grew into manhood, his physical attributes caught the eye of Potiphar's wife. She made bold sexual advances toward him.

Joseph resolutely refused Potiphar's wife. He cited two reasons for his refusal. First, adultery would be unfair to the man who had trusted him. Though only a slave, he did not want to violate the confidence

of his master. Second, Joseph did not want to sin against God. While the law of Moses had not yet been written, Joseph recognized the sinfulness of adultery.

Joseph could easily have rationalized giving in to the temptation. He was far from home. Who would know? God had allowed him to become a slave. Why should he honor God? Potiphar's wife was in a position to either help or hinder his career. Wasn't it foolish to oppose her?

Joseph made no such rationalizations. That's because he had a vital personal relationship with God. Out of that relationship he had developed a clear sense of right and wrong. Thus when temptation sprang upon him,

This ancient Egyptian statue shows an official in the service of the Egyptian ruler. Potiphar, Joseph's master, was Pharaoh's "captain of the guard" (Gen. 39:1).



he was ready with reasons why it would be wrong for him to give in.

Ask Yourself . . . How well do I handle temptation? How can I handle it better?

Potiphar's wife made repeated attempts to seduce Joseph, but he was unyielding.

d Joseph Is Put in Prison (39:11–23)

[Potiphar's wife] caught [Joseph] by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. —Genesis 39:12

Once Potiphar's wife began making advances toward Joseph, he "refused to . . . even be with her" (v. 10). But as they lived in the same home, he could not avoid her forever. And indeed, one day Joseph found himself alone with her.

Potiphar's wife quickly capitalized on the situation. She grabbed Joseph by the cloak and begged him once more to come to bed with her.

By this time, Joseph had given up trying to reason with her. Instead of arguing with her now, he slipped from her grasp and ran outside, leaving his cloak in her hands.

Ask Yourself . . . How quick am I to run from temptation?

The cloak in her hands gave Potiphar's wife a wicked idea. She was deeply vexed with Joseph. Who was he, a slave, to deny her anything?

She would see that Joseph was punished!

Potiphar's wife thought up a false accusation against Joseph. Since her husband was not home at the time, she screamed for help to attract the servants. She told them she had screamed because Joseph had tried to rape her. In her accusation she stressed Joseph's foreign origin and tried to make the servants feel injured by him themselves.

We don't know whether the servants were taken in by Potiphar's wife nor how they felt about Joseph. But at least now they could serve as witnesses that their mistress had screamed and that when they had come running, she had been holding Joseph's cloak.

The witnesses prepared, Potiphar's wife held on to the material evidence—the cloak—until her husband came home. Then she repeated her testimony. Her words implied blame for her husband, since he had brought Joseph into their home. Speaking to her husband, she called Joseph "your slave" (v. 19).

Potiphar's response was to commit Joseph to the prison reserved for political prisoners—probably the most comfortable prison available. This is curious. Why didn't Potiphar have Joseph killed, as he easily could have done?

Although the text says that Potiphar "burned with anger" against Joseph, Potiphar's action suggests that his anger was partly cooled by another consideration. Perhaps Potiphar knew his wife well enough to have some doubts about her story.

Or perhaps he wanted to be lenient toward Joseph because of Joseph's excellent service in the past.

Yet while Joseph was placed in a relatively comfortable prison, his experience was by no means easy. The injustice of his treatment must have wounded Joseph as much as it would anyone. But Joseph remained faithful to God because God remained faithful to him.

The older we get, the more we realize that life is not fair. When we lose our job, become seriously ill, or are disappointed by our children, we want to cry, "It's not fair! What did I do to deserve this?" Yet God remains with us through all the injustices of life, and at the end of time, He will right all wrongs.

Ask Yourself . . . When was the last time I was treated unfairly? How did I react?

Joseph's early experiences in Potiphar's home were in many ways mirrored by his experiences in prison. In Potiphar's home, the Lord had blessed him, he had gained the favor of Potiphar, and he had risen to full responsibility over the household. In prison, the Lord again blessed him, he gained the favor of the warden, and he rose to full responsibility over the prison.

But being the head trustee of a prison was no more the reason God had brought Joseph to Egypt than being Potiphar's head steward was.

While both roles were good preparation, God had something much bigger in mind for Joseph.

Genesis 40–41 in Brief

In prison, Joseph used his God-given abilities to interpret the dreams of two fellow prisoners, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. The baker's dream meant that he would die. The cupbearer's dream meant that he would be reinstated to his post.

Joseph asked the cupbearer to intercede on his behalf with Pharaoh. But the cupbearer forgot about Joseph until, two years later, Pharaoh himself had a dream. At the cupbearer's suggestion, Pharaoh decided to send for Joseph to interpret the dream.

