

# What were we put in the world to do?

## Leaders Guide



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

*Genesis 1:31*



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# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation

### Study 1 | Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

#### INTRODUCTION

It is far too easy to read the first chapters of Genesis with the questions of our time: “were the days of creation 24 hours long?” “how long ago did this happen?” “is this history or myth?” “how does this square with modern views of science and evolution?” Of course, these are important questions and we can probably learn some things from Genesis 1-11 that are relevant to them. But we don’t learn very much from a text if we ask it questions that it was not written to answer. Genesis is, frankly, about deeper issues than biological origins. It is answering questions like: “what *are* human beings? what are we here *for*? what is our relationship to the nature and the world? Essentially, Genesis 1 is not about the “*How*” of creation but rather about the “*Why*”. That is, ultimately, far more important.

**Note:** Though the discussion will certainly begin to touch on them, we will give more time in next week’s session to the discussion of 1) creation and evolution, and 2) the meaning of the “*image of God*”. Keep this in mind.

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

#### a) The relationship between v.1 and v.2

There have been at least three ways to interpret the relationship of verses 1 and 2.

a) The least likely interpretation reads v.2 as a contrast to v.1. This view translates: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, but then the earth became formless and void and dark, and God had to go back and create it all over.” This is the so-called “Gap” theory which posits that the six days of (re-)creation occurred many years after an initial creation which was followed by some disaster. Some people try to place dinosaurs etc. in this “gap” between v.1 and v.2. But there is no grammatical basis for this view. There is no “But” to begin v.2 nor is there any reason to translate the verb “was” as “became”. This is an example of how we can try to force a text to answer questions it is not addressing. I mention it because this view has surprising circulation.

b) A more likely interpretation reads v.2 as a parenthetical statement to a clause completed in v.3. This view translates: “When God began to create, (the earth being without form and void), God said...” This is not impossible grammatically,

but it is not the most natural way of reading, and we have to ask the question — if God did not create the original “stuff” of the earth, where did it come from? Hebrews 11:3 and many other passages tell us that there was no universe at all before God spoke. See also John 1:3, Col.1:16, Rom.11:36. If the earth were “already there” then God did not create absolutely everything, and that would compromise the absoluteness of his power and authority. c) The most likely interpretation is that v.2 is the result of v.1. This view translates: “God created the heavens and the earth. But after the initial creative act, the earth was still shapeless and empty. Then God proceeded to say...”

b) What are the means for creation?

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

**2. A quick reading of Genesis 1 reveals a highly repetitive, patterned text.**

**a) What are the main repetitions — words, phrases, ideas? b) What broader repetitive pattern do you see between the first six days? i.e. how are days 4-6 a recap of 1-3?**

a) The main repetitions

The main repetition is the word “*God*” with the word “*made*” or “*created*”. “*God*” appears 35 times in the first 34 verses. He overwhelms the text, he dominates and overshadows everything. Nothing happens unless he makes it happen. Nothing is made or created except by him. As we saw immediately above, the extreme repetition is a way of saying, “*without him was not anything made that was made*” (Jn 1:3).

The second main repetitive pattern is the phrase “*And God said*”. This occurs once on the first (v.3), second (v.5), fourth (v.14) and fifth (v.20) days of creation. But it occurs twice on the third day and several times on the sixth day. This shows the importance of the Word of God in creation.

A third main repetitive pattern is the idea of the power of God’s Word. Repeatedly we are told, “*and there was*” or “*and it was so*” (v.3, 9, 11, 14, 24, 30). We do not see God saying, “I’m going to do this” and then going to do it. Almost always, he says: “Let there (or it) be...” and immediately “it was so”.

Our words only express the intention to act, but God's word *is* an action itself.

A fourth main repetition is the "benediction" phrase — "*and God saw that... was good*". God's assessment of the goodness of creation occurs in v.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31. In verse 31, we have a kind of 'master benediction', where God sees "*all that he had made... was very good*".

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

#### b) The pattern of the days

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

#### "Kingdoms"

- Day 1** Realms of Light and Dark
- Day 2** Realms of Sea and Sky
- Day 3** Realm of the Earth (Plants)

#### "Kings of the Kingdom"

- Day 4** Lights to "*govern*" (v.18) Light and Dark
- Day 5** Creatures to "*fill*" or dominate Sea and Sky
- Day 6** Creatures of the Earth; Humankind
- Day 7** God the Creator

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

1) God – The chapter shows us:

A *personal God*. The verbs of the chapter show us a God who cannot be in any way referred to as an "It". God speaks, plans, creates, sees, evaluates, enjoys. First "lesson": This means that ultimately he is not simply a "force" or an "all soul". He is *distinct* from the universe, rather than being the 'soul' of the

universe, as Eastern religions teach. That means that, contrary to the teachings of mystical religions, we do not know this God simply through mystical experience and oneness with nature. He is personal. and we must know him as we know other persons, through a) listening to his verbal self-disclosure (see below), b) two way communication, c) and personal commitment.

*The only God.* It is remarkable to notice that this text, written in very ancient times, makes not the slightest reference to other gods or deities. The possibility does not even arise. This is a claim of exclusivity. This God is the only God. Second “lesson”: This means that only God should be worshipped, not anything else. His personality (see above) means we are not *pan-theists*, but his uniqueness means that we are not *poly-theists*. This chapter warns about the extreme danger of idolatry, because the things God has created are very beautiful and attractive. We noticed that the things God makes in days 4-6 are “rulers”. Both then and now, if we fall into worship of created things, they become ‘rulers’ of our hearts. But we must not let that happen. Genesis 1 tells us that God is ruler over all.

*A sovereign God.* The power of God is seen in that a mere word from him brings itself about. Also, there is nothing in existence that does not owe it’s existence to him. There is no energy, force, or substance that is there before him — he is the source of everything. Third “lesson”: Because he created everything, nothing is a) outside of his control, or b) outside of his rightful authority. Therefore, we cannot simply go to him for forgiveness or for crisis needs. We must make him supreme Lord of every area of our lives. It is “all or nothing” with God.

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

*A good God.* Nothing he makes is imperfect. Everything is “good”. Everything he touches is pleasing, joy-producing, wholesome. Fifth “lesson”: As Derek Kidner says: “*His ways are perfect. The series of expulsions and cataclysms in Genesis declare that [God] can make no truce with sin.*” (Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p.32). Genesis 1 foreshadows what Isaiah discovered later, that God is perfectly holy. In a pre-fallen (non-sinful) condition, that fact is not threatening. But as we see in Isaiah 6, this quality of perfect goodness is now traumatic to sinful people.



2) The created world/nature – The chapter shows us:

*A real world.* Eastern religions believe that the natural world is only an ‘emanation’ of God, a projection that is superficial, not ultimately real. Their understanding of salvation and eternity is to be liberated from the illusion of a physical world and an individual self. But Genesis 1 shows us that the world is not simply some kind of emanation but is a real existence, outside of God. Though it is created by him and sustained by him (Heb.1:2-3), there was a time in which it did not exist, and it was given existence through a creative act. First lesson: Christians are therefore ‘realists’ compared to many others today. Movies like *The Matrix* posit that physical ‘laws’ and limitations are an illusion, that if the mind could exercise its power we could fly, dodge bullets, and so on. Many versions of the New Age movement and some revived nature religions (like Wicca) are based on this idea that we can transcend diseases and other physical limitations “by faith”. But Christians know that the body and the world is real. Living within limits is a good thing.

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

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

God does not exist — and we have to face the consequences of this. We are strongly opposed to secular ethics that would like to abolish God and then find an a priori Good... In other words, nowhere is it written that we must be honest, that we must not lie — because we are on a plane where there are only human beings. Dostoyevsky wrote: “if there is no God everything is permitted.”

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

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

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

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

– David Atkinson, The Message of Genesis 1-11, p.26.

**Sum:** See how remarkably nuanced and balanced a view we have of the world here! Secularism can lead us to exploit nature, paganism to worship it, legalism to fear it, pantheism to ignore it. Gen 1 will lead us to love it, care for it, explore it, and have an almost child-like delight in it.

**4. a) What is dissimilar between the way humanity is created and the way other things are created? b) What does that teach us?**

a) What is dis-similar between the way humanity is created?

Derek Kidner writes: "'Let us make' stands in tacit contrast with 'Let the earth bring forth' (v.24); the note of self-communing and the impressive plural proclaim it a momentous step; and this done, the whole creation is complete." (DK, p.50). Kidner points out here that while usually God simply speaks ("Let there be") and it happens ("and there was"), when it comes to humankind, the creative act is not at all that simple. First there seems to be much more planning and thought (Kidner's "self-communing"). He says "Let us make" in v.27 and only in v.28 does it read "so God created man..." Also unique is God's use of the plural when speaking of the act of creation — "Let us make". Some people see the hint of the Trinity here, while others think God is referring to the angels around him. Kidner is right in saying that, in either case, it means some deeper kind creative act.

Secondly, *Vis-à-vis the animals man is set apart by his office (1:26b,28b; 2:19; cf. Ps.8:4-8; James 3:7)...* (DK, p.50) Though there is a brief reference to the sun and moon "governing" the day and night (v.18), and while all the plants and animals are called to "teem" and "reproduce" only humans are explicitly given a 'job'. They are called to "subdue" and "rule over" the earth.

Thirdly, "but his crowning glory is his relation to God." Only we are said to be made "in the image" of God. Though we will look at this more next week, it is clear that we have a closer relationship to God than any other creature. The metaphor of "image" means a "reflection" or a "small scale copy". On the one hand, that means that we are like God — he is not Wholly Other and

mysterious. On the other hand, that means we are *not* God. There is no indication of our being “part of God”. Most importantly, “*image*” contains the seeds of the idea of “sonship”. Just as children are born in the image of their parents, so we are called to be his children.

b) What does this teach us?

First, we learn the dignity of human beings. We have seen God creating a hierarchy of kings and kingdoms, and last of all is humankind. Thus we are the crown of creation, and we are the result of the ‘highest’, most complex creative act. A human being is a greater natural ‘wonder’ than all the oceans and mountains and birds and fish and animals. C.S.Lewis says that, apart from the Sacramental bread and wine (and different theologians would debate this!) “*your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses*”. (*The Weight of Glory*) Secondly, we learn the two-fold calling of human beings: a) to serve God as his vice-regents over the world, caring for and cultivating creation, and b) to know God as his children, loving him and coming to reflect his character in our being.

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

John 1

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

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

Colossians 1

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

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

**Sum:** John 1 and Colossians 1 tie salvation and creation together in Jesus in a way that most religion does not. We think of "salvation" as nothing but forgiveness and inner peace. But the Bible tells us that the goal of salvation is nothing less than all of creation regained and restored. Jesus himself was so committed to his creation that he was "un-created" on the cross, so we could be re-created and restored in him. Jesus goal is nothing less than the entire rehabilitation of the beauty and integrity of all creation — both visible and invisible (Col.1:16). We are not to be content as Christians simply to see individuals forgiven and made happy. We are to use our gifts to heal the hurts and rifts in society, in culture, in nature. We fight disease, unbelief, injustice, hostility between individuals and peoples.

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

– C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity*



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation, work and rest

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

#### INTRODUCTION

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

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

#### a) Do you notice any difference in the details and order of creation?

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

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

#### b) Do you notice any difference in the style and literary form?

We noted last week how highly 'patterned' and repetitious Genesis 1 is, with a remarkable amount of repetition of words, phrases and ideas. When read, it sounds like something that was chanted. The six days of creation themselves are clearly patterned, with the first three days being the creation of 'realms'

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

**2. Since a single author either wrote both accounts or else put them together, they could not have been seen as contradictory, but rather as complementary. How could you best express how the two accounts supplement each other?**

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

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

I believe that the best answer to the questions "why were the two accounts included together?" and "how do they complement one another?" I realize that many people become very nervous about any failure to take Genesis 1 "literally". There are two objections:

**Objection #1** – "If we don't take this literally, why should we take the gospels literally or anything else?" Response: We always read literature differently depending on its genre. No one takes Judges 5 or Exodus 15 or the Psalms



literally. Why? They are obviously poetry — they give all the obvious signals. On the other hand, when we read Judges, Kings, Matthew, and Acts, we are obviously reading narrative history. Again, we have all the signals, with dates given and prose style. There are only a few places in the Bible where the 'genre' is not easily identifiable. Genesis 1, Ecclesiastes are some examples. There will always be debates about how to interpret those passages. But to grant that one part of Scripture can't be taken literally is not to say that all parts must be.

**Objection #2** – "If we don't take this literally, aren't we 'opening the door' to the teaching of evolution?" Response: David Atkinson writes:

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

– David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (The Bible Speaks Today Series), p.31]

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

- 3. a) What do we learn from the fact that God worked 6 days and then rested? (2:2) (Why did the author depict the creation of God as a typical 7 day-week?)**  
**b) What do we learn from the fact that God planted a garden (2:8)?**

a) What do we learn from the fact that God put in a work week?

The most obvious reason that the author would have depicted God's creation as a regular work week was to relate our own actual work in a week to God's work. This tells us something of the basic *dignity* of work. The passage is

saying: "Look, even the great 'God' is not above work!" The bald statement (twice) in 2:2-3 that God did "*work*" is extremely important. Some Greeks believed that their gods created humanity to do hard labor that was too demeaning for them to do! We saw last week that the Greeks tended to pit matter against spirit. The physical was considered dirty and demeaning — while the immaterial and the spiritual was considered good. Therefore, in Greek thought, work is a 'necessary evil'. We should aspire to be free from it as much as possible. In complete contradiction to that view we have Genesis 1-2. Here is a God who works, in fact, who puts in a full work-week, just like anyone else. So we learn here that *work has dignity because it is something that God does*.

b) What do we learn from the fact that God planted a garden?

Not only do we learn that work itself has great dignity, but we also learn that *all* kinds of work have dignity. If your world-view does not grasp the *goodness* of material creation, then 'manual' labor — labor which is more physical and which involves more contact with the 'stuff' of natural world — will be seen as lower and beneath us. Greek philosophy was one source of this view of work, but the current era of global capitalism has given us a new resources for despising work like farming or teaching and caring for children. 'Information' work now pays far better than manufacturing, etc. Also, though feminism has been rightly seeking to open up the public-work world for women, it has unfortunately demeaned child-rearing and domestic work because it is 'non-paying'.

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

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

– Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne, *Eden and Beyond: Genesis 1-11*

**4. 2:8-25. a) List all the human needs that are fully provided for in the earthly paradise. b) What do we learn from the fact that God put us to work in a garden in paradise (2:15)?**

a) List all the human needs fulfilled in Eden.

Derek Kidner shows how work was part of the fully-orbed delights and conditions of this earthly paradise:

"The earthly paradise... is a model of parental care. The fledgling is sheltered but not smothered: on all sides discoveries and encounters await him to draw out his powers of discernment and choice, and there is ample nourishment for his aesthetic, physical and spiritual

appetites; further, there is a man's work before him for body and mind (v.15, 19)." (Kidner, p.61)

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

b) What do we learn from the fact that God put work into paradise?

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

**5. Read Exodus 20:8-11. a) Make a list of some common views of work which are prevalent today but which differ from the Biblical view and attitude toward work. b) Which of these wrong views do you tend to fall into? What can you do about it?**

a) A list of common views of work.

We have seen three things, so far, about work. First, work is *necessary for my own fulfillment* as a human being. It was put in paradise (2:15) along with many other things to meet all our needs. Second, work is *for the care and benefit of the world and others around us*. The purpose of our work is to "care for" — to cultivate and protect — creation. Third, work is nonetheless a duty. It is something that we are commanded to do (2:15), and something that expends energy (since we need to rest from it). As we can see, then, the Biblical theology of work is quite rich, and many modern day views of work are distortions, because they take only one aspect of the original divine design for work.

One common view of work is *work as my only identity*. The basis for this view is the God-given aspect of human fulfillment in work (see Eccles 3:22, 5:12). Accomplishments in work are important to help us know who we are. Thus many names — “Fisher, Baker, Smith” — are descriptions of jobs. Why? Work is so powerful in our lives that it helps create a “self” and an identity. Also, work is also important because it gives our life structure. As we saw, human fulfillment *is* a Biblical purpose of work. All by itself, however, this view of work leads to distortions. It can lead, of course, to true workaholism. It also can lead to “careerism” — a selfish concern only for one’s own career rather than for serving the common good. Another result of this view of work can be, ironically, deep dissatisfaction with work. If you think that the main or only purpose of work is to be personally satisfying and fulfilling, you are discounting the influence of sin on work (cf. Gen. 3:17ff.) and forgetting that our work is for others for service to the world as well. One of the marks of this distorted view of work is the 7 day work week, with little or no ‘sabbath’. In this work-view, rest is not a blessing, but a just necessary (unpleasant) respite so I can keep working. But in the garden, work was only one of many things that we need. It cannot give us what worship, aesthetics, fellowship, etc. can give us. It must know its place. It cannot meet all our needs.

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

These first two distortions miss the balance of Exodus 20:8-11, in which both work and rest are to be held in balance and each seen as a ‘good’.

A third view of work is not so common and is an improvement on the first two. This is to see *work as a sacrifice for others*. For example, many immigrants who come to the U.S. and work horrendous hours in bad conditions for little pay do so in order to bring their children and their families “up” in the world. Others see work as mainly service to their society or community. This too *is* a Biblical purpose of work. We have obligations to others. II Thess. 3:8 reminds us that if we don’t work, we burden others, and thus the Bible lays it down as a command — he who does not work should not eat (II Thess. 3:10). All by itself,

though, this view of work will be inadequate motivation. This is less of a distortion than the first two views, I think. But in the long run, it could lead people to burn out (like the “work-as-identity” view) or to take jobs that are too unadapted to one’s gifts (like the “work-as-duty” view).

Perhaps the view of Genesis to work could be called “*work as partnering with God*”. This is the view of work that encompasses all the others and keeps them in their proper context.

Work is permeated with purpose; it is intended to serve God, benefit humankind, and make nature subservient to the moral program of creation... Therefore we apply our whole being — heart and mind, as well as hand — to the daily job. As God’s fellow workers, we reflect God’s creative activity on Monday no less than on Sunday.

– Carl Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*

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

– Lester DeKoster, *Work, the Meaning of Your Life*

b) Which of these views do you tend to fall into? What can you do about it?

There are many possible answers here. One of the most important practical issues in looking at our work live involves the balancing of our hopes for work with Christian realism. Work is neither a necessary evil *nor* the only way we are to get a self and find fulfillment. Since the Fall, work is cursed, but it is not a curse. Because of sin, a curse rests on all of the world, including work (“cursed is the ground because of you...” Gen 3:17ff.) Thus all our labors will be somewhat frustrated, we will never reach satisfaction in work. Sin makes work toilsome, but even under the curse, work will bear fruit “in toil you shall eat of it...” On the other hand, we must make every effort to discover work that satisfies our gifts and calling and produces value for others around us.

To look for complete fulfillment, or for *little* fulfillment, is missing the Biblical vision for work.

**6. 1:31-2:3. The phrase 'Sabbath observance' has a negative ring to us, but that is not the case here! a) What does the text imply about what God's 'rest' is? Read Exodus 23:10-11, Deut.7-11; Lev.25:8-17. b) How can we follow his example of Sabbath rest better in our own lives?**

a) What does the text imply about what God's 'rest' is?

First, since God cannot get 'tired', we know that his 'rest' cannot be mere inactivity (as ours sometimes must be). Rather, the close linking of 2:3 with the master benediction of 1:31 indicates that God (1) enjoyed and delighted in (2) a work that was in some sense "*finished*" and thus capable of enjoyment. Thus Kidner says: "*It is the rest of achievement, not inactivity, for he nurtures what He creates; we may compare the symbolism of Jesus 'seated' after His finished redemption (Heb.10:12), to dispense its benefits.*" (DK, p. 53). These two aspects are very important. God delights in his creation, and enjoys the benefits of a finished achievement.

Second, there is no '*evening and morning*' to the seventh day (2:2-3). This means that the seventh 'day' continues to the present and that is why believers are invited to enter it in various ways throughout the Scripture. In the Old Testament, of course, the people were called to rest from their work one day a week so that they may be refreshed (cf. Exod.23:12. But there were many other 'levels' and ways to participate in God's sabbath. The Israelites were called to give their *land* "rest" one year out of seven — a Sabbath year (Exod.23:10-11). This denotes care of the created environment. When God brought Israel into the good land of Canaan, and gave them an ordered society, he called it entering the land of 'rest' (Deut.12:9; Ps. 95:8-11). In Leviticus 25:8-17, there was even prescribed a 'Year of Jubilee' which was to be on the 50th year — the Seventh Sabbath year — in which all slaves were freed, all debts forgiven, and all property lost through normal economic means was to be returned to the original family allotments. To join God in his Sabbath was more than to knock off work once a week. It is about devoting yourself to enjoying, affirming, and nurturing life — especially weak and fragile life. This shows that the "Sabbath" was an extremely deep and profound concept. Indeed — it is almost about the meaning of life itself. God calls us to enjoy and care for his created world *with* him.

b) How can we follow his example better in our own lives?

We join God in his Sabbath in at least three practical ways (based on the Old Testament texts above). We join him when a) we nurture our created bodies and souls once a week, b) we join in enjoying and protecting the wonders of nature, and c) we cultivate a society in which life is protected and honored. (This last reason is why traditionally even the Puritans allowed 'works of charity

and mercy' on the Sabbath. To help the poor is part of joining God in the Sabbath of enjoying and nurturing life. Unfortunately, the Puritans recognized the need to do "a" and "c" but not "b". They forbid recreation on the Sabbath. But that seems obviously to be part of what the Sabbath is all about.)

Remarkable! One 17th century writer rhapsodized (literally) about the importance of enjoying and sustaining the world of nature.

"By an Act of the Understanding therefore be present now with all the Creatures among which you live: and hear them in their Beings and Operations Praising God in a heavenly manner, some of them vocally, others in their ministry, all of them naturally and continually. We infinitely wrong our selves by laziness and confinement. All creatures in all nations and tongues and people praise God infinitely; and the more, for being your Sole and Perfect Treasures. You are never what you ought till you go out of yourself and walk among them."

– Thomas Traherne

**7. Read Hebrews 3:7-4:11 and Mark 2:23-3:6. a) What deeper and fuller kind of 'rest' do they speak of? b) How is Jesus the key to relating this deeper kind of rest to our weekly pattern of rest and work?**

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

"'My rest' is pregnant with more than one meaning, as Hebrews 3 and 4 makes clear. In relation to the Exodus it meant God's land to settle in... But Hebrews 4:1-13 argues that the psalm still offers us, by its emphatic 'TODAY' (v.7c) a rest beyond anything that Joshua won, namely a share in God's own sabbath rest: the enjoyment of His finished work not merely of creation but of redemption. The quitters who turned back to the wilderness may be but pale shadows of ourselves, if we draw back from our great inheritance." (DK, p. 346).

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



Ironically, it is only as we enjoy the 'rest' of the work of redemption that we will be able to truly enter into the 'rest' of caring for creation. That is why Jesus said that we cannot get true rest simply through Sabbath regulations, but only through him (Mark 2:27-28). Why? Over-work in general comes because we are not truly resting in Christ. As we saw above, we are using work to get an identity, instead of Christ. When we use work to earn a sense of self-worth, then the work (ironically) is not about the work itself, or others — but it is about us. We are doing it for ourselves — for the money and status we need to shore up our identity. But if we 'rest' from our work by trusting in the finished work of Christ, we will be able to truly enter into the rhythm of work and rest that God calls us to.







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation and culture

### Study 3 | Genesis 1:26 - 2:25

- 1. 1:26-28. a) What does the very term 'image' imply about who we are? What sorts of things bear an 'image'? b) What light does Col.1:15 and 3:5-10 shed on the 'image of God'?**

a) What does the very term "image" tell us about who we are and our relationship to God?

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

First, a mirror (or any reflecting surface) has the ability to catch the light and form of an object and reflect it back. In order to do this, the surface must be facing toward the object at the right angle. In other words, the mirror must be in the "right relationship" to the thing it will reflect. Therefore, the *"image"* of God is not so much a particular quality within us (e.g. rationality, morality, personality) — but rather it is that our total being — body, mind, soul, etc. — has been created to have a relationship with God in a way that no other created being can. *"Human beings are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship with God."* (Westermann, quoted in Atkinson, p.37). We are created into a relationship with God, which we have even if we don't acknowledge it.

Probably, however, it also means that our humanness is found in all sorts of relationships. For example, when we are said to be made in the image of God, we are immediately said also to be made male and female (1:26). This means that the *"image"* in us does not only prepare us for relationship with God, but with one another.