Crediting God with revealing the dream's meaning, Joseph told Pharaoh that the dream meant seven years of famine would follow seven years of plenty. Furthermore, Joseph volunteered advice on how to prepare for the famine.

Pharaoh made Joseph his second in command and put the ex-prisoner in charge of grain collection and distribution. When famine finally struck, Joseph was in a position to save many lives. Meanwhile, he married and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

12

Joseph and His Family Are Reunited

Genesis 42:1–47:26

Genesis 42:1–44:13 in Brief

As we learned last week, Joseph became Egypt's second-in-command, charged with managing the nation's grain supply during a famine. In this lesson we see that Joseph's position gave him the means to preserve the lives of his family, through whom the blessings of the covenant would be transmitted to the world. This was why God had established Joseph in Egypt.

The famine extended to Canaan. So Jacob sent ten of his sons (not including Benjamin) to Egypt with money for food. Appearing before Joseph, they did not recognize their brother. But he recognized them.

Joseph pretended to think his brothers were spies. He kept one brother as a hostage, but sent the others home with grain as well as the money they had brought. Their instructions were to bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, to Joseph to verify their claim of identity.

At first, Jacob refused to give up Benjamin. But when the family's Egyptian grain was gone, Jacob relented. The brothers went back to

Egypt with Benjamin.

This time Joseph received his brothers graciously. But before they left, he hid his silver cup (a prize possession in that day) in Benjamin's sack of grain. Then he sent his steward after the brothers to "discover" the cup.

The steward had orders to arrest Benjamin but to tell the other brothers they could go on home. This was a test. Would the brothers abandon Benjamin as long ago they had abandoned Joseph? They did not; they passed this test.

a Judah Asks to Take Benjamin's Place (44:14–34)

"Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me?" —Genesis 44:33–34a

As the 11 brothers reentered Joseph's presence, they threw themselves to the ground. This was their way of showing humility and

begging for mercy. They were afraid of what Joseph might do to them because, as it appeared, Benjamin had stolen Joseph's silver cup.

At first, Joseph justified their fears by speaking roughly to them. He intimidated them by telling them they shouldn't have thought they could get away with the crime, since he had a diviner's powers to know the truth.

Divination was a common practice in Egypt and other parts of the ancient world. Speaking to his brothers, Joseph may have hinted at greater involvement in divination than he actually had, in order to frighten them.

Judah spoke for the whole group. He admitted that he could not disprove the allegation of theft. He even said, "God has uncovered your servants' guilt" (v. 16). (Some commentators point out that it is unclear whether he was here talking about guilt for the stealing of the cup or guilt for the selling of Joseph.)

In addition, Judah said the brothers were all willing to become slaves as punishment for the theft. Judah probably felt that it would be better for all the brothers to remain in Egypt as slaves than for some of them to return to Jacob without Benjamin. The fact that all the brothers had returned to Joseph when they had the chance to get away proves that they felt the same way.

Joseph would have none of Judah's suggestion of slavery for all the brothers. Instead, Joseph repeated the offer to let all the brothers except Benjamin go home

to Canaan. Joseph was testing them again.

Ask Yourself . . . Have I had a test of my character lately? If so, did I pass or fail?

Judah arose to make one of the most moving intercessions recorded in the Bible. After first flattering Joseph, Judah recalled an earlier discussion between the brothers and Joseph about their father and youngest brother. Then he brought Joseph up to date on what Jacob had said and done about Joseph's demand to have Benjamin brought to Egypt. Finally, Judah concluded by pleading to be kept in Egypt as a slave in place of Benjamin for the sake of their father, who would be devastated by the loss of Benjamin.

This speech proved that Judah was not the same man who earlier had come up with the idea of selling Joseph to Midianite traders. It had taken a long time, but the Lord had worked changes in his heart.

Often we are tempted to become impatient with God over the pace of spiritual development in our own life or in the lives of other believers. Yet quietly and invisibly, God is at work. When we look back over a lengthy period of time, we often can see great improvement. And even when we don't detect much spiritual growth, we still can wait faithfully for Him to operate in the lives of His people.

Ask Yourself . . . In the last year, how has God worked to make me more like His Son?

NECROMANCY HYDROMANCY

CLEROMANCY
NECROMANCY
ONEIROMANCY
CLEROMANCY
ONEIROMANCY
HYDROMANCY
CLEROMANCY
HYDROMANCY

Divination

Divination is the attempt to discover hidden truths. In the ancient world many kinds of divination were practiced. Some kinds, such as necromancy (consulting the dead), were condemned in Scripture (Lev. 19:31). Other kinds of divination, such as cleromancy (casting lots), were accepted by Scripture—with the understanding that God determined the outcome (Prov. 16:33).