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

— Phillip Jenson and Tony Payne, *Beginnings: Eden and Beyond*, p.21

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

Second, a statue or sculpture is a second kind of thing that is image-bearer. In the Bible, the word “*image*” usually means just that — a physical, visible representation of deity. An idol. It is not surprising to learn that:

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

– J.A.Motyer, *Look to the Rock*

The close connection of 1:26 with the mandate to “*rule*” shows that this is most definitely a second aspect of what it means to be made “in God’s image”. We are called to “stand-in” for God here, ruling and caring for the rest of creation as his vice-regents. Imagine a king who sends a representative to negotiate and manage a situation in his name. On the one hand, the representative has a great deal of personal authority. On the other hand, the representative must closely follow the will the one who is being represented. So we are made **God’s representative authority** over creation — meaning that we share in doing all the things that God has done in creation — bringing order out of chaos, creatively building a civilization out of the ‘stuff’ of physical and human nature, caring for all that God has made, and so on.

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

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

#### b) What does Colossians 1:15; 3:5-10 tell us about the image?

The two passages in tandem show us that sin has distorted and warped the image of God in us very severely — yet through Christ it can be renewed. Notice that we are still in God’s image. Something that is ‘renewed’ is something that is still there. James 3:9 and Gen. 9:6 tell us that human beings are, even a fallen condition, still “in the image” of God. Therefore, today, only Christ is the perfect image of God (1:15). Only he has an absolutely perfect relationship with the Father and only he perfectly represents him in perfect servanthood and obedience. But growth in Christ gradually renews this image in us (see also Eph.4:23-24 and 2 Cor.3:18). The Holy Spirit in the work of

salvation makes us both sons and servants.

This teaching — that we are still in the image of God, yet fallen — does not mean that our sinfulness is lessened. Indeed, in is the remaining image that makes our sin in many ways more heinous and devastating. Someone once asked: would you rather be in the same room with a rabid mouse or a rabid elephant? The greater the being, the more dangerous and devastating it is when it goes mad. But it is because of both sin and the *imago Dei* that we (1) tend to dominate and rule others (we were built to 'subdue'), and that we (2) use technology and science to destroy the environment rather than care for it (we were 'given' nature). So even our sin shows us the image of God. The warped image of God explains: our deep relational needs for love, our very impulse to always worship *something* (Rom.1:21-23), our relentless drive to rule over nature and other people, though now in a terribly exploitative way.

## 2. What are some of the practical implications of the image of God? How should that effect the way we regard others and even ourselves?

The implications are enormous and vast for all of these basic teachings in Genesis 1-3; here are just a few implications of the *imago Dei*.

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

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

– Atkinson, p.40.

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

and architecture, and work, and so on.

Third, because everyone is made in God's image, all people intuitively relate to God and know that he is "there" deep down. The image of God means that we are created into a relationship to God and we have that relationship even if we won't admit it! That is Paul's teaching in Romans 1:21ff and also in Romans 2. We can only renew our image if we develop a conscious and joyous relationship with him. But fundamentally, all people are depending on him and are being "held up" by him. Therefore, when we speak to non-believers about God, we do not need so much to prove the existence of God to them, as to prove to them that they already *know* that God is real and that they are relying on him in the way they live their lives every moment. For example, if there is no God, we should not act as if human beings are more valuable than rocks and trees, for we are all just the result of random forces. Yet we know that this is not true and we don't live as if that is true. Also, if there is no God, there might be such a thing as moral feelings, but there could not be such a thing as moral obligation. Everything would be relative. Yet we unavoidably know that there is such a thing as real right and wrong, and we live that way. If there is no God, love is just a chemical reaction in my brain, and the air of significance we attach to it is all an illusion. But we know that this isn't true. In short, no one can live as if there is no God. This is what we should point out to people.

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

"You come from the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve, and that's both honor enough to lift up the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth."

— C.S. Lewis, Prince Caspian

Fifth, as Lewis hints, the doctrine of the image of God stands completely against a rigid classism or caste system in society. The 'poorest beggar' is ultimately of no less worth than the greatest emperor. This has great implications not only for jurisprudence and government, but for how we build our friendships and associations. A single human being, in the image of God, is a life and soul that will last forever, and thus it of more importance than an entire government. We must not ever feel it is "practical" to destroy a few thousand people so that we can put a new administration. A human life is of infinite worth. We must not treat people of lower socio-economic power as being of lesser value. If the city police respond 100% quicker to calls in the rich part of town then they do to the poor part of town, we are violating this principle.

Sixth, of course, the doctrine of the image of God has great implications for our attitude and treatment of the very old, the mentally retarded and physically handicapped, and the unborn. This is obviously a very complicated subject! But the doctrine of the image of God certainly informs us so as to be extremely careful and extremely slow to use 'quality of life' arguments to eliminate any individual being. Just because someone is not happy or completely rational does not mean that they are not in the image of God. We saw that the "image" cannot be confined to any one particular quality gives us the definition of a human person — like rationality, creativity, etc. Rather we are in God's image because we are created into a relationship with him. We are in that relationship to him, even if we don't acknowledge it. We have seen that the weakest human beings are to be held in honor. All of this means we should err on the side of respecting and protecting all human life even in its weakest and most incomplete forms. Someone has suggested that the *imago Dei* dictates that we practice the "doctrine of carefulness" in this area. We can put it this way: it is not only wrong do something to take a human life, but it is also wrong to do anything that *might* take a human life. (That is why is illegal to disregard the fire code in a building, etc.) So when it comes to the handicapped and the unborn, we do not have to be sure about the status of a being before we act to protect it. We should not do an action even if it only *might* be the killing of a human life.

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

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

a) What does each mean?

This famous statement of God to us has been called the 'cultural mandate' or the 'creation mandate'. In it we get the deepest insights about what we are to be spending our time doing here. There seem to be two things we are to do — (1) "*Be fruitful... increase... fill the earth*", and (2) "*subdue it... rule over... every living creature*". (1:28)

The first of these directives seems rather easy to understand. We are to fill the earth with our own kind. Because God is rich with outbursting life, he makes all living things capable of 'handing on the Creator's gift of life' by reproducing "*after its own kind*". Within every living thing, there is the power for new life. (Though, in keeping with our relational nature, we cannot do so on our own —

but only through relationship and cooperation between two persons, male and female.)

Second, we are called to “*rule*” (v.26,28), and to “*subdue*” (v.28) the earth and its inhabitants. This is a much more difficult directive to comprehend. This might be read to imply that the forces of nature are rebellious and need to be fought against in a rather violent and adversarial way. Some have complained that this gives human beings a ‘license to kill and exploit’ nature. Indeed, this is how much of humankind is carrying out the innate directive of ‘ruling the earth’. For most of our history, we have looked at the environment as something to be cut up and packaged for our profit. But all this exploitation is the result of sin’s warping of the image of God in us. The adversarial relationship with nature is the result of sin, and part of the curse (Gen.3:17ff. which we will study later). But what, then, did God mean when he calls us to “subdue” the earth?

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

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

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

– Albert N. Wolters, *Creation Re-Gained*, p.36

So, to “subdue” the earth (1:28) is similar to what God did when he “formed” the earth (1:2ff.)

Nature is not “bad” and needs to be beaten down, but it is undifferentiated, undeveloped, uncultivated. When we take a piece of land and garden/farm it, or preserve it so it can produce its peculiar life-splendors, when we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom clean up a place, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject, when we take unprocessed material and turn it into a poignant work of art, when we take undifferentiated tones and



pitches (noise) and separate them out and arrange them to create music, (even when we pass a comb through our hair) — whenever we bring order out of chaos, whenever we draw out creative potential, whenever we elaborate and ‘unfold’ creation further than where it was when we found it — we are continuing God’s work of creative, cultural development. Just as he “subdued” the earth in his work of creation, so he calls us now to labor as his representatives in a continuation and extension of that work.

b) The practical implications:

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

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

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

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

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

– Brad Frey, All of Life Redeemed

**4. What further information are we given in 2:8-20 about how our work is an extension of what God does in his creative work in Genesis 1? a) What does 'gardening' tell us about our work? b) What does 'naming the animals' tell us about our work?**

a) What does gardening tell us about our work?

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

(1). First, just as God was prepared creation to be our home, so we are to continue working and shaping the world for the joy and comfort of human beings. Notice how 1:26 is a climax. After God has created the earth, sea, sky, and all the plants and the animals, he finally creates us and “*gives*” it all to us (1:29). In many ways, God has created the house, and now gives it to us to live in. In the last few years, much has been written about the ‘anthropic principle’, namely that the universe is perfectly fine-tuned for human life. That is what Genesis 1 teaches. Then when we come to Genesis 2, we see that the garden is created for us to live in. What are the implications for us, if we are to continue God’s work? It means, ironically, that we are not supposed to turn every acre of land into a literal garden or park. We also need homes and even parking lots. We are not to value untouched nature against the needs of human beings to live. “*‘Dominion’ cannot be exploitation, but must [also] be seen as a sort of facilitating servanthood which maintains an environment in which persons who reflect [the image of God] can be at home.*” (Atkinson, p. 41). Our job is to confront the ‘formless’ places of the world that are inhospitable to human beings and make them places of beauty and goodness that can support human life. “*The work of town planners for an environment in which the good life can be lived; the work of doctors and therapists in seeking to facilitate that health which is the strength for good living...*” (Atkinson, p.62)– all these kinds of work are very important.

(2). Second, just as God in Genesis 1 continually elaborates and unfolds creation into greater and greater complexity, so we too are to both study the work of God and develop the unrealized potential of creation. In other words, the potentialities that God put into the garden are now to be drawn upon and drawn out by us. The very metaphor of the garden is extremely suggestive. It is a model of what we are put on earth to do. A gardener is not the same thing as a park ranger. She does not simply allow the ground to produce whatever it can without any help. Rather, she *cultivates* by organizing, enhancing, and enriching the ground (watering, weeding, planting) in order to bring out the enormous potential it has to give birth to a far more wonderful variety of plants and living

things than it would without the cultivation. By calling us “gardeners” God is calling us to do the same thing we see him doing in Genesis 1. He creates and then he calls each thing he creates to multiply (“*teem*”) and elaborate and develop complexity (1:11; 1:21-15).

God is showing us that all nature — not just the physical world, but the ‘givens’ of human nature and talent and relations — is like a garden. God has left nature ‘unfinished’ or rather like an unfurnished house. We are called to develop all the capacities and energies and potentials of human and physical nature to build a civilization that glorifies God. As a gardener neither destroys the ground nor leaves it as it is, so in our work — whether arts, science, business, technology, finance, academia — we are “gardening” the creation, drawing out the resources and powers of the material universe. We are supposed to do this to create a “city” that glorifies and reflects back to God his own richness and life and love and wisdom (Rev.21-22).

b) What does naming the animals tell us about our work?

The naming of the animals in 2:19-20 is evidence of this idea that we now enter into his creativity. Why didn’t God just name the animals? After all, in Genesis 1, God continually names things, “*calling*” the light “Day” and the darkness “Night”. So why didn’t he go on and just name the animals also? Obviously, because he now invites us to continue his work of developing creation without exploiting it.

But in particular, this shows that *studying* and understanding creation is very important. This lifts up the life of the mind as an important part of what we were created for.

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

– Mark Noll, The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind

**5. In light of all we have learned about work last week and this week — devise an appropriate set of guidelines for choosing a job or a line of work.**

First, we would want to choose work that we can do well. It should fit our gifts and our capacities. One of the purposes of work is to realize our own in-created potential. To take up work that we can do well is like cultivating our selves as

gardens filled with hidden potential.

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

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

Fourth, if possible, we do not simply wish to benefit our family, benefit the human community, and benefit ourselves — but we also want to benefit the ‘field of work’ itself. Genesis 1 and 2 shows that there really is such a thing as “progress”. This term has been much abused, but here we see that our goal should not simply do work, but really increase the human race’s knowledge and cultivation of the created world. In short, you want to “make a contribution” to your field, if possible. Show a better, deeper, fairer, more skillful way of doing what you do. We are seeking to build a culture that glorifies God. In this sense, we have to ask if what we are producing truly enriches the culture or degrades it.

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

– Carl Henry, Aspects of Christian Social Ethics





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation and marriage

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

#### INTRODUCTION

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

**1. 1:26-28. What principles can we learn from this text a) about the importance of gender for our own self-understanding, b) about the relationship of the genders to one another, and c) about the relationship of the genders to God.**

The first mention of sex and gender in the Bible occurs with the very first mention of humanity itself. *In the image of God, created he him; male and female created he them.* (Gen.1:27) That concurrence is highly significant. This sentence shows in a nutshell what the rest of the Bible unfolds about the importance of gender and how it affects our relationships to each other, the world, and God.

a) The importance of gender in our own self-understanding.

This means that our maleness or our femaleness is not incidental to our humanness, but is at its very essence. We are not made into a generic humanity and then differentiated, but we are from the first moment made as male-images or female-images of God. It means that only through accepting and understanding our maleness or femaleness can we accept and understand ourselves. I will not be able to understand myself if I try to ignore the traits and realities my gender gives to me. This is in contrast to the post-modern view that "gender is a social construct".

b) The relationship of the genders to each other.

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

Besides this explicit statement of equality, these verses also hint that the sexes are complementary. Immediately after making us male and female (v.27), God says: "*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth...*" (v.28). Here God gives us the ability of *procreativity* which is a reflection of his own life-giving creativity. "*Human procreativity is part of the outworking in our histories of the creative love of God in us as his image.*" (Atkinson, p.41). However, this wonderful gift of creating new human life is something we can only carry out

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

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

c) The relationship of the genders to God.

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

In addition, Genesis 1 hints at what Paul explicitly says explicitly elsewhere.

The only time God refers to himself as "*we*" or "*us*" is when he is about to create us as male and female. This is a hint that the relationship between male and female is a reflection of the relationships within the Godhead itself — the Trinity. Gender relations tell us something of the relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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

– Jensen and Payne, Beginnings: Eden and Beyond, p.21

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

"In the imagery describing Christ and the church, we're dealing with male and female, not merely as facts of nature, but as the live and awe-full shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our knowledge."

– C.S.Lewis

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



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

a) Why would Adam be lonely if he had a right relationship with God?

We have seen by the very term “*image*” that human beings are made for relationships. Thus loneliness is a problem for any human being. God sees that there is something wrong — “*not good*” — about the level of Adam’s loneliness. What is extremely interesting here is the implication that Adam’s relationship with God is not, in itself, enough! We must realize that Adam is without sin, and therefore has an un-impeded relationship with God. Nothing blocks his fellowship with the Father. And yet, his aloneness is substantial. That means that Adam’s relationship needs and capacity is such that a relationship with God himself is not in itself sufficient to satisfy it.

b) Does the fact that this part of creation is “not good” mean that God made a mistake?

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

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

c) What are the practical implications of this for handling loneliness?

First, it means that human friendships and loving relationships in general are of enormous importance in our lives. What more vivid testimony could there be to this fact than to see a man *lonely* in the very Garden of Eden? All the money, comfort, pleasure in the world cannot fulfill like love can. So this is confirmation of our intuition that happy family and happy relationships is a greater blessing and satisfaction than anything money can buy.

Second, it means that loneliness is not a sin nor a sign of immaturity and weakness. It is startling to see that even the love of God alone was not enough for Adam. This must be the design of God; he made us to deeply need other human beings *on purpose*. That means that we must not think of loneliness as the result of some imperfection in us. It is not the result of the fall (sin) but of creation. Of course, a particular case of loneliness today might be the result of foolishness or sin on our part. We may have lost significant relationships through selfishness or pride, etc. But loneliness *per se* is not a sin or flaw. In

fact, loneliness may be a sign not of immaturity but of maturity. We should admit our need for friendship and human love.

Third, it means that curing our loneliness may take a lot of searching! Adam and God do a lot of sifting and searching, looking for a 'fit' companion. It is not a simple procedure. Not everyone can be the companion you need.

**3. 2:18-25. a) Look up Exod.18:4; Deut.33:26,29; Ps.33:20; 121:1-2. What light does this shed on how woman is 'help' to the man in v.18? b) How does the mode of Eve's creation (v.21-22) shed light on what 'help' means?**

a) What is a 'help'?

The solution to the 'not-good' of Adam's aloneness is not just friendship in general. Rather, God says that he needs a *"helper, suitable for him"*. The English word "helper" is, unfortunately, a rather weak word. It connotes an 'assistant' — someone who is less capable and who simply runs errands and does menial tasks. However, the Hebrew word *"ezer"* is used in the Bible almost every other time as describing God himself. All the citations illustrate this fact. As we use the word "help" for God, we see that it means *"providing... what is lacking in the one who needs help"* (Atkinson, p.68). A helper (in this Biblical concept) is someone who helps out of strength, yet in a supportive way. For example, what does it mean for a parent to help her child with his arithmetic homework? The word "help" implies two things: First, it means that the helper is more capable in something than the one being helped. You can help with arithmetic if (and only if!) you do multiplication better than your child. Second, however, it means to use your power in a way that enables and supports. You are not "helping" your child with his homework if you actually do the homework for him. You must not usurp his responsibility. You must use your power in such a way that enriches, supports, and 'empowers' him.

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

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

b) How does the mode of Eve's creation shed light on the word 'help'?

The curious but vivid mode by which Eve is created out of Adam's "rib" only underscores this lack of interchangeability.

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

– Atkinson, p.71

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

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

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

**4. 2:18-25. a) Why does God make Adam search through the animals looking for a companion? b) What does it teach us that God gives Adam neither an animal nor another male?**

a) Why does God make Adam search the animals for a companion?

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

b) What does it teach us that God gave neither an animal nor another male?

It teaches us that the deepest answer in this world to the need for human companionship is a covenant relationship with a person of the other gender.

(See the next question #5 below.) What we need then is someone who is in deeply paradoxical relationship to us. We need a strong 'tension' between someone who is very like us and very unlike at the same time:

- (1) Very *similar* and *like* us. The animals are too *unlike* us to fill the deepest relational need. The fact that animals cannot fulfill us does not mean that we are *not* to care for them. The very process of naming the animals shows us that God wants us to care for them and shows us why we can experience great comfort in that caring. Nevertheless, it shows that we need a great degree of similarity of nature in the person who will cure our aloneness. But we also need someone —
- (2) Significantly *different* and *unlike* us. Another person of the same gender is too *like* us for fill the deepest relational needs. The need for complementarity is taught here. This is very mysterious and not spelled out, but it is obvious that it is only a person of the other gender who can both draw out many of the potentials in our own being as well as supplement and complement us where we are weak.

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

**5. 2:24-25. What do we learn about marriage from this famous verse? What do we learn about the purpose and boundaries for sexuality? What does it mean that they were 'naked and unashamed'?**

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

one else in your life more than your spouse should have the priority over your heart.

Second, we see that there must be *covenantal unity*. The old word “cleaves” brings out more of the sense of the original than the word “united” (NIV). In Deut.10:20, 11:22; Joshua 22:5; 23:8 we see that the word “cleave” means to unite to someone through a covenant, a binding promise or oath. (cf. Deut 10:20 — “*Fear the Lord your God and serve him. Cleave to him and take your oaths in his name.*”) This is the ‘missing piece’ in contemporary thinking. In our individualistic society, the legality of marriage seems inconsequential — “just a piece of paper”. “What matters is that we love each other.” The Bible, however, insists that there be a public act of social accountability. A covenant is always something that was done through a ceremony before witnesses. In fact, Genesis 2:22-25 actually *is* the first marriage ceremony, in which “*God himself, like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man*” (Gerhard Von Rad, quoted by Kidner, p.66).

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

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

Third, we see the husband and wife should be *one flesh*. This refers to “*the personal union of man and woman at all levels of their lives, which is expressed [visibly] in and deepened through the sexual relationship.*” (Atkinson, p.76). Most commentators agree that “one flesh” does not mean simply sex, but includes it. Therefore we come to see the purpose of sexuality. It is a mirror, a visible expression of, the complete unity that should be happening in the rest of the marriage. Another way to put it is that the covenant made (“*shall cleave to his wife*”) is then to be regularly renewed (“*shall be one flesh*”). Covenant renewal is enormously important in the Bible. Deuteronomy itself is a long covenant renewal of the covenant of Sinai. The Lord’s Supper is a regular covenant renewal ceremony, renewing the covenant of baptism. Sex, then, is

an acting out, physically, of the inseparable oneness in all other areas (economically, legally, personally, psychologically) created by the marriage covenant. Sex renews and revitalizes the marriage covenant. So thirdly, marriage is a physical and personal union, as well.

There are many implications of this that are extremely relevant for living in our own culture:

(1.) First, if sexuality is clearly good, God-created, and a requisite part of marriage. One spouse may not simply deprive the other spouse of sex. (*Let the husband give to his wife what is owed her, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.* 1 Cor.7:3-4).

(2.) Second, if sexuality is linked here to covenant, and indeed is given for the purpose of symbolizing, deepening, and renewing a covenant commitment, it needs the context of — duh — a covenant commitment. You can't renew a covenant unless you've made one, and you can't be sure you love a person enough to have sex with them unless you've made one. Not only that, you shouldn't trust another person with your sexuality unless he or she has "left father and mother" — i.e. made you his or her number one priority. It all fits together rather logically, but in our modern world we have split them all apart.

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

— C.S.Lewis, Mere Christianity

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

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

(3.) We should remember that Genesis 1:27-28 tells us that the other purpose of sex is procreation. If we put 1:27-28 together with 2:24-25, we see that the two purposes of sex is covenantal unity and procreation. The implication:

*"If the unitive and the procreative aspects to human sexual relationships belong in principle together, we need to be careful of practices which separate them. Some Christians, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, believe that this rules out [any sex act which uses contraceptives and thus is not 'open to life']. But this does not seem to follow. It seems perfectly possible for a marriage to be open to parenthood without every sexual act being open to conception. Indeed, by far the more important focus in Genesis 1-2 is on the unitive aspect of the marriage relationship... However, there are other practices, such as artificial insemination by a donor, or embryo transfer, not to mention surrogate motherhood, which separate procreative activity completely from the love-relationship of husband and wife. These do not seem possible to justify on the basis of the theology of sexuality we have outlined [here]." (Atkinson, p.77)*

What does it mean that they were 'naked and unashamed'?

This is a wistful comment. Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship. Just as sex is supposed to reflect the unity of the relationship, so their complete nakedness reflected how their relationship was one of total transparency and total vulnerability to one another. They had nothing to hide — they were absolutely open to each other, and neither partner abused this privilege. Their relationship had *"no alloy of greed, distrust, or dishonor"* (Kidner, p.66), it had an *"openness and a unity, not masked by guilt, not disordered by lust, not hampered by shame."* (Atkinson, p.79). **[Note:** The lack of clothing does not only indicate a perfect relationship, but also a perfect physical environment. It was never too hot or too cold, or too prickly!]

Nearly all commentators believe that the author is getting us ready for the contrast of Genesis 3. Sin has disordered *all* relationships and also *all* sexuality. We must remember that heterosexual sexuality is also "broken" — none of us have the kind of relationship that Adam and Eve enjoyed. Heterosexuality, in this world, is marked by obsessiveness, fear, guilt, idolatry, addiction, and oppression. This balances for us the 'critique' of homosexuality that we saw the passage has given us. In 2:25 we see also a critique of heterosexuality. That does not mean that married heterosexuality is not God's will, but rather that we must recognize its brokenness and imperfection in this life and world. Even inside a Christian marriage, we must beware of obsessiveness, fear, guilt, idolatry, addiction, and oppression.

**6. Read Eph.5:22-33 and 1 Cor.7:27-31. How do these passages put marriage into perspective for Christians who are both single and married?**



1 Cor.7.

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

Eph.5.

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

What does this mean for us? Every Christian is already engaged to be married — to Christ. This is the really important marriage, and our preparation for it is holiness. Christ has paid the 'bride price' to win us for Himself, and we might even regard the gift of the Holy Spirit as an engagement ring, guaranteeing our participation in the wedding day at the end of time. In the meantime, we are to prepare ourselves for the wedding by putting on "holiness" ... as our bridal clothes. (Jensen and Payne, p.34)

Someone may remember that the marriage of Adam and Eve seemed to be necessary despite having a right relationship with God. But notice how in Ephesians 5, Christ's "marriage" is not with you or me as individuals, but with the church, the *Body* of Christ. In other words, the relationship with Christ that we have in heaven will somehow unite us not only with him, but with each other, thereby completely ending all loneliness and relational incompleteness forever. Therefore, if we find ourselves to be single and wishing to be married, or unhappily married, we must rely on our spousal love in Christ, the only spousal love that will every truly complete us. On the other hand, if we are in happy marriages, we must beware of making our spouse an idol — for the same reasons.

Our betrothal to Christ is the one betrothal we cannot live without.







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Paradise lost: I

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

#### INTRODUCTION

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

**Note on the Origin of Evil:** The Genesis 3 account tells us about the entry of evil into the world, but does not tell us much directly about the origin of evil, which has occupied thinkers for ages. The narrative does rule out a couple of theories of the origin of evil. First, God does not tempt the human couple himself. He is not the author of evil. Second, the human couple do not disobey out of their own impulse and energy. They were not created sinful. There is not yet an ‘inner voice’ of temptation from the human heart. The tempting voice ‘comes from the outside’. But who is the serpent, the source of the temptation? Genesis is (maddeningly) silent on this! Kidner says: *“The malevolent brilliance [of the serpent] raises the question, which is not pursued [in the text], whether he is the tool of a more formidable rebel.”* (p. 67,71). But in 3:15, which we do not look at until next week, there is a strong implication that the serpent is simply the tool of a supernatural being, the devil (cf. Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9). Nonetheless, this does not answer the basic philosophical questions: a) how did Satan become evil? b) why did God let this happen (or why did God create us as we are), if he obviously knew it would happen? C.S. Lewis gives the classic ‘free-will’ answer for these questions:

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

- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

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

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

a) What is the explanation? How is this a good test?

In the garden of God, Adam and Eve are given one and only one prohibition—*"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat"* (2:17). This is the only boundary to human freedom that God lays down. Of all the trees in the world, you must only refrain from eating of one. This does not seem very difficult — considerably less difficult than following all of the 10 commandments! And yet there is a very difficult aspect to the command. God gives not a word of explanation as to *why* they were not to eat of the tree. They are told that they will be punished — *"in that day you will surely die"* — but they are still not told what is wrong about eating the tree or why they would be punished. God does not say: "don't eat of the tree because it is poison" or "don't eat of the tree, because it will release a terrible power into the world".

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

To clarify — consider the possible motives we might have for complying with the command "Do not lie". One possible motive we might have is fear. We might say: "if I lie, I'll get caught." A second possible motive we might have is pride. We might say: "I am a good person, and I am better than the low-down immoral people who lie." Now both of these reasons are true — lying often does not 'pay', and people who tell the truth are more helpful to others and more honest than people who do not. But if either (or both) of these motives are the primary ones, then we are ultimately only watching out for our own skin. We are not honest for God's sake nor for honesty's sake — but for our sake. Thus God is calling Adam and Eve to do something just because he says so — for his sake. **[Note:** This line of reasoning is supported by the fact that Adam and Eve could not have been very deterred by the concept of *"you shall surely die"*. They probably could not imagine what that would be like.]

b) How would this test provide knowledge of good and evil no matter what the response?

At first glance, it would appear that God does not want humanity to have the knowledge of good and evil at all. But in 2:22, God says: *"Behold, the man has*

*become like one of us, knowing good and evil*". If God "knows good and evil", and he is holy, then the knowing-of-good-and-evil cannot be a bad thing in itself! What was bad was the way that humankind came to know the knowledge of good and evil.

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

– Kidner, p.69

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

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

## **2. 3:1-3. This is the first approach or strategy of temptation. Neither the serpent nor the woman re-capitulates God's command properly? What does this teach us of the first strategy of the serpent?**

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

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

And that is the goal of this first approach. The first question insinuates that God's command is something we have a right to weigh and judge. "The incredulous [question] 'So God has actually said — ?' is both disturbing and flattering: it smuggles in the assumption that God's word is subject to our judgment." (Kidner, p.67). Let's feel the full weight of this. How does sin begin? We learn here that it does not only begin when we decide to disobey. It begins when we assume that we have the right and wisdom to even decide if we should obey.

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

The serpent's first stratagem (3:1) begins to work, for Eve's response is to exaggerate the command of God as well. She says that God told them not to eat of the tree, "*nor shall you touch it, or you shall die*" (3:3). So she "*over-corrects the error, magnifying God's strictness*" (Kidner, p. 68). Why does she exaggerate? Apparently, she has begun to feel some self-pity and has picked up the 'spirit' of the first strategy. She is beginning to put herself into the position of Judge.

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

— J.A.Motyer, *Look to the Rock*, p.114

### **3. 3:4-5. a) What is the second strategy of the serpent? How does the serpent challenge God's motives? b) What do we learn here about the essence of sin?**

#### a) The serpent's second strategy.

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

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

(2) Second, he assaults God's love and good will. He says "*God knows that... your eyes will be opened*". This is a flat charge that God does not have our best interests in mind. This is to say: "If you obey God, you won't be happy!" This is the Big Lie that lives in the heart of every sin and of every sinner. This is always the root of any particular disobedience. We don't believe that "God is for us". We believe that we have to obey God to please him, but we don't believe his authority really serves us.

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

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

— Kidner, p.68

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

#### b) The essence of sin.

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

**4. 3:6. How does a) the emotions, b) the mind, c) the will each play a role in the committing of sin? Why is it important to see that every aspect of our nature is now polluted by sin?**

It is evident from this verse that Eve has subtly made the choice to substitute herself for God. First, she determined to sit in judgment on God (strategy #1), which second, has led to the additional choice of seeking to get power and wisdom on her own, without God (strategy #2). Now the visible action of sin flows from these invisible choices.

a) The emotions – “*pleasing to the eye*”

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

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

Just as it happened in the garden, the disorder in our good emotions is hidden from us. “What could be so wrong about wanting to eat fruit? What can be so wrong about wanting to be in love? What could be so wrong about wanting to be successful in business?” The answer is — nothing is wrong with these desires in themselves. But now, since the garden, the human heart’s good desires are infected by our choice to sit in the place of God. Because of the inherent goodness of so many of our desires, we are blind to how sin has made them inordinate and disordered. So the first result of sin is: even our good emotions and desires over-power us and can entice us away from God.

b) The mind – “*desirable for gaining wisdom*”

Secondly, we see that Eve’s reasoning is now affected by and involved in the sin. “*...and desirable for gaining wisdom*”. She is using her reason, and here is how it goes. She knows that God already had this knowledge-of-good-and-evil. She sees that the tree with this name would surely be the way to gain it. After all, the name of the tree and the effects should surely match! Why name a tree after a particular knowledge if it can’t provide it? So obviously, to eat the tree would be the way to get it and move into this new level of enlightenment.



With hindsight, we see that this line of reasoning is somewhat logical, but flawed at the end. As we noted in the first question, there were *two* ways for the tree to give out this knowledge — one through obedience and one through disobedience. (In the same way, there are two ways to come to ‘know’ the bubonic plague. One is by studying it and learning how to treat it; one is by catching it and dying from it within hours. Each way is a way to ‘know’ bubonic plague! Which one is ‘better’?!)

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

c) The will – *“she took some and ate it... she also gave some to her husband, and he ate it.”*

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

What is interesting is the simplicity of the statement that she gave the fruit to her husband and he ate. On the one hand, this teaches us that sin enjoys company. We do not like to do wrong alone. There is a real need for community in sin, and one of the best ways to overcome sin is to get out of communities of self-justification and reinforcement for bad behavior. But on the other hand, we see in verse 6 a complete reversal of God’s creation order. (1) First, man and woman were given the plants and animals to care for and rule over (1:26) yet here is the serpent leading Eve. (2) Second, Eve was made to be a help to Adam (2:18) but here she is a hindrance. (3) Third, Adam surely was responsible to help and reclaim his wife, but instead he goes down with her without a word of protest. In fact, it is possible that the narrator is telling us that he sins more readily than she did. There is no description of any time of reflection and reasoning nor of giving any retort, as Eve did to the serpent.

**5. 3:7-8. a) How is v.7 so unexpected, after the threat of 2:17? b) What immediate results do we see to our sin? b) What three results of sin are immediately obvious?**

a) Why is v.7 so unexpected?

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

– Kidner, p. 69, quoting Augustine, *City of God* XIII, xii

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

b) What are the initial results?

Next week we will look in detail at "the curse" — the effects of sin on the world and on human nature. But three immediately spring to sight in the narrative, and they are comprehensive.

First, our relationship with ourselves is affected by sin. "*They realized they were naked*" (v.7). Though the word "shame" is not used here, it is strongly implied, because this verse is the opposite of 2:25, where we read that Adam and Eve had been "*naked and unashamed*". Atkinson writes: "*Shame... is that sense of unease with yourself at the heart of your being.*" (p.87) Some people distinguish "shame" from "guilt" somewhat. Guilt is feeling bad about what you've done; shame is feeling bad about what you are. That certainly fits this verse.

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

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

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





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Paradise lost: II

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

#### INTRODUCTION

Genesis 3 answers the fundamental question — what is wrong with the world and with us? Why is there death, disease, evil? This chapter describes the “fall”. Last week we looked at how sin entered the world and the human heart (Genesis 3:1-7). This week we look at the rest of the chapter in which is describes the results and outworking of sin into the fabric of human life.

#### **1. 3:7-8. How is v.7 so unexpected, after the threat of 2:17? How does the rest of the chapter shed meaning on the ‘death’ God spoke of in 2:17? How does Romans 8:19-22 shed light on this ‘death’?**

Most readers will read 2:17 and think simply of physical death. And therefore, they expect that the minute Adam and Eve ate of the tree, they would drop dead, or that God would appear and destroy them on the spot. Instead, 3:7 says, *“their eyes were opened, and they realized...”* It almost seems like the servant was right! He promised that their eyes would be opened (3:5). So was God wrong and the serpent right?

No — the ‘opening of the eyes’ that came was not like the ‘opening’ that they expected, and the ‘death’ that came was not like the death that we expected.

First, the ‘opening of the eyes’ was a new form of knowledge, but it led to bondage rather than freedom. There are two ways to ‘know’ about the Bubonic plague. One is to understand it so you can treat it; the other is to get it and die in torture in a few hours. Humanity now “knows” good and evil in the latter way. This kind of knowledge leads to distortion. (A bad person can’t understand a good one, but a good one can understand a bad one. This we touched on in last week’s study.)

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

– Kidner, p.69

Second, the ‘death’ God spoke of in 2:17 is now revealed as being far more comprehensive and pervasive than we thought. At second glance, we might say that in 2:17 God was only promising that if they ate of the tree that eventually they would die and be lost eternally. But God had said *“when you eat it”* (NIV) or literally *“in the day you eat it — you will surely die.”*

"The opening of the verse [3:7], utterly unexpected after 2:17, forces the reader to re-examine the meaning of the death that was threatened there. Augustine comments: "If it be asked what death God threatened man with, whether bodily or spiritual or the second death, we answer: It was all. He comprehends therein, not only the first... death, wheresoever the soul loses God, nor the second... death — eternal, and following after all... but all."

– Kidner, p. 69, quoting Augustine, *City of God* XIII, xii

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

This is important to remember, for many Christians tend to divide the world into 'worldly' and 'sacred' space and practice. But absolutely everything is affected by sin.

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

– A.Wolters, *Creation Regained*

## 2. 3:7-19. a) Make a list of all the results and consequences you can see of sin.

**Note: Be sure to analyze the interview of vv.9-13.**

This teaching on the results of sin is very rich and multi-dimensional, and there is no one right 'list' or outline.

### a) Make a list of all the results and consequences.

First, there is *internal shame and guilt*. "*They realized they were naked*" (v.7). Though the word "shame" is not used here, it is strongly implied, because this verse is the opposite of 2:25, where we read that Adam and Eve had been "*naked and unashamed*". Atkinson writes: "*Shame... is that sense of unease with yourself at the heart of your being.*" (p.87) Some people distinguish "shame" from "guilt" somewhat. Guilt is feeling bad about what you've done; shame is feeling bad about what you are. That certainly fits this verse.

Second, there is *mistrust and fear of other people*. The need for clothing (v.7-*they... made coverings*) is much more than a new reticence about sex. "*There is a secretiveness... a desire to hide, to retreat from the old unself-protective*

*mutuality. Innocence has changed into fear, as each with urgency and desperation seeks protection from the gaze of the other.*" (Motyer, p.118). In short, Adam and Eve don't trust each other now. They create defenses, and only reveal what they think will keep them in control what the other knows. Every human being, to some degree, is hiding from the human race. We are all desperately seeking to determine what others see of us, rather than allowing anyone to see the full truth.

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

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

– Motyer, p.118-119

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

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

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

Sixth, there is *marital breakdown*. In Genesis 2 and 3 there are hints (though they are not strong or direct) of male leadership in marriage. Those hints are as follows: a) Man is created first and names his wife as he named the rest of creation. (See below for the balanced, nuanced way the woman is 'named'.) b) Woman is created as a 'helper' — which (we saw) denotes an equal but complementary being. But the word also *connotes* the ability to serve and advance another individual with your strength. Adam is not called to nor given the same gift for inter-dependence and 'helping' that Eve is given. This indicates her service and support of him. c) Even here in chapter 3, it is significant that God questions Adam first, then Eve, and then the serpent. In a chapter like this, this is not likely to be an accident. "God, by addressing man, woman, and serpent in that order, has shown how He regards their degrees of responsibility." (Kidner, p.70).

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

"*But he will rule over you*" (v.16b) means "instead, he will dominate you." Kidner says that we see here "*Love has slipped from the fully personal realm to that of instinctive urges passive and active. 'To love and to cherish' becomes 'to desire and to dominate'.*" (Kidner, p. 71). Kidner is saying here that if a woman inordinately needs a man for her identity — that is a result of the fall. And when a man tyrannizes and uses a woman — that is also the result of the fall. In other words, the often seen 'gender stereotypes' (of a passive, dependent woman and a domineering man) are bad things.

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



"In 2:23, the passive 'she shall be called 'woman'... is less the giving of name than the recognition of a fact... but now (in 3:20) 'the man called his wife's name, Eve, for she was the mother...' matches the three-fold use of 'called' with regard to the animals (2:19-20). Woman is now as much a possession and chattel as a beast, and...she is named for a function. No longer is it what she can be to the man but what she can do for him. A cow for milk, and ox for ploughing, and a wife for offspring..." (Motyer, p.120). (**Note:** Nevertheless, see below for another perspective on the naming of Eve.)

Seventh, there is *economic-cultural breakdown*. In vv.17-19 God indicates that because of sin, now our ability to work and build a culture is seriously affected and damaged. (Refer to Week 2 and 3 on work and culture-building.) We saw that work was a good thing, put into paradise as one of the things human beings need to be completely fulfilled and happy. Yet here we see that work becomes "*painful toil*" (v.17) Work is not a curse, but work has been cursed. Both aspects of 'culture building' — "forming" and "filling" (Gen.1:26ff.) are cursed. Now both child-bearing will be filled with pain and suffering (3:16) and toiling in the soil will be as well. (Remember how we saw that gardening in the soil was a mirror of all kinds of work.) This means that, in all our work, we will be able to envision far more than we can accomplish, both because of a lack of ability and because of resistance in the environment. Art, science, business, agriculture, education — everything will be frustrating and difficult and will wear us down.

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

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

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

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

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

The great danger is to always single out some aspect of God's good creation and identify it, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain. Such an error conceives as the good-evil dichotomy as intrinsic to the creation itself. The result is that something in the good creation is identified as [the source] of evil. In the course of history, this "something" has been variously identified as... the body and its passions (Plato), as culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), as authority, especially in the family (psychodynamic psychology), as technology and management (Heidegger and existentialists)...

The Bible is unique in its uncompromising rejection of all attempts to identify any part of creation as either the villain or the savior. All other religions, philosophies, and world-views in one way or another fall into the trap of [idolatry] — of failing to keep creation and fall distinct. And this trap is an ever-present danger for Christians...

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

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

First, God in v.14 declares personal war on sin and evil, when he makes this declaration. (**Note:** v.14 does not mean necessarily that the serpent has never been 'on your belly' before. Kidner: *"These words do not imply that... the story is a 'Just So' story on how the serpent lost its legs, but that the crawling is henceforth symbolic (cf. Is.65:25) — just as a new significance, not a new existence, will be decreed for the rainbow."* p.70]

Second, God shows us that he will carry out this warfare not simply by saving individual souls, but by creating two basic 'races' within humanity! He speaks of *"the seed of the woman"* and *"the seed of the serpent"*. This is (as

Revelation 12:9; 20:2 reveals) two groups of people. As we saw last week, the chapter broadly indicates that the serpent was not simply an animal, but the agent of a far greater evil intelligence. Thus the 'seed of the serpent' is that part of humanity that follows the lies of the serpent — that God is an enemy, that we have the right to judge his word, that we can find our own salvation and happiness without him. But another group will be different.

Third, this other group — the '*seed of the woman*' are not naturally good people, for God will "*put enmity*" between this group and the world-view and people of the serpent. He is saying, "I will raise up a people who see your lives for what they are." Thus this is a promise that God will intervene in the lives and hearts of these people. The 'seed of the woman', of course, is the people of God in every generation. These are the ones who only by God's grace and conversion has come to see the truth about sin and God.

Fourth, the ultimate triumph over sin and the serpent will be carried out by a single individual.

In Genesis 3:15 there is an ambiguity waiting to be solved. The word 'seed' [is singular] and leaves the door open for an individual fulfillment.

– Motyer, p.34

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

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



# What were we put in the world to do?

## The family of sin, family of grace

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

**Background Note:** In order to interpret the story of Cain, we must understand the reason that God 'rejected' Cain's offerings. It is natural for many readers to assume that Cain was rejected because he offered grain offering while Abel brought animal sacrifices. But most commentators point out how God in the Bible asks for both cereal offerings as well as animal offerings (cf. Deut.26:1-11; Lev.23:9-14). It is true that in the Old Testament, specific sin-offerings for atonement were to be animal offerings, but there is no indication that this was the case here. Both of these men were simply bringing the 'fruit of their labor' to God in acts of worship. Both were in *form* perfectly acceptable.

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

a) What is this a history of?

The Bible contains real and true history, but some reflection shows us that it is not the ordinary kind of history. All sorts of events that are important for the military and political and cultural history of the ancient world are overlooked or only lightly touched upon. The Bible does not give a complete account of the history of any particular age of the world, any particular region of the world, nor even an acceptable history of the nation of Israel. All sorts of things are left out that we would need to know to get the whole picture. Lots of kings and rulers are barely mentioned. All kinds of important cultural and political movements are omitted or glossed over. What you have instead is a history of *redemption*. What is important to the Biblical writers is the history of God's unfolding salvation.

b) How does 3:15 shed light?

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

What we see in Genesis 4, then, is the first case study of this history. Cain turns out to be the 'seed of the serpent', and Abel the 'seed of the woman'. But this is only a miniature version of the history of the human race. God now will create a people who hate the lies of Satan, and they will be in conflict (cf. 3:15 – "*enmity*") with those who believe the serpent.

The commentator Derek Kidner asks: why couldn't the faithful been called the "seed of Adam"? Why was Eve named instead? Kidner thinks that it was deliberate, so that the term "*seed of the woman*" could have a compound or

dual meaning. The Hebrew word “seed” (just like the English word) can be either singular or plural — it can mean either many seeds or one seed. Not until Matt. 1:23 and Gal.4:4, then, can we see that “*the seed of the woman*” can refer both to a people and to a person. From the perspective of the New Testament, we see in 3:15 that God is saying both “I will save the world through line of faithful people” and “I will save the world through one born *only* of a woman, not of a man”. See Kidner p.71.

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

c) What difference does it make to know this?

The history of redemption (the lives of Abraham, David, Moses, etc.) always shows us two extremely important things. First, the accounts of these figures ‘typify’ their great descendent in many ways, helping us understand in multifarious and rich ways the meaning and operation of God’s salvation. Second, they ‘typify’ us — we ourselves — as sinners and persons who struggle and fall but who are objects of grace.

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

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

**2. a) 4:1-2a. Why does Eve seem so excited about the birth of Cain? b) 4:2b-7. Why does God reject the offering of Cain? (cf. background note. Also cf. Ps.51:15-17) How does Cain, however, take the rejection?**

a) Why does Eve seem so excited about the birth of Cain?

Eve’s cry: “*With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man!*” seems to go beyond the normal expression of gratitude for a safe child-birth. “With the help

of the Lord" indicates that Eve sees this as God's grace and favor. "The LORD" is the covenant name, "Yahweh", used by people in a personal relationship with him. 4:26 uses the phrase "*call on the name of the Lord*" to describe corporate worship. So what we have in Eve's statement is act of worship.

But the "*I brought forth a man*" seems to mean that she is thinking of God's promise that salvation would come through her "seed". Thus just having a child, any child, was evidence that God had begun to fulfill his promise. Some have thought that Eve might have thought that this child was the one who would crush the serpent's head. Of course, that is speculation. What does seem certain, though, was that Eve's cry of gratitude to God was a cry of faith. She is looking toward God in dependence, at least for the activities and duties of life in the world, and probably also for his promise of salvation in 3:15.

#### b) Why does God reject the offering of Cain?

We don't know how Cain and Abel knew their offerings were rejected. It may have been a direct message — right into their hearts and consciousness, as God's words to Cain in vv.6-7. But it is more likely that God's 'favor' or 'disfavor' here in the early Old Testament was something that was pretty concrete — like prosperity for Abel and his flocks, and hard times for Cain and his crops.

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

#### c) How does Cain take it?

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

This is the normal way we take differing 'fortunes' in life. We cannot see what

God sees. Only God is in a position to know what is 'fair'. We get a tiny glimpse of the reason for the rejection of Cain. God seems to want him to look at his own heart. (See the next question.) Cain, however, looks on the surface of things and sees only the unfairness.

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

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

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

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

So what we see here is that both Cain and Abel approach God in worship, and bring offerings. On the outside, their lives are probably the same. They both are apparently good people and they both apparently do religious exercises, but Cain's heart is not right with God. In particular, he either does not understand or he rejects the promise of grace-salvation. Thus he is of the 'seed of the serpent' while Abel is of the 'seed of the woman' — those who believe the gospel. One of the signs that you are a Cain and not an Abel is that you are often resentful because God is not treating you as your good life deserves.



Cain here acts as an 'elder brother' who resents his 'younger brother' (cf. Luke 15:11ff.) Like the elder brother in that parable, he feels the Father has not treated him fairly.

#### 4. 4:6-7, 9. Cf. Gen.3:9-11. What do we learn about God as we see him asking questions?

"In the Lord's repeated 'Why...?' and 'If...', His appeal to reason and His concern for the sinner are as strongly marked as His concern for truth (5a) and justice (10)."  
— Kidner, p.75

It is striking to see how God asks Cain questions in the same way that he asks Adam questions. Kidner explains what that means. If God were only concerned with truth and justice, he would simply tell the sinner the truth and pronounce sentence. But the questions of God show his concern for the sinner, for repentance and grace. What we see here is God the wonderful counselor, not God the cosmic policeman. From God's questions we learn several things about him.

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

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

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

"And then the heart of Eowyn changed, or else at last she understood it."  
(Tolkien, The Return of the King)

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

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

First, we learn that sin hides itself from us. *"Sin is crouching"* means it is trying to avoid your view — or to make you think that it is much smaller or more inert than it really is. To crouch is to stay low to the ground and not move a whisker. What does this mean? It means that your most dangerous flaws — the things that can most destroy your life — are even now 'crouching down' and presenting themselves to you as much smaller and less serious than they really are. You may know you are resentful, or selfish, or jealous, or have a lack of self-control in a certain area, but almost always, you underestimate the severity or depth of your problem. Actually, in so many cases, sin hides completely. Substance abuse counselors know a lot about denial in the area of alcohol and drug addiction — but the Bible here and elsewhere tells us that all sin has the same dynamic. Most of us weave intellectual or psychological webs of deceit over our consciences so that we deny the sinfulness of our worst sins at all. We see workaholicism as productivity, obsession with physical beauty as good grooming, stinginess as prudence, ruthlessness as being a 'sharp businessman', and so on.

Second, we learn about the growing power of sin. The word "crouching" depicts sin as a wild animal, *"at your door"* ready to spring upon you and *"to have you"* — to tear and rend and devour you at the moment you step outside. But notice that it only can do that because Cain has not been 'doing right'. *"If you do not do right — sin is crouching at your door..."* This means that sin does not immediately destroy you. First, we do it — but then, it 'does' us. That is the picture. The Bible indicates here that when we sin, our sins do not simply 'pass away', but somehow they take shape and shadow you and become a presence of their own that takes us down. Notice, for example, that Cain's very cold-blooded answer in v.9 *"betrays a hardening in comparison with the shuffling answers of 3:10ff."* (Kidner, p. 76).

This need not be read in a completely magical or mystical way. The first time you lie to a parent, it breaks a barrier and makes it easier to do it again. Psychologists call it 'habit' — a useful psychological capacity that, however, can participate deeply in evil. Sinful actions become sinful habits of mind and heart that become virtually invisible (habits become unconscious) and difficult to change. But this metaphor probably goes beyond the simple psychological explanation. There is also something in the fabric of life that has sometimes been called 'the law of sowing' — Gal. 6:7-8, *"You will reap what you sow"*. This is not an absolute rule, but rather a general principle of justice in the world that mirrors something of the justice of God. Gossipers will tend to be gossiped about. Haters will tend to be hated. Cowards will tend to be deserted. He who lives by the sword tends to die by the sword. People who will do anything at all to be popular often are very unpoplar. Why? Even in this fallen world, there is a fitful reflection of the justice of God. Sin sets up strains in the fabric of the universe because of the nature of the one who created it.