From God, Joseph practiced a kind of divination called oneiromancy (interpreting dreams). God not only gave him predictive dreams of his own but also gave him the ability to know the meaning of others' dreams.

If the steward's words recorded in Genesis 44:5 are true, then Joseph also practiced hydromancy (examining liquids). Probably Egyptian hydromancy involved dropping objects into liquids, or adding one liquid to another, and then interpreting the resulting pattern in a way thought to reveal truths.

Judah's offer to become a substitute in slavery for his brother Benjamin can remind us of how Jesus Christ became our substitute on the cross.

While Benjamin, not Judah, was thought to be guilty of stealing a cup, Judah was willing to take the punishment for the crime. Similarly, the innocent Jesus has taken on Himself the punishment we deserve for our sins. Now all who believe in Him may receive His righteousness through faith, and be reconciled to the Father.

The apostle Peter wrote to a group of Christians, "[Jesus Christ] himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed'" (1 Pet. 2:24).

At the right time the Messiah came into this world as a descendant of Judah.



Joseph Reveals His Identity (45:1-15)

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!" —Genesis 45:4

As Judah was telling about Jacob's sorrow and was offering himself as a substitute for Benjamin, Joseph must have listened with rising emotion. Finally, he could hide his feelings no more. Not for a minute longer could he stand in front of his brothers and pretend to have a merely official interest in them.

Joseph decided to reveal his identity to his brothers there and then, since they had proved themselves to be changed men. But first he ordered his Egyptian attendants out of the room. The tender reunion about to occur would be a family matter, and presumably he didn't want any outsiders around to distract him and his brothers.

The brothers must have been puzzled by the ejection of the attendants. Probably all along Joseph had been talking to them through an interpreter, disguising the fact that he could understand their Hebrew speech. The interpreter would have left the room with the other attendants. How could they communicate with Joseph now?

Then to the brothers' amazement, Egypt's second most powerful man said to them in their own language, "I am Joseph!" (v. 3). For more than

20 years they had thought of Joseph as enslaved or dead. Since meeting Joseph, they had never for a moment suspected that the ruler dressed in Egyptian finery and speaking the Egyptian language was their brother. But here he stood, saying in Hebrew that he was their brother.

Joseph quickly followed up his self-revelation by asking about the father he had not seen for many years. This was the concern closest to his heart; he was eager to have more news of his father. Until this point, he would have aroused suspicion by showing too much interest in Jacob.

Joseph's brothers made no reply to his question. They were still in shock over finding themselves in the presence of Joseph. They apparently had not mentioned the name of the brother who—as the cover-up story went—had been killed by an animal (see 42:13; 44:28). So perhaps Joseph's using his own name convinced them that he really was Joseph. Now they were terrified, wondering if Joseph would destroy them for what they had done to him.

Thinking that perhaps the brothers did not believe he was who he said he was, Joseph called them to him so that they could take a closer look at his face. Then he repeated his claim to be Joseph, whom long ago they had sold into slavery. Only Joseph himself could have known the secret that they had sold him into slavery.

But that was not all; Joseph had much more to tell the brothers.

Over the years, Joseph had had

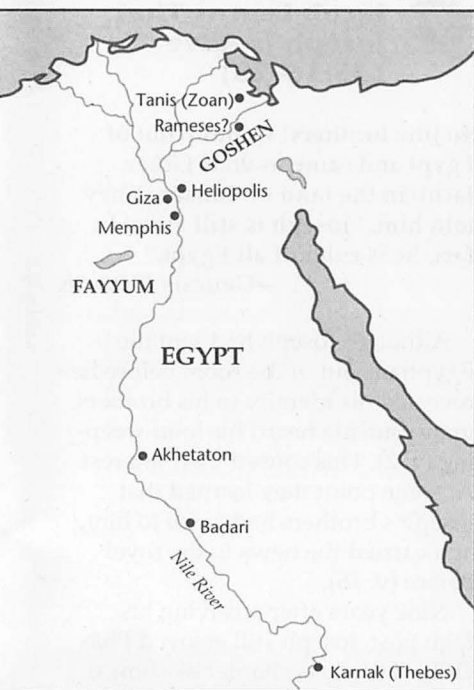
plenty of time to reflect on the strange turns his life had taken. As a man of faith, he could discern God's purposes in what had happened to him. He told his brothers that, ultimately speaking, they were not responsible for sending him to Egypt; God was responsible. God

had placed Joseph in a position of influence so that he could preserve the lives of his family members through the terrible famine God had foreseen.