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

**6. 4:11-16. a) Is Cain’s reaction repentance? b) Many see the ‘mark of Cain’ as a curse. Is that what it is? c) What do we see here of both the justice and the mercy of God? d) cf. Heb.12:24. How does the New Testament tell us that God can be both just and merciful?**

a) Is this repentance?

Cain’s cry in v.13 does not have the marks of repentance. First of all, he is not expressing any regret over what he has done, but only over the pain of the punishment. “*My punishment...*” (v.13a). Second, he is complaining that the punishment is not fair, it is too harsh. So he is not fully accepting blame for what he has done. Compare this with the lack of repentance and the self-pity of the rich man in hell (Luke 16:24,27,28) and the penitent thief (Lk.23:41).

b) Is the ‘mark of Cain’ a curse?

It is amazing that even though Cain’s response is not repentant, there is still a cry of helplessness within it that God responds to in mercy.

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

— Kidner, p.76

c) How is it both just and merciful?

Just as we saw in the questioning of Cain, we see in the sentencing of Cain a God of infinite justice yet also infinite mercy.

On the one hand, to simply forgive Cain would not be just and fair to the slain victim. When God says that “*your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.*” (v.10). This remarkable metaphor is seen also in Luke 18:7,8 and especially Rev.6:9,10. God is a God of justice, and crimes against innocent victims “cry out” to him day and night for redress. He is the God of the oppressed. The enormous amount of “man’s inhumanity to man” cannot be overlooked by God. God responds to the cry for justice by putting a deeper curse on Cain than that which was on his parents. (If we compare 4:11 with 3:17 we see that Cain is himself cursed, while in 3:17 Adam and Eve are sent into a cursed and broken environment. Deeper sin leads to deeper brokenness.)

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

d) Hebrews 12:24.

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

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

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

Yet, on the other hand, we see a terrible spirit of pride and violence growing. First, Cain builds a city as a refuge from God. It is interesting to see in Revelation 21-22 that the heavenly city that God creates for us at the end of

time has the Tree of Life in it. The heavenly Jerusalem, then, is the garden of Eden built up into a God-honoring, glorious civilization. Cain, however, goes and seeks a life of security without God, and he begins by building an alternate city. He names it "Enoch", after his son. Later, we will see in Genesis 11 that under the influence of sin, people go to the 'big city' in order to 'make a name for themselves' (Gen.11:4). So the city becomes a place where we forge power and glory for ourselves in order to build a life without God. This is the beginning of 'man-centered' civilization.

Cain's descendent Lamech shows the development of sin. First, he is the first to deviate from God's marriage ordinance of one spouse (cf. 2:24 with 4:19). As Kidner says, *"The attempt to improve on God's marriage ordinance set a dangerous precedent, on which the rest of Genesis is comment enough."* (p.78) Second, we see a terrible spirit of vengeance and violence in him. He

boasts in song that he kills people for harming him. The word "young man" (v.23) means a "lad" or "boy". To kill a youth just for a wound and then sing a long of joy about it shows how sin has developed. His commitment to vengeance — to pay back 77 times for what happens to him — is matched by the love of Christ, who tells us to forgive 77 times. (77, of course, is a symbolic number that essentially means 'infinite'.)

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

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

– John Calvin, Commentary on Genesis

**8. 4:25-26. What is the significance of the birth of Seth? See the rest of chap 5.**

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







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Judgment and grace

### Study 8 | Genesis 6:1 – 8:22

#### INTRODUCTION

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

**Background note:** In order to be true to my own principle, I won’t bother you with information about the different views of the flood. Let me just lay out my own assumptions. I believe Noah’s flood happened, but that it was a regional flood, not a world-wide flood. On the one hand, those who insist on it being a world-wide flood seem to ignore too much the scientific evidence that there was no such thing. On the other hand, those who insist that it was a legend seem to ignore too much the trustworthiness of the Scripture. After Genesis 1, the rest of Genesis reads like historical narrative. If, it is asked, ‘what of the Biblical assertions that the flood covered every mountain over the whole earth (Gen.7:19,21), we should remember that the Bible often speaks of the ‘known world’ as the ‘whole world’ — compare Gen. 41:56,57; Acts 2:5,9-11; Col.1:23.

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

##### The purpose of the paragraph

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

##### But what exactly was the sin?

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

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

"More important than the detail of this episode is its indication that man is beyond self-help, whether the Seth-ites have betrayed their calling, or demonic powers have gained a stranglehold." (p.84)

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

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

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

Second, we learn here of the *interior* nature of sin. *"...the thoughts of the heart..."* (v.5). Sin is first and primarily a matter of the heart. Certainly, there are much behavior that is always wrong. But if we focus too much on behavioral violations, we will miss the embryonic and internal forms of sin that may 'fly beneath our radar'. Sin is first a matter of attitude and motives, and it can influence and grow even before it has 'broken out' into behavior.

Third, we learn here of the *content* of sin. *"...the inclination of the... heart... was only evil..."* At first sight, v.5 seems to indicate that the human heart is only evil, that there is no good in it at all. But it doesn't say that the heart is *"...only evil all the time..."* but that the inclination of the heart is so. Neither the NIV "inclination" nor the KJV "imagination" completely conveys the term yeser, a word that refers to the potter shaping the clay into a vessel. The word means design or purpose. It means that even when we are doing a good thing — our motives and purposes in doing it are tainted. Everything we do is done to the end of being our own Saviors and Masters of our own lives (Rom.1:18-25). A classic example of this is the two sons of the parable of the Prodigal in Luke 15. Both the sons are trying to wrest control of their father's wealth from their father so they can do with it as they like. The difference in strategies could

not be different. The younger brother completely contradicts the father's values and lives a riotous, debauched life. The older brother completely obeys the father's every rule and value. But they are both — one through obeying the rules, and one through disobeying them — seeking to be their own Masters. In other words, the motive, design, and "*inclination of the heart*" was the same, even though in one case there was no behavioral violation.

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

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

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

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

But that reading fails to take into account the emphatic nature of 6:5-7 about the universality of sin and judgment. Over and over we are told that there were no exceptions, that all mankind was to be wiped from the face of the earth. As noted above, this is in line with what the Bible says. (See the classic verses — Rom 3:10, 23; 6:23) But that means that Noah and his family were included in

the assessment of the human race. So why then did Noah escape the flood?

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

“The formula ‘x found favor in the eyes of y’ is found about 40 times in the Old Testament... Sometimes it is a purely formal politeness not really intended to be taken seriously... but, when the impression of all the passages is gathered, it becomes clear that in its strict intention it deals with a situation where ‘x’ can register no claim on ‘y’ but where ‘y’, contrary to merit or deserving, against all odds, acts with grace. Taking 6:8 then, with its preceding context, we meet Noah...as a typical man among men. Like the rest, because he too is part of humankind, he is wicked outwardly and inwardly, a grief to God and under divine sentence. But in distinction from the rest of humankind a grace of God, as unexplained as it is unmerited, has come to him. He has not ‘found’ this grace by merit or effort; rather it has found him.”

– J.A.Motyer, *Look to the Rock*, p.43

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

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

These two verses provide a stunning contrast. On the one hand 6:6 gives us a picture of God’s love “*using the boldest terms, counterpoised elsewhere if need be, but not weakened*” (Kidner, p.86). It tells us that God’s grief over our sin goes to the point of his own personal pain. Commentators point out that the terms our misery under sin — “*pain*” (3:16) and “*toil*” of (3:17) — are very similar to the words “*pain*” and “*grieved*” here in 6:6. In other words, God has so tied his hearts to us that the pain and brokenness of human life now actually affects him too! Even this early in the Bible, we see him entering into our difficulties.

Yet, on the other hand, 6:13 is also a very chilling and sweeping expression of God’s holiness and justice. The “*violence*” of the human race is a tremendous issue that cannot be ignored. Ironically, contemporary people complain that “if there is a just God, why does he allow so much evil, injustice, and oppression in the world?” However, when we find a Biblical account in which he does

something about the violence in the world, we complain that he is “a harsh, punishing God”. However, 6:11 provides a very telling and subtle answer to this objection. We are told that God saw that *“the earth was corrupt”* — but ‘corrupt’ translates the Hebrew word for ‘destroyed’. In other words, what God decided to judge and cleanse was already *“virtually self-destroyed already”* (Atkinson, 137; Kidner, p.87). The human race had destroyed itself! Sin is a kind of self-judgment, self-punishment, de-constructive. God’s judgment-work is simply to confirm our choices.

#### How does the flood narrative illustrate both?

The flood rather vividly illustrates both of these two ‘sides’ or attributes of God. On the one hand, the fury and power of the flood teaches us that God is a God of might and justice and, yes, destruction. 7:21 – *“Every living thing that moved on the earth perished — birds, livestock, wild animals, all-the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind.”* Atkinson notices that the Flood is the pattern of creation in reverse (p.136). God has the right, the power, and the wisdom to judge. 1) Because he is Creator — he has the right, since he owns all that is. No one else would have the authority to destroy, but the Creator does. 2) Second, because he is Creator — he has the power, since he assembled all that is. No one else could un-knit the fabric of nature as he could. 3) Third, because he is Creator — he has the wisdom, since he knows all hearts and all ends. Only he knows what people deserve, or what they would do if he gave them more time, and so on.

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

#### **5. How can we see the gospel promise of Genesis 3:15 continuing to be the basic theme here in Gen 6-8?**

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

This is the reason for all the emphasis on “*generations*” that you read in Genesis. Genesis 2:4 says literally “*these are the generations of the heaven and the earth*”. Then Genesis 5:1 says, “*these are the generations of Adam*”; Gen.6:9, “*these are the generations of Noah*”; Gen.10:1, “*these are the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth [Noah’s sons]*”; Gen.11:10 “*these are the generations of Shem*”; Gen.11:27 “*these are the generations of Terah [Abraham’s father]*”. The NIV translation badly muffles the important repetition of this phrase by translating it “this is the line of” or “this is the account of”. Why is this phrase so important?

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

– E.Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery*, p. 40-41

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

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

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

“The earth’s share in the destruction (6:13c) was to be only in measure: 2 Peter 3:5-13 points out how different will be the final annihilation. In fact the whole act of judgment was partial: the survivors passed through a mere token of judgment, only

to carry into the new world the sin of the old, as if to demonstrate that nothing less than complete death and rebirth will meet our situation.”

– Kidner, p. 87

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

Peter writes:

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

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

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

How could that be? As the drowning waters beat on the ark, so the punishment we deserved fell on him. But then, in Christ, the righteousness and justice of God actually become our ally. In 1 John 1:8-9 John has the audacity to say that God forgives believers’ sins now because he is *just*. In other words, his own justice now demands that we be forgiven for our misdeeds. Why? The work of Christ! If Christ paid for our sins, then we cannot be punished for our sins — God would then be getting two payments. Therefore, if we are in



Christ, the very waters of God's justice and righteousness that would otherwise sink us not demand and carry us to heaven.

This is remarkably vivid! In the flood, we too see a judgment, but through the judgment a new life. It points to the ultimate judgment which fell on Jesus, so we can be brought into new life. Because we believe in him now, the final judgment that falls on the world will not harm us.

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

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

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

Second, we see that Noah lived in a condition of "*holy fear*". Thomas Manton, commenting on the flood narrative, said, "*The people of the world did not tremble till the water began to rise. But Noah trembled when God did but speak.*" We must be careful, though, to distinguish Fear from fear. The term "holy fear" is a good way to differentiate the Biblical concept of the "fear of God" from the condition of "being scared". Trust in God's Word had put Noah into a condition of "inner awe and wonder" before God. This was not a surge of fright, but almost the opposite! It meant his heart and behavior was controlled by reality as God defined it, not as the world defined it. He was imperturbable. Nothing dissuades him or dismays him.

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



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

Fifth, Noah’s obedience *exhibits* his salvation by faith, but does not *earn* it. If we wanted proof that Gen.6:8 is the cause, not the effect, of Gen.6:9 — here it is! Paul says that the gospel reveals a “*righteousness apart from [obeying] the law... that comes [is received] through faith*” (Rom.1:21-22). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Noah was living and acting in accord with this gospel dynamic. He too was not “righteous by works” but “righteous by faith”.

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



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation renewed

### Study 9 | Genesis 8:20 – 9:19

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

a) What is a burnt offering?

Leviticus 1 shows us that a “whole burnt offering” was performed when the one making the offering lays a hand upon the sacrifice and identifies with it. It is then offered up in our place to make atonement for sin. Therefore, a burnt offering is an acknowledgment that we are saved by grace and that we owe God our lives. (**Note:** The author of Genesis apparently knew about the Mosaic legislation that came later on in which some animals were designated ‘clean’ and suitable for sacrifices.)

b) Why was a burnt offering appropriate?

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

c) Why does God make his promise?

In verse 21, God promises to never again “*curse the ground*”, i.e. send another devastation like the deluge. Why? We are told that God found the aroma of the offering to be ‘*pleasing*’. In other words, God found the offering acceptable. Why did he? One thing that could not have been the reason for his promise was any improvement in the human heart. 8:21 is very striking. This is exactly what he said about human nature before the flood (6:5). If anything, it more strongly emphasizes that sin is inborn. In other words, God is not saying: “I will not curse the ground because Noah and his family are better people than the ones I was dealing with before.”

But if there is no real improvement in human nature, then why would God accept the sacrifice and promise to no longer send cataclysms? Kidner says:

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

– Kidner, p.93

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

d) What did God promise in v.22?

The promise that the seasons will not be disrupted is a way of saying that all disasters will be local, and that there will not be a disaster that is world-wide and destructive. *"The Noah story assures us, in our nuclear age, of God's commitment to human survival on earth."* (Atkinson, p.150)

**2. How can we follow Noah's example today? (cf. Heb.13:15,16)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If we only had verse 3, we might conclude that all God was doing here was giving us (literally!) a hunting licence. But that is not true. Secondly, God prohibits consuming animal blood. At first, this seems to be a very curious statement. But many other places in the Old Testament continue to insist that blood symbolizes the life. (v.4 – cf. Lev.3:17) And the life belongs to God. Why would God insist on this symbolism? It had two functions. First, the symbolism

of blood was a way to begin to teach the significance of sacrifice. It paved the way for the Mosaic sacrificial system which prepared us to understand the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. *"The law on blood is theologically far-reaching... It prepared men to appreciate the use of blood in sacrifice. Belonging to God, it could be seen as His atoning gift to sinners, not theirs to Him (Lev.17:11). (Kidner, p.101)*

But more significantly, the prohibition against blood was a way to remind human beings that their rights over animals and God's creation was limited. All life belonged to God. We must not do anything we wish with it. *"Even when man slaughters and kills, he is to know that he is touching something which, because it is life, is in a special manner God's property."* (Atkinson, p.159). In other words, the creation ordinance — to be stewards, not owners, of nature — is still in force. We are to humbly respect the nature over which we have been given so much power. Ironically, this Biblical attitude is well embodied in the speech of the Native Americans to the slain deer ("We are sorry to have to kill you, brother") in the beginning of the movie, "The Last of the Mohicans"!

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

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

This remarkable passage shows the remarkable implications of 9:5-6. Calvin reads the "image" of God to be a reflection of God's own goodness and beauty in our being. If even an animal sheds human blood, God will respond. Calvin draws this out and shows what this means for Christians. Not only does this mean we should be profoundly patient, forgiving, loving, and hopeful for all individuals, but it is the most solid possible basis for working for racial and social and international and economic justice and peace. It is a reason to protect

and care tirelessly for the elderly, weak, disabled, sick, and so on. It means we must never use human beings as “objects”, as mere means to an end. It means we must never demean human beings by lying (for to lie is to dis-empower them, to manipulate them). We must never demean them by scorning or abusing them emotionally. We should never assess the worth of a human being in economic or purely functional terms. This reminds us of C.S.Lewis’ statement that “next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses”. He says that the “weight” of your neighbor’s “glory” is too much for anyone but the humble to bear.

**Note:** Verse 6 certainly gives warrant to those who believe that governments should inflict capital punishment, at least on those who have done murder. But it is far too complicated to simply say

#### 5. 9:9-12. What does this ‘covenant’ imply about the our relationship with the natural environment?

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

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

What does this mean for us? We could not have a stronger basis for ‘ecological stewardship’ than this “covenant with the earth” and the explicit claims of Romans 8. We have more than just pragmatism to go on. [i.e. “Don’t tear up the environment — it’s impractical. We’ll hurt our quality of life.”] God loves the mountains and trees and streams. In Psalm 19 we are told that nature *“declares the glory of God”* by simply being what God created it to be. We, as

the stewards of nature, must do our part to help it be itself — and thus aid it in glorifying God every day by its beauty. Of course, this principle does not answer all questions about conservation and environmental protection! But it shows that Christianity is at least as good a resource and motivation as any other religion and philosophy for the care of the environment.

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

First, a rainbow shows us the beauty of God's grace. It conveys the beauty and glory of what he has done for us. It is seen elsewhere of the beauty of God (Rev.4:3). (*"...To the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."* Eph.1:6)

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

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

Fourth, a rainbow tells us something of how God accomplishes his grace. The rainbow exists "where the darkness and light come together". Rainbows do not happen on sunny days, but their beauty exists against a background of judgment. *"The obvious glory of the rainbow, however, against the gloom of the cloud... arises from the conjunction of sun and storm, as of mercy and judgment."* (Kidner, p.102). God is not simply God of love who just ignores the need for justice — nor is he merely a just God who ignores the yearnings of love. Rather, he brings his grace *through* judgment. On the cross this is supremely seen, where he judged sin so that he could forgive sinners. The greatest glory of God is seen there — where in a single stroke, his justice and mercy were fulfilled as his Son died.

Fifth, the rainbow tells us something of the results of God's grace — no more condemnation. Though the NIV translates it "rainbow" — Hebrew word used is simply "bow", the same word used for a bow that shoots arrows. *"The hostility is over: God hangs up his vow!... The light of his beauty shines through even the reminders of a watery judgment. The weapon of war itself is transformed into a delight. Here is the Creator's overarching care: the Creator God is the Covenant God. He who made us still loves us."* (Atkinson, p. 164).

When God 'smells' the sacrifice of Noah, he hangs up his bow. No more arrows of wrath. Why not? The flood had served its purpose. It was a token of judgment on evil for all of history, and it gave the human race a 'new start'.



But it did not deliver any real final solution to the problem of human sin. But God had a plan. His son would come and become the only *truly* acceptable sacrifice — to whom all other sacrifices point. He would take the ultimate judgment/flood of eternal justice — he would take the ‘arrows’ of wrath — so that God could hang up his bow forever.



# What were we put in the world to do?

## City of Man; City of God

### Study 10 | Genesis 9:18 - 12:3

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

At first reading, the incident of Noah's drunkenness and Ham's response does not seem to warrant the severe response of vv.24-27. So let's look closer.

##### a) Noah's sin.

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

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

##### b) Ham's sin

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

There are two reasons we can't understand the seriousness of Ham's sin. First, is the cultural reason. We live in a far more individualistic culture, in which honor and respect of parents is considerably less important than in more traditional cultures. The contrast between Ham's behavior and his brothers' shows that he gazed directly, and probably with amusement, on his father's exposure. Rather than being concerned to cover his father and limit the extent of his humiliation, he tells others about it. That was a major breach of the father-child relationship.

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

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

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

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

First, we learn that anyone can sin — and everyone will sin. Noah was “*blameless*”, we were told (6:9). “*Blameless*”, we now see, does not mean perfectly sinless. (Most Biblical scholars believe that the word means that

observers can find no overt inconsistency between a person's profession of faith and life patterns.) Noah was a towering figure of goodness and virtue and faith, so much so that some commentators feel that this story must be a legend that was placed here by some other author. How could the same man who stood in faith without flinching against the whole world — who essentially said, "let God be true and every man a liar" — now fall into such a silly sin of personal weakness? Well, the answer is that "the same man" can, does, and will. We are all sinners, through and through. That means that, on the one hand, we should never proudly let down our guard, thinking, "I'm not the kind of person who could ever do that." On the other hand, it means we should not feel hopeless and uniquely bad when we do sin.

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

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

— E.Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* p. 42

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

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

Fifth, we learn here the importance of showing respect and honor to our parents. This text alone is scarcely able to give the Bible's whole teaching on our relationship to our parents. The Biblical view is very nuanced. For example, the commandment is to always "Honor your parents". It does not say we must always obey them, nor even that we must always love them. Why? Parents might be wicked, and we are to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). So why would the Bible make honor the only universally required attitude? Because, if your parents are good people, then honor is very right and warranted in a multiplicity of ways. But if your parents have wronged you, to "honor" them will keep you from being controlled by bitterness and anger (or by over-reacting and doing the opposite of everything they ever did)! To honor bad parents means to forgive them and to show respect and deference to them. Why should we do that? a) For what they have done for you (there's always something!) and b) for what they represent, namely the institution of family and the God who stands behind it.

This Biblical attitude toward parents and family is very balanced and does not really align with either a secular culture's views nor a traditional culture's. The Bible will lead a Christian in a secular culture to honor his parents more than that culture would tell him or her, and it would probably lead a Christian in a traditional culture to honor parents somewhat less than that culture says.

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

a) Why single out Canaan?

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

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

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

— Kidner, p.104

b) What does the prophecy mean with regard to the future?

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

The most interesting part of the prophecy is that God would "*extend the territory of Japheth*" and yet he would "*live in the tents of Shem*" (v.27). This means that, though the Gentiles would become far greater in number and power than the Shemites, they would somehow be dependent on their smaller brethren. Most Christians have read this prophecy as fulfilled in Eph.3:6- "*Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*" The true faith — the Messianic line and community of faith — was preserved down into history through the Shemites. But today, all peoples in the world find salvation through the revelation that was preserved and which came down into the world through Israel.

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

**Note:** This list of names is essentially a list of all the nations that ancient Israel knew about anywhere in the world. "*Most of the names appear to be those of individuals [but] they meet us later in the Old Testament as peoples. The natural sense of the chapter seems to make these the founders of their respective groups; but the interest lies in the group so founded and its relation to other peoples. This is born out by the sprinkling of plural (e.g. Kittim, Dodanim, v.4)... which show that the compiler of the list did not automatically ascribe ancestors to the groups he recorded.*" (Kidner, p.105)

First, this chapter teaches us that humankind is unified and one, despite all its astonishing diversity. There are 70 names in the list, though the Old Testament knows of other nations not on the list (Deut.2:10-12). The number '70' then is likely to stand for "all the nations of the world". Despite the differences, all the nations of the earth are 'brethren'. The implications of this are very great. It means on the one hand that we are never to regard any one race as 'sub-human'. It is a powerful argument against racism. On the other hand, it means that every culture does not have the right to 'its own' religion and God. All

nations have the obligation to submit to the true God, their Creator. (See Paul's use of the unity of humankind in Acts 17:26ff.)

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

This is a hard balance to maintain. That means we are not to be universalists who say, "all good people can find God", as if God is not bringing his salvation into history through one unique revelation that all must turn to. But on the other hand, it means we are not to be sectarians (or worse, racists) who say, "we are the saved and chosen ones, and the rest of the world are wicked heathen races and cultures who are going to be deservedly lost." Some believe that the 70 missionaries chosen by Jesus in Luke 10:1 were chosen to symbolize the 70 nations of Genesis 10, to show the church that

"they have to regard all nations as future partakers with them of the same salvation, and to embrace them with an interest of hopeful love unheard of elsewhere in the ancient world"

– F. Delitzsch, quoted in Kidner, p.105

**5. 11:1-9. a) With what purposes do the builders of the first skyscraper use their technology? b) Look carefully at v.4. What two ways are these people looking to get 'a name' — an identity?**

a) The purposes

It is interesting to see that there are two reasons given for the building of the tower of Babel. In v.3 they say, "*let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly'... instead of stone...*" This means that some group had made a technological advance. Evidently, this particular way of making bricks was an advance over previous methods of building. It meant that they could build a much taller



building than had ever been made previously. Like millions of people since then, they wanted to take their new talents/discoveries to a big “city” (v.4) where they could use them. Even today, the people with the most creative new ideas often trek to the cities to find a fertile environment for experimentation and implementation of their dreams.

But there is a second, deeper reason for their project of city-building. *“So that we may make a name for ourselves, and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”* (v.4). This is a deliberate attempt to build, not the “City of God” (Revelation 21-22, the heavenly Jerusalem) in which the purpose of all technological and cultural production is the glory of God’s name. Rather, this is an attempt to build the “city of Man” (the earthly Babylon). The “City of Man” takes the wonderful possibilities of a city and turns them to self-glorifying ends. Cities are places where the talents and gifts of human beings are concentrated, stimulating one another, producing greater and greater art, science, architecture, business, organization. But what is all of it *for*? Verse 4 tells us vividly. The “City of Man” is where we go to use the power of the city to maximize our own power, glory, and autonomy. It is a way to make ourselves independent of God. Yet the very statement of verse 4 shows our radical insecurity. We only go to the city to *“make a name for ourselves”* through our accomplishments — if we lack a name, if we don’t know who we are. *“The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement... At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes...”* (Kidner, p. 109).

b) What two ways do they look for an identity?