Most of us cannot be sure of the reasons for the troubles that come into our lives. Nevertheless, we can be sure that nothing happens to us by chance. And we do well to reflect prayerfully on events in our lives to try to determine what God might be telling us by them. If He requires us to endure trials, it is because He has some greater good to accomplish on behalf of His people.

Ask Yourself . . . How have I seen God turn an evil into a good?

Since the first time Joseph's



The Land of Goshen

The land of Goshen is located in the northeastern section of the Nile River delta. Although the area is not large

(about 900 square miles), it is considered some of the best land in Egypt. With irrigation, it is an excellent area for grazing and for growing certain crops. The Hebrew people were still living in the land of Goshen at the time of the Exodus, four centuries after Joseph.

brothers had appeared before him, Joseph had worked out a plan for the family. He would settle them in the land of Goshen—one of the most desirable locations in Egypt. He would provide what they needed and would watch over them, especially in the five years of famine that remained. Therefore, they would not die of famine or be scattered in Canaan, but instead would be kept together and safe in Egypt. So Joseph told his brothers to go back to Canaan and bring Jacob and all the other family members to Egypt.

With the important explanations over, Joseph embraced and wept with his brothers, beginning with the youngest. Benjamin was Joseph's only full brother and the only one innocent in regard to him. Earlier, when Joseph was pretending to be an Egyptian, he must have wanted more than anything to embrace Benjamin and the others. He did not have to restrain himself anymore.

This mutual display of emotion and the conversation that followed completed the family reunion.

We should note in reading this passage that whatever bitterness Joseph may once have felt toward his brothers was all gone now. He had forgiven them. They had nothing to fear from him.

How many of us are holding grudges against someone who did something much less serious to us than sell us into slavery? If Joseph could forgive his brothers, we can forgive those who have sinned against us. Not that forgiveness is easy. But God is willing and able to

help us. Perhaps a tender reunion, complete with hugs and tears, awaits us when we forgive one who has hurt us.

Ask Yourself . . . How willing am I to forgive those who have hurt me?



Jacob Learns That Joseph Is Alive (45:16-28)

So [the brothers] went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. They told him, "Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt."

—Genesis 45:25-26

Although Joseph had sent the Egyptians out of the room before he revealed his identity to his brothers, many outside heard his loud weeping (v. 2). This roused their interest. At some point they learned that Joseph's brothers had come to him, and carried the news to the royal palace (v. 16).

Nine years after receiving his high post, Joseph still enjoyed Pharaoh's favor. As chapter 47 shows, Joseph was in the process of using the nation's grain reserves to make Pharaoh tremendously wealthy. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh was kindly disposed toward Joseph. Consequently, the news about Joseph's brothers was greeted with pleasure in the royal court.

When Joseph next had an audience with Pharaoh, the matter of

his brothers was discussed. Apparently, Joseph did not even get the chance to tell Pharaoh about his plan to bring his family to Egypt before Pharaoh instructed him to do just that. This would be a way for Pharaoh to reward Joseph for his work.

Pharaoh took an interest even in the details of the move. First, Pharaoh instructed Joseph to tell his brothers to go back to Canaan and gather up their family members. The brothers would carry with them provisions and the promise of land and goods in Egypt. Next, Pharaoh instructed Joseph to tell his brothers to take Egyptian carts with them for transporting their families. They had no need to bring their belongings to Egypt, since these would be more than replaced in Egypt.

As Pharaoh instructed, Joseph provided his brothers with the carts in which they would bring their families back to Egypt in comfort and style. He also gave them food and other provisions. He gave each brother new clothing, with Benjamin receiving the most. He even gave

Benjamin silver weighing three hundred shekels, or about seven and a half pounds.

Joseph also sent a whole caravan of food and gifts for his father. Not only would these gifts please Jacob, but also they would serve as proof that Joseph still loved and honored his father.

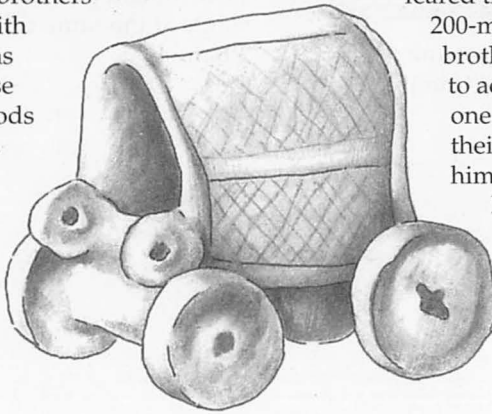
Finally, Joseph instructed his brothers, “Don’t quarrel on the way!” (45:24). Probably he

feared that during the 200-mile journey the brothers would begin to accuse and blame one another for their parts in selling him. Since Joseph had forgiven the brothers, he wanted them to forgive one another. The past was past.

Ask Yourself
... How prone am I to pointless quarreling?

The father, Jacob, must have spent

the weeks that his sons were away from home worrying about them, especially about Benjamin. And he must have been overjoyed when all 11 appeared at his door safe and sound. But then he was in for a shock. His sons were all telling him some wild story about Joseph’s still being alive—and ruling Egypt! This



This drawing represents an Assyrian terra-cotta model of a cart dating from shortly before Joseph’s time. Pharaoh sent Joseph’s brothers back to Canaan with carts to collect their family members (Gen. 45:19).

was incredible.

Further persuasion, along with the sight of the carts, animals, and riches, finally convinced Jacob. It took a little while before Jacob could give up his long-held belief that Joseph was dead. But he did give up that mistaken belief, and “the spirit of their father Jacob revived” (v. 27). Jacob vowed to go to his son Joseph before he died.

Genesis 46:1–47:26 in Brief

Jacob fulfilled his vow. He left Canaan with all his family mem-

bers, servants, livestock, and possessions. Joseph traveled from home and met Jacob in the land of Goshen.

After the reunion, Joseph escorted his father’s caravan to Pharaoh and presented his brothers and father to Egypt’s ruler. In keeping with Pharaoh’s suggestion, Joseph then provided land and food for the Hebrew immigrants. Joseph himself, however, continued in his government position, saving lives while at the same time enriching Pharaoh.

13

Jacob and Joseph Say Their Last Words

Genesis 47:27–50:26

Genesis 47:27–31 in Brief

Having come to Egypt because of a famine, Jacob's family stayed on there even after the famine ended, probably because they were prospering. But Jacob knew his family's true home was in Canaan. As he neared death, he made Joseph promise to bury him in Canaan with his father and grandfather.

a Jacob Blesses Manasseh and Ephraim (48:1–22)

[Jacob] blessed [Ephraim and Manasseh] that day and said, "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing:

'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. —Genesis 48:20

Chapters 48 and 49 record a deathbed scene. With his last remaining strength, Jacob sat on the edge of his bed and spoke to his sons. They had been called to

him because of his final illness. Even Joseph came from his palace with his two boys.

Jacob knew death was closing in on him, so he performed the traditional duty of blessing his sons. This meant he divided the inheritance among them and invoked God's blessing upon them. Since Jacob's family was in covenant with God, the belief that their descendants would one day possess the Promised Land lies behind all of Jacob's words.

Jacob began his speech by addressing Joseph, telling how God had blessed him long ago at Luz, or Bethel (48:3–4; compare 28:10–22). God had promised that Jacob's descendants would become numerous. In light of the blessing, Jacob claimed Manasseh and Ephraim as his own sons. Any other sons Joseph might have would remain Joseph's own; they would not be equal with their uncles, as Manasseh and Ephraim were.

In those days, the oldest son usually received twice as much of the inheritance as any other son. Jacob's oldest son was Reuben, but Reuben proved himself unworthy (35:22). So Jacob instead gave the

double portion to Joseph by adopting Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Through them, Joseph's descendants would be two tribes, not one.

Then Jacob mentioned the death and burial of his favorite wife, Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Perhaps he mentioned her to suggest that Manasseh and Ephraim would take the place of any other sons he would have had by Rachel if she had not died early. But mentioning his sorrow at her death, Jacob's voice seems to have trailed off. Did he momentarily become lost in thought about the beloved wife with whom he soon would be reunited in death?

Finally, Jacob saw two young men he did not recognize. Surely in the 17 years he had spent in Egypt, Jacob had gotten to know his grandsons Manasseh and Ephraim. But his eyesight was failing, and he could not easily recognize them.

Having been told who the two young men were, Jacob had them come near. He kissed them and embraced them while they sat on or stood by his knees. Scholars think receiving children onto one's knees was a symbol of adoption.

Next, Joseph bowed down to his father to thank Jacob for the honor Jacob was showing him.

Now it was time for the actual blessings. Joseph maneuvered his sons so that Manasseh would be at the right hand of Jacob to receive the better blessing as the older son. That was the way it was supposed to work. But Jacob crossed his arms

to put his right hand on the younger son, Ephraim.