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

The two ways that the people of Babel/Babylon seem to be getting their identity is in a) the greatness of their personal accomplishment, technology, and b) in the size and power of their group. First, the grandiose statement *“a tower that reaches to the heavens”* means that at least (see below) they are assigning spiritual value to their work and accomplishment. They are getting significance and power from their work that they ought to be getting from God. It is fair to say that they are ‘saving themselves’ through their work, trying to “get to heaven” without God. “I don’t need religion in order to face the world

with confidence and joy! I know I'm great. Look at the skyscraper I've built!" Surely there are many people in NYC right now saying the same thing, almost literally. (Why do you think it is so easy to get people to give money to build buildings as long as the wealthy donor can put his or her name on it?)

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

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

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

How does God intervene?

God 'confuses their languages', in other words, he creates disunity! This seems rather remarkable. Aren't peace and unity among people good things? The answer is — it depends on what that peace and unity are being used for. A totalitarian empire can very easily be filled with 'peace and unity' which is used to oppress and enslave.

We need to be reminded that God ordinarily provides punishment through natural means (Rom.1:18ff — *"he gave them up... to [their desires]"*) The things that the sinful heart desires sets up strains in the fabric of the real world that always lead to break down. The pride and need for personal glory (v.4b) necessarily leads to contention, competition, disunity and strife (v.4c). In other words, when we live a life of pride and self-glorification, it makes unity and love between people impossible. So the two things they wanted so desperately were anti-thetical to one another outside of God. Through the years, we have

seen the same thing. Outside of God, we have to choose between making the self an idol (which leads to the disunity of individualistic cultures) or else make the tribe/family into an idol (which leads to the suppression of individual freedom). So God's intervention and judgment, even if it was very sudden and supernatural — nonetheless reflects the real, self-inflicted results of sin on human society.

#### How is the intervention both blessing and curse?

In one sense, this was of course a terrible judgment. But on the other hand, God's intervention leads to even greater diversity of culture and language than the designers of Babylon wanted. Thus the scattering and disunity of humanity, which on the one hand is a fruit of sin, leads to the further diversifying and enriching of humanity, which is of course a blessing.

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

#### What does Babel tell us about the possibilities for society?

Babel is thus a vivid case study of the impossibility of building any human society that really "works" unless it is grounded in God. Every society that is not completely based on a God-centered world view and that is filled with converted people — will have to make an idol out of something. Either the family or the individual self, or the national interest, or the accruing of personal wealth — something will end up being considered the "bottom line", the *summum bonum*, the greatest good. But any idol leads to a breakdown somewhere. *"The half-built city is all too apt a monument to this aspect of man"* (Kidner, p.110)

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

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

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

Proof of this statement is seen in Acts 2. Here we see another “Table of Nations”. It almost seems unnecessary. Why is Luke giving us such a long, tedious list? He is deliberately trying to get us to draw a link to Genesis 10 and 11. At Babel, people of one speech could not understand one another, because they were trying to get to heaven by themselves, to get their own name. At Pentecost, people of many speeches *were* all able to understand one another. Why? Because in Acts 2 God “comes down” again, only in blessing, not in judgment (Gen.11:5ff.) At Pentecost, God reverses the curse of Babel, because of the work of his Son. Now, in Christ, there is no Greek or Jew (Gal.3:28). In Eph.2:14ff, Paul explains that the cross removes the pride and self-naming that leads to racial animosity and human disunity. The church now is to show the world how in Christ the lost community of humanity can be recovered. That is what we are to be now! We are to be an “alternate city” of God (Matt.5:14-17) in the midst of every “City of Man”, showing the unity of cultures and races and classes that only Christ can bring. And finally, some day, the curse will be totally gone. *“In that day I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all may call on the name of the Lord, and serve him together.”* (Zeph 3:9).

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

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

– Kidner, p.103

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





# What were we put in the world to do?

## The call of Abram

**Study 11**  
**Genesis 11:27 - 12:20**

### INTRODUCTION

We now begin the second major section of Genesis, the narratives of “the Patriarchs” which last the rest of the book, chapters 12 through 50. Genesis 1 begins with God calling creation into being. Now Genesis 12 begins with a call as well, but God is now calling his *new* creation into being. Genesis 1-11 showed us that God’s original designs for his creation have been unfulfilled. From the time of Fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, there is a ‘downward spiral’ of sin and evil which judgment can only retard but cannot remedy (e.g. the Flood and the confusion of Babel). It seems to the reader that God’s only option is to simply destroy the creation that will not answer his call to service and fellowship with him.

But instead, God begins with a single human being, Abram, and calls to him to go to a new land and to begin a new nation which will provide a new hope for the eventual “*blessing*” and salvation of the whole world. God’s general call of creation is now supplemented by his special call of ‘re-creation’ or salvation. He will create a people for himself who will bear into the world his saving truth and grace which will eventually bring the whole universe to God’s originally designed fulfillment. This all begins with the call of Abram in this chapter. Not only is everything else in Abram’s life an unfolding of the meaning of this call, but so is the rest of the entire Bible. Paul, in the book of Galatians, is absorbed with showing how Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abram. (And after spending Fall and Winter on Abram and Genesis, we will turn to the book of Galatians to see St. Paul’s reading of how the call and promise is realized in our daily lives through faith in the gospel.)

**Note:** It may be a bit confusing occasionally that we go back and forth between calling this man “*Abram*” and “*Abraham*”. “*Abram*” means ‘exalted father’. Mid-way through the *Abraham* story God gives him the name Abraham, which means ‘father of a multitude’. Don’t be confused — it’s the same guy!

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

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

THINK APPLICATION

Acts 7:2-4 is an important supplement. There we learn that Abram heard God's call originally when they were in Ur, before they got to Haran (v.2-3). So it was at Abram's request that Terah and the whole family left their homeland. But either because of unwillingness or some incapability the clan stayed and settled in Haran until Terah died. Then God called Abram again (Acts 7:4), so that the call we read in Genesis 12:1-3 is really the second call of God to Abram. Notice also that the first call (Acts 7:3) only calls him to leave country and people, but the second call (Gen.12:1) adds that he has to leave his *"father's household"*. That means that Abram's extended family (at least Nahor and probably many others) was unwilling to go to Canaan. (That could easily be the reason that they stopped in Haran in the first place.) The second call to Abram required he not only leave his land and nation but even most of his family.

The other thing we learn by way of background is that Sarah was *"barren, she had no children"* (Gen.12:30). As many have noted, even small digressions and comments in the middle of genealogies are always significant. Packed into this little phrase is a world of misery that is hard for today's readers to comprehend. In order to understand the rest of Genesis, however, we need to realize the importance of child-bearing and the bitterness of barrenness in ancient cultures.

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

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

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

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



- b) We also learn here how radically individual the call of God is, at least in some sense. As we noted, Abram lived in a highly non-individualistic culture. In ancient cultures it was not the lone person but the tribe, the group, the family that mattered. And yet this background shows how even in this context the call of God is a profoundly personal and individual responsibility. Careful reading of the Hebrew of 12:1 shows the use of the “ethical dative” which should be literally translated — “go by yourself”. God is saying, essentially, “Even if no one else in your family comes — I want you to come.” Abram had done everything he could, as a good family man of his time, to get his whole family to come with him as he obeyed the call of God. In the end, he couldn’t get them off dead center. So God comes again and says — “I don’t care if nobody else is coming. You come without them then.”
- c) On the other hand, we can’t help but notice that Abram *did* try to get the whole family to come and it even seems that God allowed him to stay in Haran until his father died. This is a bit speculative, but it seems safe to infer that Abram’s attitude toward his call from God steered a middle course between thumbing his nose at his family and letting his family’s reluctance and unbelief keep him from following God himself.
- d) Lastly, this ending of chapter 11 and the word about “*barrenness*” may be a way for the narrator to tell us that the call of God is simply our only hope. All of Genesis 1-11 shows us that humanity has come to a ‘dead end’. Sin and evil had put all humanity in a downward spiral. God’s partial judgements (e.g. the flood and the confusion of Babel) can only diminish sin but can’t eradicate it. And now in the family of Abram, we have a miniature version of the same thing. Abram can’t get his family to go on past Haran. His wife is barren and so his own family and line has reached a dead end as well. He has no hope and future.

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

– Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p.116-117.

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

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

a) What does God require of Abram?

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

First, what God asks him to leave. *Leave your country.* He was to let go of his economic and material security. He was leaving a much more settled, ‘civilized’ environment for a ‘backwoods’ uncivilized one. He was putting at risk all the normal social advancement to be hoped for. He was leaving all physical and social safety. *Leave... your people.* He was to let go of his cultural security. He left a familiar culture and customs for a foreign society. He was going to a place where he would always be an outsider, never an insider, never comfortable. *Leave... your father’s household.* Finally, he was to let go of his personal, emotional security. In traditional cultures one’s identity was tied up on your family. He was no longer allowed to rest in the sorts of relationships that we ordinarily get our self-worth and sense of significance from.

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

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

"Go out." *Where?* "I'll tell you later. Just go."

"You will have a son." *When?* "I'll tell you later. Just trust."

"Now offer up your son on the mount." *Why?* "I'll tell you later. Just climb."

#### b) What do we learn for ourselves?

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

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

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

- 1) Follow the Lord personally. We looked at this under question #2. We all have to 'leave' in that we must follow Christ whether or not the rest of our family and friends do, whether or not it is 'accepted' in our culture and class. Fervent Christian faith is extremely unpopular in many social and family circles, and we may have to take a lot of ridicule and ostracism in order to be true to the call.
- 2) Follow the Lord without conditions. There is a strong tendency for spiritual seekers to do a 'cost-benefit' analysis when thinking about Christian faith. They ask: "If I give my life to Christ, will I be guaranteed of a protected, happy life?" Or they want to know exactly what changes will be required. They ask: "If I become a Christian —

how much money will I have to give away? Will I have to change the way I spend my money? or will I have to change my sex life? And how much?" But just as Abram is called to go to *"a land I will show you"* so we are called to follow Christ simply because we owe it. We can't possibly foresee even a fraction of what that will entail. A person who bargains, who says, "I'll obey if I know what is coming, if it looks like it will be worth it" is not really listening to the call at all. God is saying, "Take your hands off your life! Give up your right to self-determination! Stop living according to what seems to profit, benefit and please you."

- 3) Follow the Lord by trusting in his grace. As Paul indicates in Galatians 3, Abraham's faith is analogous to trusting in Christ. Saving faith is not saying, "bless me because I am believing so well and so hard!" Saving faith is saying, "all the other things I thought could make be significant and secure I turn from and put all my hope in you." God will now be his only wealth, honor, safety, approval. Abraham is being called to transferring his trust from his own abilities and efforts to resting wholly in God's miraculous intervention in history. Namely, all the promises depend on the miraculous, "impossible" birth of the 'son of promise'. (See below question #4). That is how we become a Christian — not by trying very hard to live in a certain way, but by giving up all efforts at self-salvation and turning to Christ as Savior.
- 4) Follow the Lord by becoming a person 'in mission'. Yes, of course we are not all called to leave our homeland and culture in order to follow Christ. But the call of Abram includes *"I will bless you..."* (v.2a) *"and you will be a blessing"* (v.2b). God only 'blesses' you in order to be a blessing to others. Anyone who answers the call of God becomes a person 'in mission' wherever you are. It destroys the "consumer mentality". You not only live for God, but for others. In general we choose where we live and who we associate with and how we spend our time in such a way as to maximize our own safety, status, success, and prosperity. But the call of God changes all of that. The call of Abram shows us a principle — that if we are going to be a blessing to others, we will have to "leave" our security-zones and comfort-zones. There are lots of people we feel intimidated by or disdainful of, and there are lots of situations in which we feel uncomfortable or out of control — so we avoid them. But here we see we won't be able to serve others if we only spend time with 'our kind of people'.

Any person who has been changed by the gospel will find that they have a new ability to critique their own class and culture. They have a security in Christ so that now they do not need to cling to a sense of their own cultural superiority and do not need as much to have the approval of their own kind. This gives us every mature Christian some 'critical distance' that enables them to relate to

people of other races and classes better than they could have before. In other words, everyone in Christ is called "to leave" their country and their people.

"The courage to break his cultural and familial ties and abandon the gods of his ancestors out of allegiance to a God of all families and all cultures was the original Abrahamic revolution. In the same way Christians 'depart' from their original culture. Christians can never be first of all Asians or Americans, Russians or Tutsis, and then Christians. Christians take a distance from the gods of their own culture because they give the ultimate allegiance to the God of all cultures and his promised future. But [now in Christ] departure is no longer a spatial category; it takes place within the cultural space one inhabits. It involves neither a modern attempt to build a new heaven out of the world nor a postmodern restlessness that fears to arrive anywhere. When they respond to the call of the gospel they put one foot outside their culture while the other remains firmly planted in it. Christian distance is not flight from one's original culture, but a new way of living within it because of the new vision of peace and joy in Christ."

– Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace

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

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

– Joyce Baldwin, Genesis 12-50, p. 29.

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

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

a) What does God promise to Abram?

First, Abraham will be made "into a great nation" (v.2a). So the first promise is that God will make Abraham into a whole new country or society. As we have seen, this is a 'dream come true' for a man in ancient, traditional society. But the significance, in the context of the whole book of Genesis, is that God is now creating a new humanity, a new society in which God's truth and love can

reign, in which the rest of the world will get a glimpse of how God wants life to be lived. There are several 'subsidiary' promises that come under this general one. For example, it is hinted here that Abram will get *"a land"* (v.1), and it is also stated here that God will protect Abram (*"I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you"* v.3a). But these are all means to the end that Abram's descendents will become a new human community. They need a place to dwell, and they will need God's protection if that is to occur.

Second, Abraham will *"be blessed"* and get a *"great name"* (v.2b). The second promise is for a special covenantal, personal relationship with God. It is unfortunate that the word *"blessed"* and *"blessing"* has come to be so debased in our English usage. It normally is used to indicate being *"inspired"* in some general way. But in the famous Aaronic benediction, which God gave to be the climax of the tabernacle worship, to be *"blessed"* is equated with an experience of intimacy with God (*"make his face shine upon you"*) and total fulfillment and well-being (*"give you peace [shalom]"*). This is certainly what God is promising Abram, since immediately after Abram sets out, we read that *"the Lord appeared to Abram"* (v.7). Probably the idea of *"make your name great"* has also to do with this intimate relationship, for Abram in later literature is known as *"the friend of God"* (2 Chr.20:7; Is.41:8).

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

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

b) What is the one promise on which all other promises hinge?

But all of these incredible promises rest on one 'lynch-pin' promise. In v.7 God says that Abram will have *'offspring'*. If there is no child born to Abram, there will be no need for a land, there will be no possibility for any new humanity or salvation for the earth. Therefore the salvation of the whole world will hinge on the miraculous birth of a little child. We have seen that Sarah is barren, so everything depends on something that Abraham and Sarah cannot accomplish in their own ability. There will have to be a supernatural intervention of God into history for all of this to take place. Salvation will not come through human effort.

c) In what way do we participate in these blessings?

Is it just a coincidence that all the incredible promises of intimacy, community, and salvation for Abraham hinged on the birth of 'the son of promise' — just as it does for us? No. Jesus in Luke 24:44ff says that all of the Bible points to him. In John 8:56 he says *"Abraham rejoiced to see my day."* Paul in Galatians 3:15-18 tells us that the ultimate 'offspring' of Abraham that fulfilled all the promises was the miraculous birth of Christ, the one to whom Isaac points. All of our salvation hinges not on anything we have done or can do but only upon the miraculous coming into history of the ultimate 'son of the promise', Jesus Christ. We too must believe in the sheer grace of the birth of the 'son of promise'. Paul says then that whoever believes in Jesus Christ is a spiritual descendent of Abraham (Gal. 3:7) who is *"blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith"* (Gal.3:10). How so?

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Basically, we will never be like Abraham simply by trying to be like Abraham, but only by believing in the one to who Abraham points. Abraham was to be the head of a new humanity, but ultimately it is Christ who is the founder and head and source of a new humanity through his death and resurrection (Eph 1:20-23). Jesus is the *true* Abraham, who left the ultimate security and wealth and status and home — heaven itself! Jesus *truly* 'went out, not knowing whither he went'. He went into the ultimate wilderness of the cross, and took



our punishment. He lost the ultimate city and home and family so we could be absolutely sure of our place and security in God's city and home and family.

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



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Abram and Lot

**Study 12**  
**Genesis 13:1 – 14:24**

### INTRODUCTION

Lot was the nephew of Abram, the son of his deceased brother Haran. Lot was also evidently the only member of Abram's extended family that went out to Canaan with him (12:4-5). Within the bigger history of Abram is woven the narrative of Lot, a much sadder story, which begins here in chapters 13-14 and ends in chapters 18-19.

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

**Review:** We saw last time that Abram had failed to exercise faith in the Lord when a famine came upon the land (12:10) and he left for Egypt. There he allowed his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's harem out of a cowardly desire to save his own skin. Yet despite Abram's faithlessness, God did not abandon him. God intervened by enlightening Pharaoh to the true situation and yet preventing him from killing Abram (12:17-18). Instead, Abram was sent back *"with his wife and everything he had"* (12:20). What could have been an enormous disaster was averted.

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

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

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

How? He had been called by God out of idolatry to put his faith in him (12:1-3). Then Abram failed God badly but God intervened and brought him out of Egypt, even though he didn't deserve it. This showed Abram that the basis of his

THINK APPLICATION

relationship with God was not his worth or merit but the sovereign and free grace of God. This revelation always has two effects: 1) First it humbles you to realize that you may be 'chosen' but you are not 'choice'. It humble you enough to be repentant. But also 2) it assures you that he loves you and is going to be there for you no matter what. That *comforts* you enough to be repentant. We need to have hope of his mercy and acceptance if we are going to be able to dare to be honest with ourselves about the extent of our sin. If I think my worth and my loveability is bound up with my moral performance, I will never be able to admit to myself or anyone else how much of a failure I am.

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

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

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

It was obvious that Abram and Lot would not be able to stay together. They would have to divide and go to different parts of the country if they were both going to thrive. It did not take much wisdom to see that. But Abram responds to the situation in a remarkable way. He lets Lot make the first choice. He allows Lot to go to the choicest part of the land. Why is this remarkable? In that patriarchal culture, seniority in the family meant everything. It would have been completely fitting for Abram, the head of the family in Canaan, to simply take up his abode in the best place and then let Lot fend for himself. Instead, the elder defers to the younger and lets the younger man make the choice.

"Abram's wisdom sprang from his faith. By faith he had already renounced everything; he could afford to refresh the choice: and by faith he had opted for the unseen; he had not need to judge, as Lot did, 'by the sight of his eyes'.

— Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 118.

How did he arrive at this approach? Abram first sorted out his priorities — his "core values" as they are often called today. As we have just seen in vv.1-4, Abram now is re-committed to following God's call to stay in the land and trust

God to fulfill his promises in his time. But there is a second priority that he mentions, namely that *"we are brothers"* (v.8). Abram singles out another non-negotiable priority — the maintenance of a strong relationship within the family. He wants a strong, positive relationship between himself and Lot. Now what are Abram's options? A) He could have stayed with Lot and moved out of Canaan altogether. That would have enabled them to perhaps find a place that they could have both grown wealthy together. That would have maintained his relationship with Lot, but not with God. B) He could have chosen the fertile part of Canaan (the plain of Jordan) for himself and left Lot to fend for himself in much less desirable places. That would have maintained his relationship with God (because he would have been obedient to the call to live in Canaan) but it would have probably created great resentment on the part of Lot. C) Finally, Abram could offer to stay in the more arid part of Canaan while Lot took the fertile land. In that case he would maintain his relationship with both God and Lot, but he would put his own economic future and growth at risk. In the end, that is what he chose. He said, in effect: "You choose where you want to go and I will take what is left over." (v.9)

Abram chose to put "God and family" ahead of "career and wealth". The practical implications for us are obvious. We may live in a time and place in which the demands of career and wealth-creation have never been more all-encompassing. The 40 hour week is a thing of the past for most professionals. Obviously we are not being much of a help to our families if we make no sacrifices for our career, but there must be balance, and in the end, our spiritual growth and our relationships have to take precedence.

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

What does Lot do in response to Abram's gracious offer? It is easy to read past v.10 without noticing it. It said that Lot looked toward the fertile Jordan plain was *'like the garden of Eden, like the Land of Egypt'*. These two phrases show us something of how his heart was operating. *Like the Land of Egypt*. He'd seen the luxury, sophistication, and wealth of Egypt, which developed its civilization also in a narrow watered plain (the plain of the Nile). He was dreaming of getting his own living standard up to the living standards of Egypt. *Like the garden of the Lord*. This might simply be hyperbolic language saying that it looked "like paradise". But it may also be an indication of the kind of spiritual idolatry that the heart is capable of. Sin leads us to treat good things like career, or family, or money as ultimate things — things that will fulfill our deepest spiritual longings. All human beings live "east of Eden", alienated from God and therefore always restless and unhappy, even in the best conditions. The only way 'back to the garden' is through God's salvation. But instinctively we try to "get back" our own way. We say, "if I can become a successful artist, then I will finally experience happiness and fulfillment." But nothing is the garden of the Lord except the garden of the Lord.

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

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

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

Now God comes to Abram and tells him to *"lift up your eyes and look north and south, east and west"*. (v.14) Commentators tell us that in the location between Bethel and Ai there is in fact high spot that is a spectacular 'look out' point which gives a panoramic view of the almost the whole land. God now repeats his promise to give this land to Abram's descendents (v.15). And secondly he strengthens the promise to make his descendents into a great nation. He is told that his descendents will be as innumerable as the grains of dust. God is renewing Abram's call, but emphasizing the rewards and promises of it, not the challenges and requirements of it.

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

"The sequel for both men is instructive. Lot, choosing the things that are seen, found them corrupt (13:13) and insecure. Choosing selfishly, he was to grow ever more isolated and unloved. Abram, on the other hand, found liberation. With the call of 12:1 at last fulfilled, the promise of 'land' and 'seed' was now amplified (v.14)..."  
— Kidner, p. 118.

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

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

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

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

— Ian Duguid, *"The Gospel According to Abraham"* p. 38.

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

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

The cities of the plain (represented by the five kings named in v.2-3 around the "Salt Sea" or the Dead Sea) had been under the military power of King Kedorlaomer (v.4) and had been paying tribute to him. After twelve years of this they rebelled. Kedorlaomer acquired some allies and began a campaign of conquest that eventually led to an invasion the cities of the plain in order to coerce them back under his lordship. The 5 kings of the cities of the plain (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar) made a defense but were utterly defeated. The Kedorlaomer alliance *"seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah... They also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions."* (14:11-12).

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

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

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

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

The mysterious king Melchizedek comes out to meet Abram after his great victory. He is king of a place called *"Salem"* (Hebrew *"shalom"*) which is simply the word for "peace". He is a believer in the true God; in fact he was called a priest of God. He praises Abram and blesses the God of Abram and gives him credit for the victory. On the other hand, the king of Sodom gives no credit to either God or Abram for the victory. He also doesn't thank Abram for his own rescue. He simply gets "down to business". He concedes that Abram has a claim to the goods of Sodom and proposes that he keep them as part of the reward. This contrast is again a test of Abram's faith — an opportunity for him to grow and increase or fall and decrease.

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

– Kidner, p. 121.

"The eye of faith" can perceive that the offer of the king of Sodom was spiritually seductive. Abram had been called by God to create a counter-culture in Canaan. He had been called out of an idolatrous society to create a 'new humanity', a new human society in which sex, money, and power are not used



idolatrously but in service to God and others. Had Abram accepted this great wealth from Sodom, it would have put him *at least* in a situation such that others could claim that his people's prosperity was based on military conquest and plunder, rather than on the support of God. Perhaps the luxuries of Sodom would have drawn Abram or many of his people in the same direction as Lot. Instead, after he had given Melchizedek a "tithe" of what he had won in battle (v.20) and after he remunerated his allies (v.24) he returned all the rest of the plunder to the people of Sodom. Remarkable!

Kidner is right to point out that the *real* history of the world — the *real* list of world-changing significant events — is not what most historians record. At the time a major battle between 'the powers that be' seemed like a history-making incident. But we see here that the big invasion would not even have been remembered except that it provided another place where Abram's faith could be clarified and tested, preparing him to be the founder of the 'people of God' out of which the world's salvation would come. What the world thinks is important and what God knows is important are (usually) two different things.

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

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

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



# What were we put in the world to do?

## The oath of God

### Study 13

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

# THINK APPLICATION

### INTRODUCTION

Even though there is no exciting event in this chapter and it is therefore much less famous than others in the Abraham narrative, this account is *“theologically... probably the most important chapter of this entire collection.”* (W.Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p.140.) The first part of this passage is a crucial part of Paul’s great treatise on faith in Romans 4. The second part of this passage is a crucial part of Paul’s great treatise on grace in Galatians 3.