Jacob's reversal of his hands did not mean that Ephraim would be blessed and Manasseh would not be blessed. In fact, Jacob invoked God's blessing on both young men (vv. 15-16, 20). But Ephraim would have the superior blessing.

Joseph saw his father's crossing of hands as a mistake and tried to correct it. But Jacob gently refused to switch his hands. With prophetic insight, he said the descendants of both young men would be great, but Ephraim's descendants would be greater.

Centuries later, the tribe of Ephraim did become more powerful than the tribe of Manasseh. During the wilderness wandering, the tribe of Manasseh was led by the banner of the tribe of Ephraim. At the time of the divided kingdom, the northern 10 tribes of Israel were often collectively called Ephraim.

As Jacob blessed the two young men, Jacob must have thought back to the time he had stolen his brother's birthright. Like Ephraim, Jacob had been elevated above his older brother, Esau. Jacob knew from personal experience that sometimes God acts in ways that upset human customs or ideas.

Ask Yourself . . . How ready am I to accept the unexpected from God?

In verse 21 (as in verse 15) the name "Joseph" refers, not literally to Joseph, but to Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph. Jacob

assured these young men that they—that is, their descendants—would one day return to the Promised Land. In expectation of that return, Jacob gave them a special mark of favor by willing them a certain piece of land.

Genesis 49:1–28 in Brief

Having blessed his adopted sons, Jacob proceeded to bless his natural sons. His words prophetically anticipated the characteristics of the tribes that would come from the men.

According to Jacob, the tribes of Judah and Joseph (that is, Manasseh and Ephraim) had the greatest future. These prophecies were borne out. The tribe of Manasseh would occupy the largest land area of any tribe. The tribe of Ephraim would become the leader of the 10 northern tribes of Israel. The tribe of Judah would possess the land that included Jerusalem, and would eventually become a separate kingdom. Greatest of all, the Messiah came from the tribe of Judah.

What Land Taken from the Amorites?

What place was Jacob talking about when he willed to Manasseh and Ephraim “the ridge of land I took from the Amorites with my sword and my bow” (Gen. 48:22)?

Since “ridge of land” translates the word *shechem*, some commentators have suggested that this was the land Jacob bought near the city named Shechem (33:19). If so, then the sword and bow may refer to the actions of Simeon and Levi against the men of Shechem (34:25–29).

Others believe Jacob’s words refer to a piece of land and to a fight not recorded in Genesis.

b Jacob Dies and Is Buried (49:29–50:14)

When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people. —Genesis 49:33

After Jacob finished the address to his sons, he repeated his request that he be buried in the cave of Machpelah [mack-PEE-luh] along with his ancestors and his wife Leah. Then Jacob died. He was 147 years old (47:28).

Joseph led the way in displaying grief over the death of his father.

It's important that we grieve well when those we care about die. On the one hand, we need not "grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). God promises that beyond the grave lies eternal life in heaven for all who believe in Christ. But on the other hand, the loss of someone we love will naturally cause us pain. We should admit our grief and express it freely and honestly.

Ask Yourself . . . How well do I handle the loss of loved ones?

Once Joseph's initial display of grief was over, he gave orders for physicians under his management to embalm Jacob's body. Apparently,

Jacob was made into a mummy. This was the usual treatment in Egypt for the body of an important person who had died.

Ordinarily, professional embalmers, not physicians, were called in to mummify a body. Joseph may have wanted physicians to embalm his father so as to avoid the religious ceremonies that typically went along with embalming.

According to records dating from a period shortly after Joseph's time, the embalming process usually took 70 days. Jacob's embalming, taking place earlier and perhaps

in a simpler form, was completed in only 40 days. But the mourning went on for another 30 days.

Since a pharaoh was mourned for 72 days (only 2 days more than Jacob), Jacob's mourning period shows the great honor he was accorded.

At the end of the 70-day mourning period, Joseph sought permission from Pharaoh to leave the country to bury his father. For some reason he did not make this

Making Mummies

According to ancient Egyptian belief, the dead live on in another world and continue to need their bodies. Thus the Egyptians developed advanced embalming techniques. First, embalmers would remove most internal organs. Then they would place the body in natron (sodium carbonate) to dry out the tissues. Finally, they would wrap the body in linen bandages and place it in a coffin.

Well-preserved mummies have been found dating back to the time of Joseph and earlier.

request to Pharaoh in person.

In his request Joseph played on the Egyptian monarch's respect for the dead. Joseph mentioned the oath he had given to his father to bury Jacob in the land of Canaan. Pharaoh was quite willing to let Joseph go for such a purpose.