- 1. 15:1. “After this” (v.1) shows that God’s word to Abram is connected to what just has happened. Why do you think Abram needs to be told ‘do not be afraid’? Have you had a similar experience?**

In chapter 14 Abram rescued his nephew Lot in a daring military action. God blessed him and he was victorious. Then Abram resisted a temptation to self-trust and spiritual compromise that new political power can bring. (Recall last week’s study of Gen 14: 18-24.) In other words, chapter 14 is all about victory for Abram on all fronts, material, political, spiritual. But God’s word comes and says up front, *“Do not be afraid, Abram.”* (v.1). This means that Abram felt far from confident and triumphant as a result of the battle. Later we see him continuing to express doubts (v.8). *“The battle, with its prolonged period of exertion and tension, was followed by morbid fears and a sense of failure.”* (J.Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50*. p.49.)

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

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

is for honor and glory, for approval and power, and you become disillusioned with yourself. **Summary:** For various reasons, no one can 'stay on the mountaintop', and after successes and spiritual 'highs' there is often a negative reaction in the heart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is a searching test. In Jonathan Edwards' book *Religious Affections* he pondered long and hard what distinguished genuine Christian life and experience from mechanical religiosity. One of the key differences that Edwards noted was that Christians are "*attracted to God and his ways for their own sake*". If we look at our hearts closely enough we will always see mixed motives. But real Christians should find God more and more attractive, and more willing to obey him regardless of 'pay off' in earthly fortunes and circumstances.

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

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

— R. Alter, Genesis, p.63

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

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

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

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

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

a) What does the term 'credited' mean?

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

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

b) What does it mean that Abram's faith was 'credited to him as righteousness'?

It is obvious to the ordinary reader of the Bible that human 'righteousness' is defined as moral, lawful conduct. All through the Psalms, 'righteousness' or 'unrighteousness' is the concern of the divine Judge. Righteous behavior leads to acquittal by the judge; unrighteous behavior leads to condemnation and punishment.

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

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

– G.Wenham Genesis 1-15, p. 335

#### c) How does Paul make clear the implications of this?

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

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

– D. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p.262

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

If there is any doubt that this is the Biblical teaching, Paul makes a striking statement in Romans 4:5, where he speaks of the *God who justifies the wicked*. The word for translated '*wicked*' by the NIV is the word *asebas* which

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

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

a) How is Abram’s faith both like and unlike ours?

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

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

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



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

b) Why do we need the work of Christ to help us 'make sense' of God's radical act of credited righteousness?

First, on the objective side, the work of Christ explains what seems to really be a contradiction. The Bible shows us a God of absolute justice who can *'by no means clear the guilty'* (Exodus 33:7). Yet he continually in the Old Testament rescues his people and establishes personal relationships with people who fail to meet his standard of righteousness. The teaching that God 'credits righteousness' (Gen 15:6) or that he refuses to 'credit sin' (Psalm 32:1,2) simply doesn't make any sense. On what basis can a just God do such a thing? The cross of Christ of course answers the question. If we don't understand and accept Jesus' claims, we are simply not going to admit that 'credited righteousness' even exists. It is nonsense.

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

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

**6. 15:7-21. Abram again expresses doubts and fears in v.8, and God deals with them in a final way. a) Why is he asked to bring and cut up animals? Read Jeremiah 34:18. b) What does it mean that (1) God goes through the pieces and (2) only God goes through the pieces?**

a) Why is he asked to bring and cut up animals?

Jeremiah 34:18 speaks of a 'covenant' or contract that certain men made with God. When they made this covenant, they cut a calf in two and then walked between the pieces. God says that since they broke their part of the covenant he will *'treat them like the calf they cut in two'*.

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

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

– G. Wenham, p. 332

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

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

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

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

"[The Lord] alone makes the covenant: the accent is on His initiative and His giving, as verse 18 makes clear, in contrast with the [equal] bargain-like covenant of, say, 31:44." D. Kidner, Genesis p. 125. "Here the covenant is simply a promise. It is one-sided as a commitment on the part of God to Abraham and exacts no comparable allegiance from Abraham to God. It is a commitment of free grace... God's movement toward Abraham is free and unconditional." W. Bruggemann, p. 149-150.

This is nothing short of astonishing. When God does not call Abram through the pieces, it is tantamount to his saying: "I will not only pay the penalty if I fail to do my part, but I will pay the penalty if *you* fail to do *your* part. I would rather be torn apart than see my relationship to you be broken." And of course, Abram had no idea what this promise and oath would cost God. Years later Isaiah understood the implications when he said of the Messiah that he would be "cut off from the land of the living" (Is.53:6) as he paid for his people's sins. To be "cut off" was the covenant curse. God really would become as those animal pieces when he was broken, speared, and pierced on the cross.

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

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

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

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



# What were we put in the world to do? The God who sees

## Study 14 Genesis 16:1-14

### INTRODUCTION

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

An additional background note. Sarai's proposal of Hagar was not original to her. Near Eastern documents from the period show us that the arrangement was culturally and legally acceptable.

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

— R.Alter, Genesis, p.67

In other words, Hagar's son born through Abraham would belong to Sarai because Hagar was Sarah's property. However, it was still a brutal, cruel, and unwise custom. In his quote above, Robert Alter points out that the narrator is criticizing, not supporting, what Sarai and Abram did with Hagar.

#### **1. 16:1-4a. What pressures are on Abram that make his decision understandable? Look carefully at Gen 15:4. Is Abraham disobeying God's promise or any other 'rule'?**

There are very understandable reasons for Abram to listen to Sarai. First, Abram could rationalize that the promise of a son "*from your own body*" (Gen 15:4) could technically include a child from a slave-wife, not Sarah. All the promise said was that the child would be from Abram's body. Second, a slave-wife and surrogate maternity was an accepted part of the culture. God had not yet revealed to his people that the cultural practice of polygamy and slavery was contrary to his will. (See question #5 for more on this.) Technically he was not breaking any 'rules' as he knew them. Thirdly, over a decade had passed since Abram's initial coming into Canaan (v.3). "Perhaps" he may have reasoned, "it is up to me to do something. Maybe God is waiting for me to

THINK  
APPLICATION

take the initiative.” Fourth, any husband will find it difficult to resist the wishes of his wife when she is deeply sad and angry. She is clearly in deep emotional pain. Abram would have to feel the pressure of her strong feelings.

So superficially and technically was doing nothing wrong in following Sarai’s plan.

**2. What are some typical ways that we can be tempted to ‘take matters into our own hands’ because of God’s seeming inaction? What is the result?**

A classic example is the Christian and marriage. Common sense and Biblical guidance directs the believer to marry only someone who also believes in Christ and has a similar level of commitment to him. But of course this ‘narrows the field’ tremendously, especially in major U.S. cities. As the single believer looks for a suitable mate and partner, it may soon look like “God is against me ever getting married! I am going to have to just do something myself.” The frequent response is to marry someone who doesn’t (really) believe in Christ. Participants will have many other more personal examples.

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

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

a) What is wrong with Sarai’s reasoning and motive?

Sarai says, “*The Lord has kept me from having children*” (v.1). This is the presupposition and premise for her whole plan. She does not see God as on her side. She believes he is actively against her. Her reasoning goes like this, “God is against me every having children. Therefore, if we are going to get a child — we are going to have to do it ourselves. It’s no use waiting on God!” Because her plan rests on a falsehood, it is doomed.

b) What is wrong with Abram’s choice?

The first thing wrong with Abram’s response is that he did not challenge the false premise of Sarai. As far as we know, God had only spoken directly to him, not to Sarai, at this point. Abram had received the vivid assurances and promises and oath of God. It is understandable that Sarai might feel that God will never come through, but it is not acceptable that Abram should think so.

Because of the greater revelation Abram has received of God's nature and purpose, he is definitely the most culpable and blameworthy party in this whole sad affair. **Application note:** If we are Christians or if we are Christians who have had a lot of instruction, we are more responsible in God's then those *doing the same things* who have not had the same opportunities to learn of him.

But the main thing wrong with Abram's response is that he chooses salvation through self-effort rather than salvation through grace. Paul lays this out clearly in Galatians 4. He speaks of Ishmael as "*born in the ordinary way*" (Gal.4:23,29) but of Isaac as the son "*born as the result of a free promise*" (v.23) and "*born by the power of the Spirit.*" (v.29). The apostle recognizes that Ishmael was a son that Abram had the human ability to produce on his own, without divine help. It did not take a divine promise nor the power of the Spirit to bring about the birth of Ishmael. However, if Sarah was going to be the bearer of Abram's son, there was nothing to do but wait on God. Sarah's biological son could not be achieved by human effort or ability — it required nothing less than a miraculous intervention by God in history.

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

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

**Application note 1:** At this point some may notice a theme emerging in the Abraham narrative — testing! Why is he exposed constantly to 'tests', some that he fails and some that he passes? If God saves by grace, why all the testing?

It would be better to wait until God's ultimate test of Abram's faith in chapter 22, when we can get a 'bird's eye view' of all of the tests and their common characteristics. For now consider the simple analogy of educational testing. An educational test has two purposes. On the one hand, a test's purpose is to reveal to the student his or her true level of ability. (This may be either good or bad news! But the function of the test is to give you a picture of your real condition.) On the other hand, a test's purpose is to challenge and enable the

student to learn and grow in the area that is being tested. In the same way, faith cannot really be 'measured' (like height or weight), only 'tested'. Difficulties and challenges to our faith at least show us our true condition and immaturity, and at best move us on to new levels of spiritual maturity.

**Application note 2:** Our salvation also depends on the miraculous birth of a baby boy through the intervention of God in history. When we believe in him, instead of trusting in our own good works, we are taken up into God's love and kingdom.

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

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

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

It is important to notice how Sarai hides the truth from herself. (1) She refuses her own responsibility ("You are responsible.") Of course Abram and Sarai did this together, and both are responsible, but Sarai simply refuses to admit her part of it. She puts all the blame on Abram. We saw in the Garden of Eden that



almost immediately sin leads to blame-shifting as Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. Blame-shifting is directly tied to the impulse of self-justification which is the very essence of sin. (2) She couches the whole system in terms of injustice. (...for this wrong [lit. violence] I am suffering.") It is amazing that a slave-owner who plans to take a slave woman's child to be her own is complaining of being the victim of injustice! Yet it is not so amazing. Sin makes "the heart... deceitful above all things." (Jer 17:9) Overly wealthy people can feel poor. Abusive people always feel that *they* are the ones being abused.

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

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

Sarai's 'plan' has ended in disaster.

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

As we have seen, while Abram did not 'break any rule', he sinned at the most fundamental level when he listened to Sarai's plan. As John Stott has put it, the essence of sin is human beings substituting themselves for God; the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. (See *The Cross of Christ*, p. 160.) The core of sin is self-salvation, self-justification, seeking to do for ourselves what only God can do, seeking to be our own Savior and Lord. That is a deeper definition of sin than 'breaking the rules.' Every act that breaks God's law is a sin, but sin is not always law-breaking. You can try to be your own Savior through *law-keeping*, as the Pharisees did by their efforts to be saved through their morality. Abram here shows how you can technically do nothing wrong but be moving far from God.

Because Abram's basic response was one of self-justification, it is not surprising to see how all the parties act and react in ways that lead to complete breakdown. When Sarai says puts getting a child above waiting for God, she makes an idol out of being a mother and child-bearer. It is no surprise then that she finds her heart intolerably humiliated and bitter by seeing her slave happily

pregnant. Pregnancy and child-bearing is now Sarai's main meaning in life and identity, and thus she feels attacked by the smugness of her servant. When Sarai comes to Abram and blames both him and Hagar for her misery, she continues with her self-justifying behavior. She needs to see herself as a victim. Her idolatry creates a delusional view of the situation. She can't admit her own sin and need for forgiveness. Lastly, Abram's callous response is also self-justifying. He probably is stung by the complete unfairness of Sarai's claim that 'it's all your fault', but he doesn't want to look honestly at the situation and admit what part he *has* played. (When your accuser wrongfully exaggerates your wrong, the natural tendency of the self-justifying human heart is to refuse to admit *any* blame at all.)

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

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

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

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

brought devastation and breakdown.

Third, we must repeat what we mentioned in the chapter 12 study. The Bible is not primarily a series of stories with a moral (though there are plenty of good and bad examples!) Rather, it is a record of God's intervening grace in the lives of people who don't seek it, don't deserve it, who continually resist it, and who don't appreciate it after they have been saved by it. This means that those who are shocked and offended by this story may find that the story is well-designed to reveal the foundations of their own hearts. Do you say, "I'm shocked and confused! These are the spiritual heroes I'm supposed to emulate, but they are really moral failures." Your shock may be because you have bought in to a completely mistaken idea, namely that Christianity is about how those who live moral and good lives (like Abram, Moses, and David) are taken to heaven. You are missing the whole point of stories like these — that even the ablest human beings who have ever lived could not rise above the brutality of their own cultures nor the self-centeredness of their own hearts. But by God's grace, and by their ultimate clinging to the promise of God's grace to moral failures, they triumphed.

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

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

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

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

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

a) The fact that God heard an Egyptian slave.

Here again we see how God’s grace subverts and contradicts (does not condone) traditional human social institutions. Hagar is a woman, a slave, a non-believer in Yahweh, and of a race outside the chosen line of Abraham. And yet God comes to her and blesses her. This means that:

God is not exclusively committed to Abraham-Sarah. His concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern even for the troubled and exploited who stand outside of that line. So great is God’s passion for the oppressed.

– W.Brueggemann, p.153

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

b) The fact that he heard a slave that did not pray to him.

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

It is possible that Hagar is expressing amazement that she has been in the presence of such a God and lived. Her expression is not just “there’s a God

who sees me" but "I have seen the God who sees me! He was visible to me! I was in his presence." Yes, that is something to be amazed at. How could a God so great he notices the cry of the weak and little be himself so gentle, gracious and approachable? The answer to that lies in future. As usual, "*the angel of the Lord*" who appears in 16:7-14, is a mysterious figure who speaks in the first person, as if he is the Lord himself, and yet is referred to as being the messenger of the Lord. This happens throughout the Old Testament and seems to indicate that this is God himself come in some visible human form. As such he points us to the ultimate example of God coming to earth in visible, human form in Jesus Christ.



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Our covenant God

### Study 15 Genesis 17:1-27

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a reference to Abram's age (99 years) and hinges on somewhat on Sarah's age (90 years). This brings up the subject of the long life-span of the 'patriarchs' in the book of Genesis. The ages given often seem to make no sense. For example, when Sarai is called a woman of remarkable physical beauty (12:11) she is at least 66 years old (cf. 12:4 with this chapter, in which Sarai is said to be nine years younger than Abraham.) Many have thought that the patriarchs counted shorter years, but that is hard to justify historically. Derek Kidner probably has the most reasonable view:

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

– D.Kidner, Genesis, p.117

#### 1. 17:1-16. How is this covenant making event the same as that in chapter 15:9-19? How is it different?

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

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

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

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

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

– Iain M. Duguid, *The Gospel According to Abraham*, p.74

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

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

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

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



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

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

Another way to put it is that in chapter 17 the covenant is 'going public'. *"Whereas in chapter 15 the covenant made with Abram was private and personal to him alone, now the time had come for it to be public."* (J.Baldwin, p.62).

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

In v.3-6 God changes Abram's name to *Abraham*. His old name meant "exalted (or honored) Father", but his new name meant "Father of many nations". In v.15-16 God changes Sarai's name to *Sarah*. Interestingly, both names mean 'princess' or 'queen', with the latter name being only a different version or pronunciation. There was no new meaning change. Why would God change her name then?

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

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

living for, what your priorities are, what you main hope and comfort is, how you now assess 'success'. This must mean that you experience a basic change in identity. A new name from God signifies this.

Third, to change the name of someone means a change of status. This is closely connected to the first meaning. It was customary when a child or youth was adopted into an ancient family that the child received a new name. The new name signified the new status that the person now had as legal heir and member of the family. In the same way here, *"the covenant changes [Abram's] status, a fact which requires a new name that will point to the promise, just as the Christian name, given in baptism, indicates a person's standing in Christ."* (J. Baldwin, p.64)

#### 4. What does that mean for us, practically?

What does this mean for us? Historically there are many churches that provide a person with a new name at their baptism. (As we will see below, baptism is the Christian equivalent of the covenant-making that happens here in Chapter 17.) But as vivid and meaningful as such a rite is, getting a new literal name is not the point. Even here in chapter 17, the name is only symbolic for the change in identity and mission. What we must remember and practice the following.

First, that we only will come to discover who we are through deeper commitment and relationship to him. It is in covenant with God that we discover our true "name". This happens in stages of course. The more we come to know our gifts, the more we come to see what God has called us to do in the world, the more we come to know our hearts realistically through prayer and knowing God's Word, the more we come to see who we are.

Second, that only in relationship to him can we heal and renovate our identity and self-understanding. Many of us have distorted self-images because of our covenant-service to other 'gods' or idols. God created Adam and Eve to be his children and servants. Therefore we were built to be "in covenant" with something greater than ourselves that would save us and keep us. If we do not serve the true God we will have to serve *something*. And as Paul says in Romans 1 every human being enters into 'covenants' with created things, idols (*"They worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator."* Rom.1:25) We look to persons, careers, performance, or other objects to fill our hearts with meaning. For example we may decide that if I am physically attractive, or financially successful, or if I have a family filled with happy, prospering people who all love me — then I can have a sense of significance. Paul's use of the word 'serve' shows that we are essentially bound to these replacement-gods and salvations. We have to have them, we are committed to obeying them. But any idol-covenant leads to a distortion of self-image. You will either have too low a self-esteem (if you are failing in your idol covenant) or too high a self-esteem (if you have done well). The only way to truly change our

fundamental self-understanding and identity (our 'name') is to change our heart-covenant. As we go deeper into our relationship with God, we will lose both the over-blown superiority and/or the hopeless inferiority that flow out of serving other gods besides the true one.

**5. Now let's look at the outline of the covenant. a) vv.4-8, 15-16. "As for me". What does God promise to give? b) vv.1-2, 9-14. "As for you". What is Abram required to do?**

a) What does God promise to do

(1) v.4-5. First, God gives Abram a new name. As we have seen, this name represents a new status in his relationship with God and a new personal identity. (2) v.6. Second God now promises not only to make of Abraham one nation but many nations. Multiple kings will come from him. This is a new magnification of the promise. The same thing is said to Sarah in v.15. (3) v.7. Third, he promises that he will enter into a covenant not only with Abraham but with his descendents as well, and that this will be an *everlasting* covenant. Again, this is a new magnification over anything said before. The relationship with Abraham's descendents is based on grace and will last forever. (4) v.7-8. Fourth (easily overlooked), God re-iterates his promise to be *your God*. This is the essence of the covenant — a personal relationship with the God of the universes. (5) v.8. Fifth, he promises the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendents. This too is a new focusing of the promise. The actual boundaries of the land have not previously been mentioned. (6) v.15. Sixth, God now specifically promises that the 'son of promise' will be not only from Abraham's body but also Sarah's. The child of promise will be Sarah's child.

The promises to Abraham before had been remarkable, but now they are magnified to astonishing proportions. No wonder Abraham's response is just to fall down and laugh! (v.17)

b) What is Abram required to do?

The stipulations of the covenant for Abram are: (1) First, he must *"walk before"* God. This is a very rich metaphor in the Bible. It has already been used of the relationship humanity had with God in the garden of Eden (3:8), and of Enoch (5:24) and Noah (6:9). It means (a) At least, it means obedience. 'Walking with' includes treading the same path as someone else. Therefore, it means to do as God does — live in righteousness, holiness, faithfulness, and so on. (b) But in addition it means relationship. To *'walk before'* means to be in God's presense, to be near him where you can converse with him and relate to him. This is at least a call to prayer and spiritual communion with God. (c) But in addition, it means process. The metaphor of walking evokes the idea of pilgrimage and journey. Abraham is not called just to obey God or just to relate to God, but to *grow* in God. *"There can be no 'once for all' formula for instant holiness,*

*because life's circumstances and demands keep changing, like the different phases of a journey.*" (J. Baldwin, p.63). So we see that 'walking before God' is a call to obedience, personal knowing, and continual growth in grace. Overall, it means living every second and step of your life in relationship to God. There is no 'secular' and 'sacred' division to the covenantal life. Everything must be done with reference to him. (2) Second, he must be 'blameless'. (v.1). It's root meaning is the word 'whole' or 'completely integrated.' This word does not mean so much perfection of performance as whole-hearted dedication and devotion. It is calling for a completely undivided heart. (3) Third, Abraham is to take upon himself the oath-sign of circumcision, and then to put it on all the male children of his household. The mark of circumcision was the physical symbol of the spiritual commitments God required. (See below for more on this oath-sign. (4) Fourth, this covenant requires a commitment to a people. Notice that the punishment for breaking the covenant is to be "cut off from his people" (v.17). That is very significant. The rite of circumcision was a way of being brought into a relationship with God and with all those also in a covenant relationship with God. Every believer shared the same oath-sign. You cannot enter into a covenant relationship with God individualistically. It automatically brings you into a believing, covenant-community.

This last item should not be under-emphasized. The main way we are held accountable to walk before God obediently is by entering a community of others who have taken the same oath. Together we discipline and encourage and stimulate each other. Thus circumcision was a way to create a new community, as can be seen by the fact that God told Abraham to put the sign on slave and free, Jew and Gentile in his house. All are included. Class distinction and race distinctions are swallowed up in the covenant relationship we all have with God.

Notice that very little has yet been revealed by God regarding his Law. The Ten Commandments have not yet been given. *"The striking feature of the stipulations [of this covenant] is their lack of detail. To be committed as all. Circumcision was God's brand; the moral implications could be left unwritten (until Sinai), for one was pledged to a Master, only secondarily to a way of life."* (Kidner, Genesis, p.129). The covenant was "You will be my people, and I will be your God." The essence of the promise is a personal relationship with God, given by grace. The essence of the requirement is a personal commitment to God, given with the whole heart.

If anyone reading this thinks: "but I could never keep this up! I can never be totally whole-hearted in my obedience to God" you are forgetting that the covenant of chapter 15 came before this one. You are bound to live like this because God has already committed himself to us.

**6. Why do you think God chose circumcision to ratify the covenant with Abram? Read Colossians 2:11-12. How does this rite shed light on what Jesus did for us on the cross?**

a) Why was circumcision chosen?

Circumcision was already practiced in many cultures at the time. But God now adopts it as the oath-sign of his covenant and gives it new meaning. In other cultures, circumcision was a 'coming of age' ceremony administered at puberty. Under God *"its new meaning... [was] to mark not the threshold of manhood, but of the covenant."* (Kidner, p.130). Of course, an oath-sign has to represent features of the covenant; it was chosen for its illustrative power. So what does circumcision show us and represent

First, the marking of the body in circumcision is permanent. This reflects the eternity of the covenant between God and Israel (v.19).

Second, circumcision is intimate, put on the most private member in an act that makes its subject very vulnerable. It reminds us of how whole-hearted and personal the covenant is to be. We are to serve him with all our inmost being, not simply behavioral compliance.

Third, circumcision is done through cutting off with a knife. It is no coincidence that God says that the penalty for breaking the covenant is to be *"cut off"* (17:17). That confirms the symbolism. Therefore, circumcision is like other oath-signs used in the ancient Near East, and like the one God himself used in Genesis 15. There God *'passed between the pieces'*. This means that he was promising to do his Word or become like the dead animals. In the same way, circumcision was a solemn way of saying, "I will follow you whole-heartedly, or be cut off". Circumcision demonstrates the devastation that will be the result of covenant breaking.

**Note:** Joyce Baldwin comments that *"mercifully, women were not subject to any cutting, as they have been in some parts of the world; this did not mean that they were excluded from the covenant, for they were accepted as full members with their fathers, husbands, and brothers."* (Baldwin, *Genesis 12-50*, p.66) Despite her positive words, some observers would consider baptism to be a superior covenant sign, since it is put equally on males and females.

b) What does Jesus show us?

Colossians 2:11-12 is a remarkable passage that likens the crucifixion of Christ to circumcision. Paul writes: *"In him you were circumcised... not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but in the circumcision of Christ, and you were buried with him in baptism, and raised with him through your faith..."* Here we see Paul speaking, as he often does, of how we 'died and rose' with Christ. That is, when we believe in Jesus, his death and resurrection is imputed to us. (For example, we are treated by God as if we had died and paid our sins.)

But notice how he speaks of Jesus death, as his 'circumcision'. What does this mean? It means that Jesus death was a bloody, violent act, in which he was 'cut off' from God and his people and from life itself.

Here then we see our confidence. When Abraham entered the covenant, he took a solemn oath to obey it or else to experience the curse of the covenant, to be cut off — physically, socially, and spiritually. Of course, no human being has ever 'walked blamelessly before God'. So how does God stay in covenant with his people? Jesus took the curse of the covenant for us. He came as a human being, and was circumcised as a child (Luke 2). He entered the covenant! But though he was the only human being in history who fulfilled it and who truly earned the blessing and promises of the covenant, at the end of his life he took the curse of the covenant. He was "*cut off from the land of the living*" (Is 53:8). Jesus took the great curse and circumcision that all the oath signs of circumcision pointed to. He went under the knife.

#### **7. What does this rite of circumcision tell us about how our children are to be involved in our faith and relationship to God?**

God's command for Abraham to put the covenant sign on his male children, even on infants, raises a problem for modern people in a way that it did not for ancient people. Here are some of the objections.

First, some object that we should not commit our children to being God's followers when they are too young to be involved in that decision. We should not impose our values and beliefs on them, rather we should wait for them to make their own choices. But God did not want Abraham to raise his children like that. He wanted them to grow up *in* the covenant, so that as they became rational and conscious they would find themselves already obligated to walk before God, obey him, and live with his people.

Although it is certainly true that children often resist heavy-handed coercion, there is also much naivete behind the notion that you can raise your children without imposing your values on them. If you say to your child, "I'm not going to tell you which faith is right or wrong — you have to do that for yourself," then you are raising your children to believe that spiritual truth is a matter of preference, not objective reality. For example, you don't leave it up to your children to decide if they want to use modern medicine when they grow up. If you believe modern medicine is more in line with reality than witch doctors, you simply bring them up with its benefits. So to raise your children without 'imposing' your values on them is actually to raise them in a very particular world-view. You can't help but raise your children to accept that which you believe to be crucial truths.

It is clear that God intends for believers to raise their children from their first days to worship and know God and to live among the people of God.

Second, some object that we should not put the covenant sign on our children today. Common sense and Colossians 2:11-12 shows us that there is an analogy between baptism and circumcision. They both represent salvation. (Paul said, "*He [Abraham] received circumcision as a sign of the righteousness he had by faith.*" Rom 4:11). Just as baptism was a sign of salvation through faith, so is baptism. Just as circumcision did not save Abraham but instead brought him in to a life of obedience to God with the people of God, so is baptism. But today many Christians do not believe it is right to put a sign of saving faith on a child who has not yet believed. Therefore they do not believe in infant baptism.

It would not be possible to make a full case for infant baptism here, nor would it be fair to the many people using this material who are members of churches who don't accept that practice. You didn't chose this Bible study to have your beliefs attacked. However, it is important for Christians both inside and outside of infant-baptizing churches to at least realize that infant baptism is a practice that claims to be Biblical. It is not just a 'tradition'. And at this point we come to an important part of the case for it. If it is wrong to put a sign of saving-faith on infants now, why wasn't it wrong for Abraham to put it on infants then? Remember, circumcision was a sign of the salvation Abraham had *by faith* (Rom. 4:11.) So why was it allright to put the sign of faith on those without faith?

The answer is that it is *faith* that brings you into the personal, saving relationship with God, and it is the *oath-sign* that brings you into the covenant community, where you are held accountable to live in a way that pleases God. God want us to have both the saving faith and the binding commitment and membership in the community. But Genesis 15-17 shows us that these two elements can come in either order. Abraham first got saving faith (Gen 15) and later added commitment to live obediently in covenant community (Gen 17). But the children of Abraham would experience this in reverse order. First they would find themselves living in covenant community, and later they would have to be 'circumcised in heart' (Jeremiah 9:24-26) and get saving faith. Either order is fine. They almost never happen at the same moment anyway. Therefore those who practice infant baptism also practice "believer's" baptism. You can be brought into covenant life as an infant and later put your faith savingly in Christ. In that case you are baptized as a child and admitted to the Lord's Supper when you savingly believe. Or you can live outside of the church/covenant community but find faith in Christ. Then you are baptized, receiving the sign as an adult, like Abraham.





# What were we put in the world to do?

## The friend of God

### Study 16 Genesis 18:1-33

#### INTRODUCTION

At this point in our study we should pause and ask the question: “What is the point of the writer of Genesis? What is the main theme, the main message?” It is important to ask that question as you go through a book so that you don’t simply study every episode and story as if it was a stand-alone little tale, put there to teach us some ‘moral’. What is the book of Genesis really about? Here is a candidate for the Genesis theme: the main theme of Genesis is how God fulfills his promises to Abraham unconditionally and through those promises restores the world lost in Eden. In the beginning God created a world filled with creatures who would become themselves (what they were designed to be) in worship and service of the Lord (Gen 1-2). But the creation has turned from God and begun disintegrating (Gen 3-5). God’s judgement retards the spread of disintegration but cannot stop it; creation will not answer God’s call to service (Gen 6-11). God determines then to begin a new creation, making Abraham capable of answering his call (Gen 13-15) and creating a new people out of his seed who will obey and serve him. Within this new creation, this covenant community, fellowship with God and with one another will be restored (Gen 16-17). All of this however, is based on the gracious, miraculous birth of the son of promise. Through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3).

Of course, from our vantage point we can see that this is not just the theme of Genesis, but of the whole Bible and therefore of all of human history. God is recreating the world that was lost by creating a new people of God (by calling them out by his grace) and through the ultimate son of promise, born of Mary, who truly is going to bless all the nations.

**Note1:** One helpful piece of background information to remember is that hospitality to travellers was considered an essential virtue in the ancient Near East. Abraham’s welcome of the three travelers was elaborate, but not totally out of the ordinary. It is not necessary to posit that he knew who these strangers were in order to account for it.

**Note2:** “Christians commentators have been tempted to discern three Persons of the Trinity here; but the passage differentiates clearly between the Lord and his two companions” (see verse 22, and 19:1) D. Kidner, Genesis, p.131.

**1. 18:1-8. a) Contrast this communication from God with previous ones. b) Why the difference? How does this story of God’s meal with Abraham relate to the main theme of Genesis — God’s promises to Abraham?**

a) Contrast this communication with previous ones.

The difference is remarkable between this visitation from God and his previous communications with Abraham. From what we can tell, all Abraham received

THINK  
APPLICATION

before chapter 15 was a disembodied voice. Then in chapter 15 God takes a visible form, but the result is an extremely frightening, overwhelming sight and experience (15:12). God came in dreadful darkness, smoke, and fire (15:17), and moved between bloody, dismembered carcasses! So first God was remote, then terrifying. But now in chapter 18 we have God coming in the form of an ordinary looking man (18:2) happy for rest and food. The Lord asks questions, gently chides Sarah for laughing (rather than rebuking her), opens a discussion about Sodom, virtually inviting Abraham to question his judgement.

b) Why this difference?

It cannot be a coincidence that in Genesis 17 the covenant with Abraham is 'completed'. First, God showed in Genesis 15 that the new relationship to Abraham he is forging is based on sovereign grace, not on anything meritorious in Abraham, and God even hints that ultimately he will take the curse in order to keep this relationship with Abraham's people. Second, God showed in Genesis 17 that this grace is to be answered by whole-hearted commitment and a willingness to submit to the Lordship of God in every area of life. One of the results of this covenant relationship will be intimacy with a holy God that otherwise would be impossible. They are to 'walk' together (17:1) and belong to one another (*"I will... be your God"* 17:7).

Primarily, then, this warm and even charming account, told with such loving detail, is a fulfillment of God's promise to have a personal, intimate relationship with Abraham. Now that the covenant has been made by God (Gen 15) and ratified by Abraham (Gen 17) we see God coming no longer as a remote voice or a terrifying fire but in very accessible and palpable form to speak face to face with Abraham and Sarah about the promised son, and to dialogue with Abraham about the fate of Sodom, the home of his nephew Lot. God has promised Abraham that they would have *fellowship* with one another. They would walk together as God and man had walked together before the Fall (cf. 17:1 and 3:8). Now God begins to do just that.

**2. 18:1-33. If this is in some ways meant to be a picture of fellowship with God, what can we learn practically from it? cf. James 2:23; Rev.3:20; Heb.13:1-2; Matt 25:35; John 15:13-15.**

James 2:23 is very significant. *"And the Scripture was fulfilled that said, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend."* 'Credited righteousness', our new standing with God within the covenant of grace — must lead to friendship with God. (See also 2 Chron 20:7; Is 41:8)

Derek Kidner (*Proverbs*, p.45) says that two Biblical qualities of 'friends' are candor and constancy. Friends: a) are transparent with one another, sharing deeply and honestly, b) are always there for one another in faithfulness. They

take and spend time with one another. Friends always let you in, but never let you down. In this chapter we see all of these elements.

First, we see an interesting illustration of constancy. Abraham is very faithful to the ethical duty of hospitality to hungry, weary visitors, and as a result, he finds himself going deeper into fellowship with God. The writer to the Hebrews makes a remarkable reference to this incident when he writes: *"Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."* (Heb 13:1-2) Abraham was simply "doing his duty" well, welcoming tired strangers with generosity, deference, and courtesy. But his reward was contact with God himself. In the same way, we are being taught that friendship with God depends on our very faithfully doing our 'covenant' duties of prayer, worship, keeping our conscience clear, caring for people with needs, ministering to those who are hurting (Matt 25:35), putting God first in our lives. Experiences of the presence of God cannot be programmed, but rather they come to us. However, they won't come to us if we have stopped being faithful and diligent in our basic Christian duties. If we 'have no time' for Christian ministry, service, for the 'means of grace' (hearing the Word, regular prayer and worship, the sacraments) then we won't come to know him personally. In the same way, you can't create or deepen a friendship unless you are committed to just spending time together.

When Jesus says, *"Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears... and opens... I will come in and dine with him, and he with me"* (Rev. 3:20) he is speaking not to non-believers but to Christians. To 'eat with' someone in the Near East was a highly 'relational' act. Meals took quite a long time, since the purpose was to get to know one another.

Second, we see interesting illustrations here of the need for candor. God kindly insists on candor from Sarah, with whom he is seeking a personal relationship (see question #3 below). Verse 15 tells us that Sarah lied to God — to God! Yet God shows the essence of friendship by, on the one hand insisting on honesty (*"I did not laugh!" "Oh, yes you did."*) but on the other hand not attacking or rejecting Sarah for her dishonesty. In other words, he shows both candor and constancy. God then provides candor when he remarkably begins to 'think out loud' about Sodom in a way that invites Abraham "in" to his inmost thoughts. *"Shall I hide from Abraham...?"* (v.17) is a rhetorical question. The obvious answer is: "No, I will not hide. We are friends." The third and most breathtaking example of candor between friends is seen in Abraham's boldness in seeking to dissuade God from judging Sodom (vv.22-33). Even Abraham is amazed at his own candor and honesty (v.31), but 'boldness', familiarity, and direct talk is the mark of friends.

Ultimately, this kind of intimacy, boldness, and familiarity is inexplicable. Why should the holy God treat sinful, weak human beings with such respect? And how could we ever be so sure of God's love and acceptance that we would dare be so honest and transparent? The ultimate answer is of course in Jesus

Christ. His work on the cross paves the way for intimacy with God. But also his incarnation truly makes the diety something palpable and accessible. Watching him live shows us holiness, wisdom, love, grace, majesty in forms that we can relate to personally. The three men at Abraham's tent were temporary apparitions, but in Jesus Christ God becomes someone we can know and talk to and befriend. (John 15:13-15)

**3. 18:9-15. Who has the main dialogue with God at Abraham's tent? Why does God have this conversation — what is his purpose? How does God help Sarah's progress in faith?**

God had spoken audibly to Abraham several time and had once appeared visibly, but as far as we know this is the first time that he has made a direct contact with Sarah. She had heard God's promise of a son many, many times, but it had always been "second hand" through Abraham. Now these three strangers come to Abraham's tent, and it is not clear who they are until in v.9 they ask, "*Where is your wife Sarah?*" This must have been rather a surprise that they knew the wife's name. Not until it is clear that Sarah is listening is it clear that the speaker is "*the Lord*". From v.10 on the whole conversation is between Sarah and God. God had come for Sarah. We learn from this that it is not enough to have a 'second hand' experience of God. If Sarah is to become a part of the covenant, she must also have a personal encounter with God. It is not enough to only know *about* God, or even to believe in general and obey in general the God you know *about*. You have to *know* God personally yourself.

As we look at God's conversation with Sarah we see a) first, he makes the most specific of all the forms of the son-promise. He says, "*this time next year... Sarah... will have a son*" (v.10). b) second, he responds to her self-hating, despondent doubt with both a gentle challenge and yet assurance.

After his statement of the promise we read that she *laughed to herself* (v.12), but her laugh had little real humor in it. When she says she is "*worn out*" (v.12) she uses a word that really means "useless" or good-for-nothing. When she says, "*shall I now have this pleasure?*" she uses a term that means sexual pleasure. The English reader thinks she is talking about the pleasure of having a child. (Actually, only male readers would be tempted to think that giving birth is pleasant!) Rather, she is probably saying, "I am so old, shrivelled and useless that my husband isn't even having sex with me! So how am I ever going to have a child?" So we see why God had to come to see Sarah. Only he could deal with the unbelief in his grace that has taught Sarah to consider herself 'beyond hope'.

God deals with her bitter laughter and self-hatred the same way he deals with everything in our lives — with a combination of conviction and comfort. First he 'calls her on the carpet' and won't let her off. He convicts her of her unbelief, but looking under the mask (she had only laughed *to herself*, trying to hide it)

and telling her “You laughed at me!” (v.13) when she denied it, he presses anyway. “Yes, *you did*.” (v.15). But, on the other hand, he is remarkably assuring. Even when he convicts her, he is gentle. But most of all, he calls her to wonder at his grace. Literally, he asks: “*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*” This is a challenge with tremendous promise in it. He is saying: “I can do more than you can even imagine. I will fill your life with wonder.” It is this mixture of firmness and yet loving assurance that is the essence of parenting and spiritual shepherding in general.

**4. 18:18-19. What do we learn from God’s summary of Abraham’s call in v.18-19? What is the relationship between God’s favor and Abraham’s obedience as seen in v.19?**

First, we learn that Abraham is to teach and order his household in “*the way of the Lord*” (v.19a) This is the most explicit expression so far of Abraham’s responsibility to create a counter-culture, a new God-fearing community in which God’s ways are pre-eminent. This underscores the corporate nature of our covenant relationship with God. Though we are saved individually, we are automatically saved *into* a community of other saved persons. We are all, like Abraham, called to live and shape this alternate humanity, new creation-community.

Second, we learn that the two marks of this ‘*way of the Lord*’ are “*righteousness*” and “*justice*” v.19b. (NIV – “*what is right and just*”) These two words are often paired in the Bible, and probably has to do with both personal individual godliness and socially just and generous behavior. God is Lord of every area of our lives.

Third, however, we see here the relationship of God’s choosing Abraham to his obedient behavior. First it says “*I have chosen him*” (v.19), a Hebrew word that literally means “I have known him personally.” Many commentators say that the word means almost ‘to make someone a friend’. Second it says, “*so that he will... do what is right and just*”. The order and relationship of these two things could not be clearer.

“Verse 19 shows particularly clearly how grace and law work together, for it opens with grace (I have chosen him) directed toward the firm discipline of law (direct... to keep the way of the Lord) through which eventually grace may reach its goal (that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.)”

–D. Kidner, *Genesis*, p.133

God does not choose Abraham because he does what is right and just. He does what is right and just because he is chosen. We are saved by grace alone, but that saving grace always and gladly turns to obedience as a way to relate to our Lord and bring about his loving purposes in the world and in our lives.

**5. 18:17-33. What do we learn from this passage about intercessory prayer?**

First, Abraham's prayer is really initiated by God. Notice that it is God's thoughts that come to Abraham that leads Abraham into passionate prayer. That tells us that prayer is not simply an appeal to God as much as a *response* to God. We would not be able to pray at all if we didn't have God's general promises in his Word that he is a prayer hearing God. We would not be able to pray with confidence and boldness if we didn't have (further) God's gospel in his Word that tells us our new standing as his adopted and loved children. But even further, we generally pray best when responding to God speaking to us (challenging, assuring, comforting, warning) by the Holy Spirit through his Word. In short, our prayers really are dependent on God coming and drawing us out through his Word and Spirit.

Second, Abraham's prayer is extremely persistent and specific. He simply will not give up. He comes back again and again. He knows exactly what he wants and he is set on getting it. The Bible calls us to prevailing prayer, continual and relentless. The gospel produces this kind of prayer (and we can also say that this kind of prayer is a good indication that the gospel is in your life.) The gospel gives you a sense of your helplessness and weakness, so you pray fervently, knowing you cannot bring this about by yourself. On the other hand the gospel gives you a confidence that God is *for* you and is on your side. Without that kind of hopefulness, you can't stick at relentless prayer.

Third, Abraham's prayer is "familiar" and bold. We have already alluded to the candor and 'cheek' of Abraham's prayer. His temerity takes the breath away. It is far more aggressive than most people would ever feel free to be with God. However, just as interesting is the fact that

Fourth, Abraham's prayer is passionately humble. He is filled with fear and trembling. He calls himself "*dust and ashes*" (v.27). He repeatedly recognizes that his own audacity and boldness is a great risk, and that God has every right to be angry with him (v.30, 31, 32). He has absolutely no sense of entitlement. This is remarkable, that someone so aggressive would have so little sense that he deserved to be listened to. Either Abraham is desperately concerned for those he is praying for, or very, very confident in God's grace and mercy, or both. But his assertiveness is not based on any belief in his own worthiness.

Fifth, Abraham's prayer is deeply theological. Abraham is not simply crying out, but he is reasoning theologically, appealing to God on the basis of his truth. In v.25 he argues from the 'given' that God is absolutely just, for example. He is not simply 'bringing his grocery list' but he is seeking understanding Biblical understanding as he is praying. He is asking, "This is true, so wouldn't this be true?" Though his emotions and heart is obviously engaged, so is his mind. The best prayers (best both for changing our hearts and engaging God) are prayers based on and filled with Scripture.



Sixth, Abraham's prayer is committed to the unbelieving city. Abraham's prayer has been called 'high priestly' because he comes before God on behalf of others. Moses intercedes before God for the children of Israel after they sin (Exodus 33) and others do the same. But there is something in Abraham's intercession that goes beyond them all. It is easy to miss who exactly Abraham is praying for. Of course he wants Lot and his family spared, and next week we will see that God does answer Abraham's prayer in that regard. But if we look carefully, Abraham is praying for the whole city of Sodom, with all its wicked inhabitants. *"Will you not... spare the place..."* (v.24) Abraham is pleading for God's mercy for a city filled with injustice and evil. Gordon Wenham notes how radical this is:

We have already noted verbal links of this passage with Moses' great intercession with God in Exo 32-34, with Samuel's 1 Sam 12, with Amos and with Jeremiah, who all pleaded with God on the nation's behalf. Here, however, Abraham is not praying for his own people (he does not mention Lot) but for Sodom, and this makes this episode unique among prophetic intercessions.

– Wenham, Genesis 16-50, p.53

Seventh, Abraham's prayer is not answered in an all or nothing way. Of course, in one sense God turns him down. He does not *"spare... the place"* (v.24). And yet as we will see next week, God does repeated interventions to spare Lot, and the reason given is that God had listened to Abraham (19:29).

This prayer shows that God has truly made Abraham his friend. This kind of prayer-life is far beyond most of us. How can we approach it? See below.

**6. 18:17-33. What is the basic argument Abraham uses in his intercession to seek to spare the city? What is God's response to it? (Does he agree with it or disagree with it, do you think?)**

As we noted above, Abraham is not simply pleading with God, but appealing to him on the basis of truth. And in the heart of his prayer he hits upon a remarkable theological logic. He stands before God, as it were, as a defense attorney. (Indeed, several commentators say that v.23 *"Abraham approached him"* is a legal term meaning 'to approach the bench'.) A lawyer can not simply plead with a Judge or jury, but must make a case on the basis of the law, the truth. In that sense, Abraham is truly being an 'advocate' for Sodom. (Remarkable!)

The logic of his case is seen best in v.24 — *"will you... not spare the place for the sake of... the righteous?"* He argues like this. "I know you won't let the righteous perish for the sake of the wicked (v.23), but why not let the wicked live for the sake of the righteous (v.24)." Abraham is asking — could there not be a situation in which the righteousness of the few "covers" the unrighteousness of the many? Gerhard Von Rad puts it like this:

"[Abraham's question] proceeds from the deeply rooted solidarity of a community incriminated in any crime, a solidarity from which the individual could not be simply released... (See Joshua 7:24ff.) Now it is a great misunderstanding to see in this conversation a protest against this ancient collective idea... One must not interpret this section from the viewpoint of [an] individualistic tendency that [comes later in history]...

[Abraham's question] is not one that forces its way from collectivism to individualism, but one that dares to replace old collective thinking with new... Could not a smaller number of guiltless men be so important before God that his minority should cause a reprieve for the whole community? The law of guilt transference has as its counter-point the law of substitution... What is amazing is how his courage increases during conversation as Yahweh's grace is willing... until he arrives at the astonishing fact that even a very small number of innocent are more important in God's sight than a majority of sinners... so predominant is God's will to save over his will to punish!"

– G. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 208-209

Modern people are very individualistic, and have little or no sense of the reality of 'collective guilt'. Ancient people (and the Bible!) however have a more balanced view, and realize that there is both individual responsibility and corporate responsibility. For example, in Joshua 7, we see that an entire family is punished for the sin of one member. Since they knew and could have stopped him, or at least since they were part of the family system that produced him, they were all held to guilty. "Well, then" argues Abraham, "Why couldn't this corporate responsibility work the other way as well? If it is true that the guilt of the many can be transferred to the one, why can't the righteousness of the few cover the guilt of the many?" And to Abraham's amazement — and ours — he finds that the idea of 'imputed righteousness' is valid before God. He finds over and over again that yes, God will cover and spare the guilt of the many if there only a few truly righteous persons among them. Abraham has found that God's desire to save us is so "preponderant" over his desire to judge that someone else's righteousness could save us if we are in solidarity with him.

But in the end, this new concept seems to fail. Abraham stops his appeals at ten righteous persons (v.32-33) but goes no farther. Why? Ten was the number traditionally considered the minimum for a synagogue. It was the minimum administrative number for constituting a believing community in a city. Abraham may be unwilling to go farther than ten because of the importance of a believing community for a city, not just believing individuals.

But the real reason that Sodom is not spared is not because the *principle* failed, as we know from the New Testament, but that there were no truly righteous persons in Sodom. Even Lot was very flawed. So Abraham's intercession uncovered the principle of imputed righteousness, that God could save and cover guilty sinners with the righteousness of another (Romans 5). But alas, there was no perfectly righteous person there.



**7. How does Jesus fulfill Abraham's prayer? How does Jesus help us to become priestly pray-ers like Abraham?**

Abraham prayed for people who might have killed him if they lived, but Jesus prayed for people who *were* killing him. *"Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing"* (Luke 23). Abraham risked his life before the holy God in order to save the wicked city, but Jesus gave his life for the people. *"Jesus was a high priest who perfectly meets our need. Unlike other priests who offered many sacrifices, he offered himself, once for all, for the sins of the people."* (Hebrews 7:26). *"Therefore he is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, for he ever lives to intercede for them."* (Hebrews 7:25) Jesus is the one truly righteous one whose righteousness saves us (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We will never become pray-ers like Abraham just by simply trying, but only by believing and rejoicing in the one to whom Abraham is pointing. We said above that is essentially impossible to be as aggressive and as humble in prayer as Abraham is. Outside of the gospel we may see ourselves as *'dust and ashes'* but then we won't feel we deserve to go to God. Or we may feel we are good enough to go to God, but then we could never have Abraham's humility and passion for people who are lost and even evil. Only if we know that in Christ we are lost sinners yet legally righteous and accepted at once will we have the dynamite in the heart that will lead us to pray like Abraham and care for our city as he did.



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Judgment on Sodom

### Study 17 | Genesis 19:1-38

#### INTRODUCTION

The first bit of background information we need is to remind ourselves of the moral significance of hospitality in ancient times. The way a family, village or city treated travellers was considered a crucial index of its character.

Another piece of background information has to do with the destruction of the cities of the plain. The famous text tells us that the cities perished in “*fire and brimstone*” or “*burning sulphur*” (Gen 19:24). But geological studies show us that God probably used existing conditions and materials (just like he does for judgment through storms and rain). As we saw in Gen 14:3,10, the region of the cities was filled with underground pits and beds of petroleum and bitumen, salt and sulphur. “*Exudations of bitumen, petroleum and probably natural gas... catching fire from lightning or human action would adequately account for recorded phenomena.*” (J. Baldwin, Genesis 12-50) The Bible tells us that this ‘natural’ phenomenon was a judgment of God, not a random accident.

#### 1. Begin by re-reading Genesis 18:20-21. What does God say is the reason that he judges a city? (Who do you think is doing the ‘outcry’?)