In Egypt, funeral processions were major spectacles. Jacob's funeral procession was no exception. His body was accompanied by Joseph, Joseph's brothers, and other members of their family. Out of respect for Joseph, many Egyptian officials also accompanied the body. To protect such an important crowd, mounted soldiers went along.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I willing to get involved in helping friends who are grieving?

The destination of the funeral procession was the cave of Machpelah, not far from Mamre. Apparently, those in the procession did not take the shortest route to the burial site. Rather, they went around the Salt Sea and came at their destination from the north. They may have wanted to avoid problems with the Philistines in the area lying between Egypt and Mamre.

The procession stopped for a week at the threshing floor of Atad. We don't know where this spot was, except that it was near the



This structure in Hebron covers the suspected site of the cave of Machpelah, where Jacob and other members of his family were buried.

Jordan River. But here, at the point of entering the Promised Land, the group observed another mourning period. For this reason the place was named *Abel Mizraim* ("Mourning of the Egyptians").

Eventually, the body arrived at its final resting place: the cave of Machpelah. Probably here there were more ceremonies. Then everyone in the party returned to Egypt.

C

Joseph Reassures His Brothers (50:15–21)

Joseph said to [his brothers], "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

—Genesis 50:19–20

Sometime after Jacob's death, his ten oldest sons began feeling vulnerable. Their father was no longer around to protect them from their powerful brother. Would Joseph now seek revenge for their selling him into slavery many years before?

After talking over their situation, the brothers settled on a plan. They wanted to get things straightened out between themselves and Joseph once and for all.

The brothers sent a message to Joseph. The message said that Jacob had left instructions for Joseph to forgive his brothers. In that day, the requests of a dying man were given much weight. To this message, the brothers added their own plea for forgiveness.

Some commentators believe the brothers made up the instructions they said were from Jacob. The commentators say that if Jacob had wanted to give instructions of this sort to Joseph, he could have done so at the deathbed interview.

Lying or truthful, the message made Joseph weep. It had been at least 17 years since Joseph had assured his brothers that he bore them no grudge. As far as we know, in all the intervening years he had done nothing to harm them, and in fact, he had helped them in many ways. Yet still they did not trust him. This was enough to make a grown man cry.

Ask Yourself . . . Do I have trouble believing others when they say they have forgiven me?

The brothers followed their message in person. In Joseph's presence they prostrated themselves and called themselves his slaves, putting themselves at his mercy. In other words, they were right back where they had been all those years before (50:18; compare 44:14, 16).

Just as he had done many years before, Joseph dealt tenderly with his brothers. He told them not to be afraid. He would not judge them; that was up to God.

Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Only God has the authority and the perspective to know what's best in our situation. It is not our place to strike back to even the score.

Ask Yourself . . . When I am injured by others, how willing am I to leave vengeance to God ?

Joseph gave his brothers the same explanation for his slavery that he had given them before. He said God had used their wickedness for a good purpose. "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Gen. 50:20; compare 45:5).

We experience the most despair from our trials before we see where God is taking us. During those times our focus must be on the Lord. He can take the harm inflicted upon us by others and use that to work for our benefit. With our eyes upon Him, we can be confident of the future He has in store

for us, both here and in eternity.

Ask Yourself . . . Am I in the midst of a storm? If so, are my eyes upon God or on the dark skies that surround me?

Joseph's slavery in Egypt had been a part of God's plan to save lives, especially the lives of his family. And now Joseph would continue to provide for his brothers and their families as he had done while their father was alive.



Joseph Dies and Is Buried (50:22–26)

Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin in Egypt. —Genesis 50:26

The final verses of Genesis are reserved for a description of Joseph's end. He finished out his life in Egypt amid his large family. At one time Jacob had said Joseph would become a "fruitful vine" (49:22), and Joseph began to see that prediction come true. He lived long enough to see "the third generation of [his son] Ephraim's children" (50:23). If placing children on one's knees was a sign of adoption, as scholars suspect, then Joseph adopted some of his great-grandchildren.

As the time of Joseph's death approached, he called his brothers together. Of course, some of his brothers may have died by this time. The Hebrew word for "broth-

ers" (v. 24) can refer to other relatives. Perhaps if some of Joseph's brothers had died, they were represented by their sons, Joseph's nephews.

Although Joseph had found power and wealth in Egypt, he wanted to be buried in the Promised Land as his ancestors had been. But he did not ask his brothers to bury him there right after his death, as in the case of Jacob. Instead, he asked them to carry his bones with them when they returned to the Promised Land.

Scripture shows that Joseph's wishes were respected. At the time of the Exodus, Moses made sure the Hebrews took with them the bones of Joseph (Exod. 13:19). Eventually, Joseph was buried in the tract of land Jacob had purchased near Shechem (Josh. 24:32).

At the time Joseph made his request to be buried in Canaan, he promised his brothers, "God will surely come to your aid" (Gen. 50:24–25). This looked forward to when the Hebrews would experience the oppression that led to full-scale slavery by the time of Moses. Despite the slavery that would one day come upon the Israelites, Joseph had perfect confidence in the deliverance that God would bring.

Ask Yourself . . . In what way would I like God to come to my aid?

Joseph died at the age of 110, which was regarded by the Egyptians as an ideal age at which to die. Many references to that effect have

been found in ancient Egyptian writings. Joseph's death at 110 must have confirmed to the Egyptians that God's blessing had indeed been on Joseph's life.

Joseph was embalmed and placed in a coffin, where his body would await transport to the land of promise.

Thus the book that opened with the beginnings of life on earth ends with a dead man in a coffin. The wages of sin is death. But the hope for eternal life can be found in the faith of the patriarchs.

Each patriarch, including Joseph, died in full confidence of God's grace.

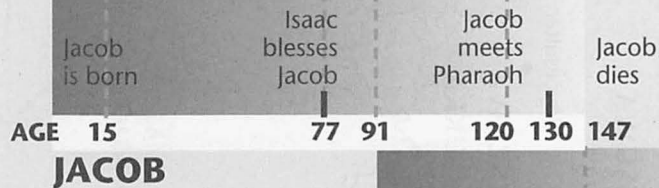
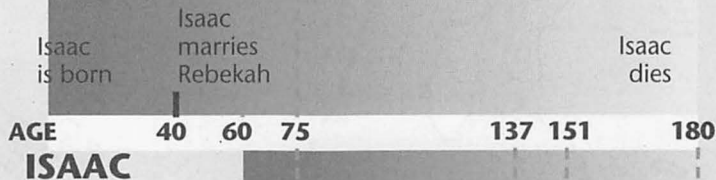
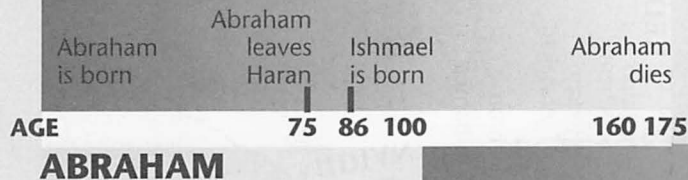
What about us? Do we have hope and confidence of eternal life?

God's redemptive program began with the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But His plan all along

was to bless all peoples of the earth. This He is doing as men and women everywhere put their lives in the hands of the Savior, Jesus Christ.



This ancient coffin from Egypt suggests how Joseph's mummified body may have been buried.

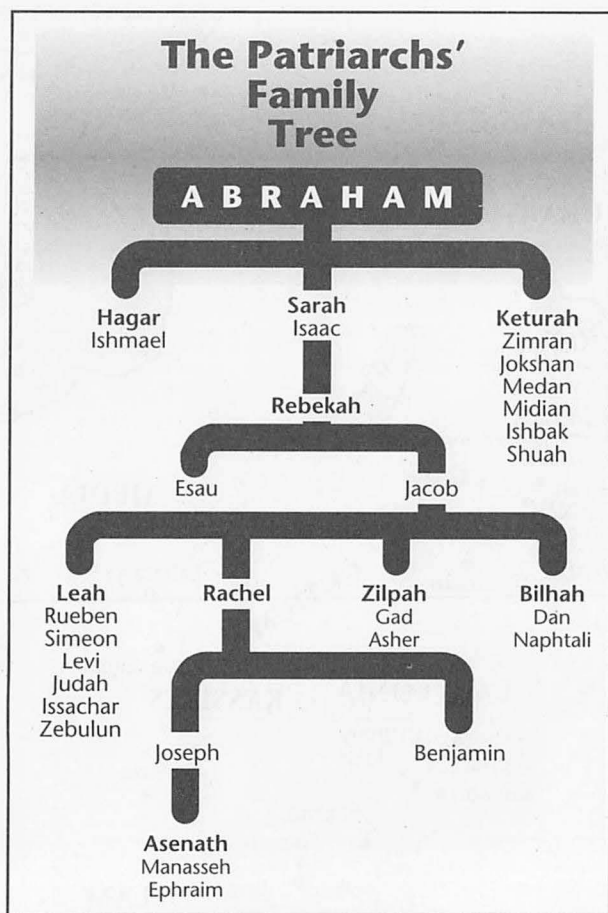


Lives of the

PATRIARCHS







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