God says that there has been an “*outcry*” against the city. That implies that some have been harmed and are crying out in appeal. About this word Robert Alter writes, “*The Hebrew noun, or the verb from which it is derived... is often associated in the Prophets and Psalms with the shrieks of torment of the oppressed.*” (Alter, Genesis, p.80) See for an example Proverbs 21:13 where the verb is used of the misery of the oppressed poor. Elsewhere the Bible uses this same image the blood of victims “*crying out*” to God, such as the blood of Abel (Gen 4:10). The fact that God describes the sin of the cities of the plain with this metaphor does not bode well for them, since this was the same language used of the condition of society before the great flood (Gen 6:5). All this fits in with what was said in the introduction, that the sin of Sodom could not simply have been immoral sex, because it is the cry of injustice that God hears. That means additional sins besides sexual ones. (“*Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom. She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned. They did not help the poor and needy.*” Ezekiel 16:49)

We will not re-visit at length the whole issue of God’s justice and judgement. We studied that when we came to the narrative of Noah and the great flood. Nevertheless, people struggle greatly with the idea of a judging God. Here, briefly, are two reasons why there *must* be a God of justice who will judge oppression, evil, and injustice. There must be a divine “judgment day” or:

- 1) there is no intellectual defense against the “naturalness” of violence. Many people say that they don’t believe in God, this world is all there is. But if this world is all there is, violence is perfectly natural. Nature operates on a principle of the survival of the fittest, the stronger

eating the weak. Now if it is natural for a big fish to eat a smaller fish, why isn't it perfectly natural for a stronger nation or culture to oppress an weaker one? If there is no God, or no super-natural reality outside of nature, how can anyone say that the violence of life is *wrong*? You can't judge any part of nature to be 'crooked' unless you have a straight-edge that comes from outside of nature. Unless there is a just God who says that oppression and slavery and violence is against his will and law, then there is no real intellectual basis for objecting to bigotry and oppression. It's just your opinion against mine.

- 2) there is no emotional and personal defence against bitterness of violence. Unless I know that there is a God a) who knows what others deserve better than me, b) and who will give do justice and put everything right eventually, then I will be unable to avoid being sucked in to the cycle of bitterness and maybe revenge. If you are the victim of oppression you will experience an enormous pressure within to be the judge, unless you know deep down that there is a true Judge who can do this better than you can, and that you don't have the right to sit in his chair.

In short, we need (intellectually, emotionally, socially, culturally) to have the hope that comes with knowing there is a God who is the Judge. Many say, "I don't believe in a judging God, I believe in a merciful God." But a God who will never come down in judgement isn't truly merciful! Who will hear the "outcry" if he does not?

**2. vv.1-3-What hints does the narrator give us immediately about the condition of Sodom? What does Lot's seat in the gate tell us about his position and influence in the city?**

The skilful narrator gives us dark hints about what is to come. First, Lot is the only person at the gate of the city to greet the travellers and to offer hospitality. *"That Lot was alone and no-one else greeted the visitors is ominous..."* (G.Wenham, "Genesis", New Bible Commentary, p. 74.) As noted in the introduction, this lack of hospitality immediately shows that the city was a brutal place. Apart from Lot's invitation, the guests would have had to sleep on the street. (*"We will spend the night in the square."* V.2b) Secondly, when the travellers express their intention to sleep out on the street, *"Lot's alarm in v.3a reveals he knew his Sodom."* (D.Kidner, Genesis, p.134.) Lot knows, essentially, that any strangers out after dark would be the object of violence. Since it was *"evening"* (v.1) he is frightened for them and wants to protect them. [Note: It is not evident that he recognizes them to be divine messengers until later.]

In light of all this, Lot's position "*sitting in the gateway of the city*" (v.1) is something of an indictment of him. Why? The "gate" of the city was the place that the local dignitaries sat to set policy for the town. (See Genesis 34:20ff as an example. There an issue is brought to those in the 'gate' for discussion and decision.) To be given a seat in the gate was something like being on the city council or like getting a seat in the stock exchange. It meant you were recognized as being successful and prominent, and you were then able to debate and deliberate on public policy and social/cultural norms for the city. What is immediately obvious, however, is that Lot has had absolutely no positive effect on the city. It is filled with selfishness, brutality, violence, licentiousness, and oppression, and he is simply presiding over it!

This does not mean that Lot participated or condoned what was going on. On the contrary the New Testament tells us that he was deeply distressed by the evil that he saw (2 Peter 2:7-8). Nonetheless, despite his standing in the economy of the city, he was either too cowardly to speak out against the wrongdoing, or else he was completely unpersuasive and ineffectual when he did so. Verse 9 shows this when the crowd speaks disdainfully of him. Either his life-pattern or his reasoning (or both) failed to win respect and gain a hearing. The contrast with two other Old Testament figures — Joseph, Daniel, and Esther — is very noticeable. They also were believers who came into prominent official positions in very pagan societies and in very un-godly cities. Yet they had deep influence on their cultures for good.

### **3. How is Lot's ineffectiveness in Sodom a warning to us? What should we learn from it?**

Some might say that Lot's ineffectiveness in Sodom warns believers against becoming involved in a secular affairs or even against living in unbelieving cities. Someone might say: "Lot's mistake was to go and live in such a wicked city in the first place! He should have stayed out in the country and kept himself pure and unspotted." The trouble with that reasoning is that Daniel and others are held up to be models to us. If Lot was sinning to go into an unbelieving city and become enmeshed in the government, then why wasn't Daniel sinning? Not only that, at one point the exiled Jews *en masse* refused to move into the city of Babylon and become engaged with society, but God told them otherwise (cf. Jeremiah 29:1ff.) The prophets that told the Jews to stay out of the big, wicked city were false prophets!

What the story of Lot warns us against is more subtle. Lot's failure was that, instead of his family being salt and light to mold the values of Sodom, Sodom influenced and molded the values of Lot's family (as we will see later.) But

why? Derek Kidner gives us the best hint.

As for Lot, his place 'in the gate' proclaimed him a man of standing in Sodom, little as he relished its ways (2 Peter 2:7,8). His public ineffectiveness must be balanced against the influential careers of Joseph and Daniel, whose high office was a vocation; the difference lay there.

– Kidner, p. 134

Kidner's insight is profound. Daniel and Joseph saw their careers as primarily "vocation" — a calling from God. Their main and primary motive was to use their gifts in such a way that their God was honored and shown to be the true God. Joseph, for example, let it be known 'up front' to the Pharaoh that he was a believer in Yahweh, so that when Pharaoh appointed him as Prime Minister, he knew exactly what he was getting. Daniel did the same. They only came in to positions where they had the freedom to profess their faith and work with integrity. With God's help they rose up in the ranks despite their stands (which often brought them into danger). But because they put their service to him above prosperity and advancement, then when they *did* advance they were seen as men of great integrity and their words and deeds had an impact. As we saw in Genesis 14, Lot's pre-eminent reason for moving to Sodom was for the benefit of his career and prosperity. Being an influence for God and the good of the city was secondary. Career advancement was the non-negotiable. Thus he rose in the ranks, but ended up having no influence at all. The people of Sodom probably knew he worshipped some strange foreign God (cf. 19:9), but there was no unusual courage, compassion, or character about him to grab their attention or respect.

So what is the warning for us? We are not being warned against involvement with unbelieving culture and society but against being a "thermometer" (an instrument controlled by the environment) rather than a "thermostat" (an instrument that effects its environment). We are not being warned against 'secular vocations' but making an idol out of our career, achievement, or the approval of the culture. We must see out entire lives, including our work, as part of our calling to glorify God with our gifts. We must make service to God the non-negotiable, not career advancement. For example, that means we should not take jobs that absorb all our time for rest, prayer, and relationships, we should not take jobs that produce things that are detrimental to or exploitive of others, we should not take jobs with companies with corporate cultures that are immoral or corrupt.

Besides the job, a Christian will also be willing to contribute to the good of the whole community or neighborhood. We should not simply 'use' the city we live in in order to derive entertainment, personal advancement, and cultural enrichment. We should also be involved in working to solve its community problems. This too is a way for a Christian to put the service of God ahead of personal peace and affluence.

Only if our priorities are put straight will we be able to be 'salt and light' in our cities and society.

**Background Note:** Before going any farther we must address the long-standing question that has confronted readers of this passage — what was the sin of Sodom? The traditional view is that 1) the sin of Sodom was homosexuality, and 2) this account teaches that homosexuality is to be abhorred and condemned. The basis for this view is verse 4-5, where the men of Sodom seek to have sex with the (male) visitors of Lot. Others today deny this interpretation. Some who deny the traditional view believe that the Hebrew word (literally) “to know” in v.5 (translated by the NIV “*have sex with*”) does not refer to sexual intercourse. They believe the sin of vv.4-5 is rather a failure of hospitality or perhaps a desire to do violence to them. Obviously, the debate rages on. The traditional view is often motivated by a desire to prove homosexuality wrong from this passage, while the contemporary view is motivated by a desire to deny that homosexuality is wrong.

I suggest a third way. I believe that the purpose of the narrator was not to teach us about homosexuality *per se*. First, the contemporary view is wrong that sex is not in view in vv.4-5. If the mob was not asking for sex, why does Lot offer his daughters to them in v.8 mentioning that they are virgins? But second, the traditional view is forced, because it is obvious that what the mob is after is really like a gang rape. That makes it impossible to know whether or not the narrator means to say that *any* homosexual act is wrong or just rape. Elsewhere the Bible shows us that Sodom was judged for a complex of issues — for its social injustice (Ezek 16:49), for lying, corruption as well as for adultery and sexual sin (Jer 23:14; cf. also Isaiah 1:9,10 and 3:9).

In short, we shouldn't try to make this text condemn or exonerate homosexuality. If we are going to discern the Bible's views on homosexuality and heterosexuality, we must go to the texts that are written in order to teach on those subjects, especially Genesis 1 and 2 and Romans 1.

#### **4. vv.4-11. How do you assess Lot's behavior with the mob in defense of his guests?**

Lot's reaction to the mob is an incoherent mix of character and stupidity, of moral sense and moral nonsense. On the one hand, he shows great courage to go outside and face the mob with “*the door shut behind him*” (v.6). He shows a peace-maker's spirit when he pleads with them, “*my friends, don't do this...*” (v.7). He also shows the highest regard for his responsibility as host. “*They have come under the protection of my roof*” (v.8). But on the other hand, the response of the mob shows that Lot has been “in denial” about the depth of the city's violence and depravity. His speech only infuriates and incites the

crowd to greater violence. He has completely misread the situation and put everyone's lives in more jeopardy. But his offer of his daughters, to meet the sexual needs of the mob (v.8) is astonishing. (Imagine what his daughters were thinking and feeling when they heard this offer!) It is at least tremendously callous and probably shows us that Lot is being guided more by human cultural conventions than godly wisdom. He seems to value these women (even though they are his daughters) far less as human beings than the travelling men.

Here we have Lot's character in microcosm. He is sincere and consciously committed to moral values and conventions, but he has almost no real wisdom and the spiritual maturity (discernment, love) to manage the situation. He is a 'nice man', a moral man, but he does not have God spiritually working in his life to grow him in faith and grace. He has not made a covenant with God, he has not 'left everything' to serve the living God as Abraham has. God is just one of many concerns in Lot's life. God is not "Lord" of Lot's life. So his character is a patchwork of light and darkness. In one stroke he completely alienates his family (see vv.30ff), enrages the mob, and put the lives of his whole household in such danger that only the supernatural intervention of the angels saves them.

What we see, as usual in the Bible, is that we cannot save ourselves. Lot is a great example of a well-meaning, good and 'decent' person, who has a conscience and has tried to be religious in a general way. However, his human resources and human wisdom has only brought him into a place of peril and to the brink of utter disaster, spiritually and physically. Only God, through the angels, can save him.

**Note:** The word used in verse 11 is not the normal Hebrew word for 'blindness'. It actually means a "dazzled state". This means that the angels did not actually remove their sight but probably created an explosive flash of overwhelming light that struck everyone with temporary blindness, debilitating the mob and removing the threat. This word occurs also in 2 Kings 6:18, when angels are again present and an attacking army is struck blind. The suggestion is that the angels may have momentarily flashed out a ray of divine glory which devastated the eyes and minds of the attacking men. *"Out of the brightness of his presence... the Lord thundered from heaven... He scattered great bolts of lightning and routed them."* (Psalm 18:12-14)

**5. vv.11-29. Trace the ways that God (through the angels) seek to save Lot and how Lot and his family respond to each effort. What do we learn here about how God works in our lives?**

Abraham had prayed for God to save his nephew Lot (Genesis 18). Now we see how he proceeds to do this.

First, we see God initiating. Lot has not called on God to come and help him.



Lot has not 'earned' God's help through his good life. God does not come to Lot because Lot is cognizant of his spiritual need. Rather he comes to *make* Lot cognizant of his spiritual situation. He initiates in grace. The first step of this initiation is to open Lot's eyes to his peril and his need to leave the city. The visit of the angels "*shattered the uneasy peace in which [Lot] has lived so long.*" (Kidner, p.134). Lot is forced for the first time to publicly call the residents of Sodom "*wicked*" (v.7). But they only see him "*trying to be judge over us*" (i.e. 'he's trying to tell us how to live!') and become murderously enraged. Lot's ineffectiveness and Sodom's wickedness is laid bare. There is no escaping it. The end-result is that Lot can no longer live in the city under any circumstances. His hand is being forced.

Second, we see God's working salvation through relationships, and especially the family. The angels give Lot the chance to speak to his whole family — including his in-laws "*or anyone else in the city that belongs to you*" — about the coming destruction and offer them a chance to escape (vv.12-13). What does this show us? On the one hand, unlike our individualistic culture, God looks at us in communities and families, not just as individuals. His salvation very often works along family lines. This is realistic. As much as contemporary people want to think they are 'self-made', we are inescapably and largely a product of our family. Much of what we are comes directly from our parents' character. Our family's sins tend to be our sins; our family's virtues tend to be our virtues. Therefore God wants to save families, not just individuals. He wants Christian members of a family to winsomely attract the other members to him. On the other hand, we must notice that God does not save anyone automatically just because they are related to Lot. They have special privileges and opportunities because of their relationship, but they still have to make their own decision to follow. Thus in this story, "*The family's solidarity in God's eyes (cf. Gen 7:1; 17:9; 18:19) and the members' freedom to defy it are both vivid realities here.*" (Kidner, p.135.)

Third, we see God (through the angels) empowering. Lot shows that he has essentially no innate ability to cooperate with God's grace at all. Early in the morning they call him to flee (v.15) but Lot "*hesitated.*" Lot knows that God will destroy the city and even if that doesn't happen the angry mob from the night before will destroy him — yet he can't bear to leave! Then the angels "*grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them.*" (v.18). Then they call him to flee again (v.19). What a vivid illustration of Paul's famous statement that human beings are not capable of seeking God (Romans 3:10) and Jesus famous statement that everyone must be drawn or they cannot come to God (John 6:44).

Fourth, we see God accepting imperfect responses. The angels command Lot to go to the hills (v.18) but Lot asks if instead he can go to a smaller city, Zoar (v.19). This request for a revision of the plan shows how unwilling Lot still is to trust God and leave his comfortable life in Sodom. Yet, his request agreed to

(v.21). This final example of divine patience shows us that not only is our salvation not initiated by us, but it is not even 'earned' by us through the quality of our response. God calls us to believe, but our belief is always flawed. Our acceptance is not based on the quality of our love and faith, but on his mercy (v.16).

Fifth, we see God working through prayer. *"So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe..."* (v.29). Prayer and how it 'works' is certainly shrouded in mystery, but we learn here that it makes a difference in the lives of people we love. Look at how patient God is with Lot. And why? Because *"God... remembered Abraham."*

But we should probably look even deeper than to a lesson on the importance of praying for our friends. God's commitment to Lot seems to be absolute. No matter how slow and unwilling he is, God waits for him. Notice the angel's remarkable statement, *"flee there [to Zoar] quickly, because I cannot do anything until you reach it"* (v.22). This shows how God was deeply (unconditionally?) committed to Lot's safety. The angel "could not do anything" in judgment until Lot was safe. I believe here we would do well to think of the ultimate Advocate (1 John 2:1-2) and Intercessor (Rom 8:34) whose prayers for us guarantee our security in the Lord (Luke 22:31-32). If Jesus is our savior, then he is our intercessor, and thus God will patiently and unconditionally shepherd us to safety not for our sake, but for the sake of our Great Abraham, our great Intercessor, whose prayers are never turned down, even though we are as spiritually stupid as Lot.

**6. vv.26. Lot's wife "looks back" and 'becomes a pillar of salt'. How does Jesus warning in Luke 17:32-33 shed light on what happened here?**

Lot's wife (along with everyone else in the family) is told by the angels in v.17 specifically *"Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere on the plain... or you will be swept away."* However, she does look back, and dies. The typical 'Sunday School' version of the story (and its depiction in movies) takes this story to be a supernatural event. The depiction goes like this — Lot's wife looks over her shoulder or turns around momentarily and God immediately turns her into salt. This seems unfair and arbitrary, especially considering God's patience with Lot's procrastination and resistance at every point. It also seems cruel.

But we must notice that the text doesn't say *"God turned her into salt"*, but only that *"she became"*. Also, the fact that she became salt indicates that (just as the angel warned her) she must have stopped and lingered and was caught in the conflagration. It was a completely natural consequence. *"She was caught up in the molten tide that swept across the plain like volcanic lava. Thus she became fossilized..."* (J.Baldwin, p.79). Nevertheless, though her death was "natural", *"in the context of judgment it captures in a single picture the fate of*

*those who turn back (cf. Heb 10:38,39; Luke 17:31-33).*" (Kidner, p.135. The picture of Lot's wife reminds us that we cannot tell God "I'll flee to you when I'm ready." It is typical, for example, for younger adults to want to postpone a strong spiritual commitment until they have 'experienced more of life'. But you don't know whether your heart will be too hard or indifferent to repent and turn to him later. We must never put off submission to God whenever we sense him calling to us in our hearts. If he is softening your heart and drawing you, you have no right to tell him — "come back and help me about 5 years from now". You may find that you will spiritually harden — become a stone.

Jesus warning in Luke 32-33 is especially helpful because it shows us that what Lot's wife did was not just 'break a rule' through a momentary impulse, but she was simply failing to hear God's call to discipleship. God was saying to Lot's family: "If you are going to be saved you must follow me and leave behind everything! All your status, money, comfort, friends — everything! It is the only way you will be saved." Jesus says that in reality God calls us all to the very same thing. Of course, few of us have to literally and physically leave everything, but we are to make a profound change in our center and begin to live wholly for God. Nothing else is central or necessary. He is the only Savior and Lord. God calls us all to do this. And if we aren't willing to listen to the call, we will be lost.

**7. vv.30-38. How is this sad epilogue a result of Lot's sins 'coming home to roost'? What hope does Matthew 1:5 provide us after reading this story?**

This epilogue shows us the end results of a life led by a basically good man who compromised with the world.

First, we see that Lot, whose great goal in life was affluence and security is now virtually homeless. After having begged God to let him go to Zoar, now he flees it out of fear (v.30). God's judgment on Sodom left Lot a man full of fears and insecurity. He leaves the city for his bitter final living quarters — *a cave* (v.30). Lot had originally not been satisfied with the tent of Abraham. He wanted a large and gracious "*house*" (v.3) in the city. But now he has nothing left but a dark and dank cave. The irony of the situation is that he refused to stay with Abraham and be a 'pilgrim' — a man who put God's will and mission before his own personal comfort and security. But in the end, the man who refused to be a spiritual pilgrim is now a homeless wanderer, like Cain.

Second, we see that Lot's daughters have imbibed his own pragmatist values all too well. "*Putting their desire for children above principle — for their deeds breach both incest rules and filial duty — Lot's daughters contrive to have intercourse with him.*" (G. Wenham, p.75.) Lot was a moral man, who himself would not have ever gone so far as to do something like this willingly. But though Lot had been formally obedient to moral rules, he had always made his

life choices on the basis of his own self-interest above all. His daughters have simply taken this philosophy out to its logical conclusion.

The tribes that descended from these two children were particularly cruel and perverse. The Moabites worshipped fertility gods and their society was riddled with sexual licence and organized orgies. (See Numbers 25.) The Ammonites were particularly cruel. Their god Molech demanded child-sacrifice. *"[Lot's] legacy, Moab and Ammon... carnal... and cruel... So much stemmed from his self-regarding choice (Gen 13:10ff) and his persistence in it."* (Kidner, p.136)

Why this epilogue? The narrator puts the swift disintegration of Sodom and Gomorrah beside the slow but sure disintegration of Lot's family. We see that sin will always bear a harvest of destruction, but the fruit may come in suddenly or very slowly. *"It is a superb study of the two aspects of judgment: the cataclysmic, as the cities disappear in brimstone and fire, and the gradual, as Lot and his family reach the last stages of disintegration, breaking up in the very hands of their rescuers."* (Kidner, p. 134.)

Despite the fact that Moab and Ammon were enemies of Israel and particularly debauched cultures, we find in Matthew 1:5 a remarkable sign of the power of God's grace. Ruth, the Moabitess, who turned to the true God in faith, became of mother of Jesus Christ himself. No people, no person, is beyond the reach of God's grace.

#### **8. How does this account fit in with the theme of the rest of the theme of Genesis?**

We have previously said that the theme of Genesis was that God restores the world lost in Eden through the promises he makes to Abraham. Originally, the world was whole and perfect, but when Adam and Eve trusted themselves rather than God, sin entered the world and disintegration began. Abraham is the beginning of God's salvation, however. God calls Abraham to trust him (as Adam and Even did not). Abraham must 'lose the world to gain the world'. He must be willing to put God ahead of security and status and even home if he is going to become a new people that will eventually bring salvation for the whole world.

Why then the story of Lot? Sadly, Lot is not the exact opposite of Abraham — he is not wicked, violent, and corrupt. Rather, he is the *counterfeit* of Abraham. (He fools even himself.) On the surface he seems quite moral and good, but he has refused to put God first. *"He is the righteous man without the pilgrim spirit."* (Kidner, p. 133.) He refuses to 'get out' of his security zones, he refuses to become a spiritual 'pilgrim'. As a result he is the counter-point to everything Abraham is. Abraham is called to teach his children and build a strong family (Gen 17) but Lot's family disintegrates. Abraham has the King of Sodom in his





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Isaac and Ishmael

### Study 18 | Genesis 20:1 - 22:19

#### INTRODUCTION

The story of Abraham and the offering up of Isaac is so famous that it is usually studied all by itself. That has obscured the interesting parallels (and lessons!) that come from comparing the two stories of Ishmael and Isaac. We will look at chapters 20 through 22 in order to better understand what the writer is trying to tell us about the redemptive purposes of God in the birth and wilderness experiences of the two sons of Abraham. Chapter 20 shows us the last threat to the birth of Isaac — and it comes from Abraham himself! Chapter 21 tells us of the birth of Isaac and the crisis this touches off in Abraham's family. Chapter 22 tells of the climactic test of Abraham's faith. (We will skip the incident of 21:22-32 where Abraham secures legal rights to a well near Beersheba, the first actual piece of land Abraham receives in Canaan. This is a small but significant way that God continues to fulfill his promises to Abraham.)

#### READ Genesis 20:1-18

##### Summary of the Event

- Abraham moved to the region of Gerar, an important caravan center on the very southern border area between Canaan and Egypt. The head of the city of Gerar was Abimelech.
- As before in chapter 12:10-20, Abraham was sure that foreign kings would seek to kill him in order to take and marry Sarah (20:11-12). Therefore he again lies that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife. Indeed, despite the age of Abraham and Sarah, Sarah retains her looks, and Abimelech takes her into his harem. (See introductory note to chapter 17 on the longevity of the patriarchs and family through a blessing of God.)
- But there are many reasons that in this incident Abraham is even more guilty and blameworthy than in the previous instance.
  - First, in chapter 12 Abraham had far less experience of God and understanding of his promises and ways. It is amazing that he would now put the promise of a son at risk like this, after so many visible confirmations and signs.
  - Second, in chapter 12 Abraham had exhibited far less character development. But now, through testing and intimacy with God, he had learned unselfishness (chapter 14), and courageous love and prayerful concern even for his enemies (chapter 18). Yet here Abraham simply lets his fears get the best of him.
  - Thirdly, the Egyptians and Pharaoh seem much more unaware of God and his will, but the city of Gerar and Abimelech seem far more righteous than the Sodomites or even the Egyptians. Abimelech gets

a direct word from God (v.6) and shows a strong moral conscience (v.9), as well as real graciousness after discovering that Abraham lied to him (v.14ff.) Abraham's fears led him to mis-judge Abimelech's character.

- Most remarkable is how Abraham retains his special relationship to God and prays for Abimelech (v.17).

**1. 20:1-18. How does this incident continue to confirm and throw light on the main theme of Genesis? What do we learn practically?**

We have said that the main theme of Genesis is how God fulfills his promises to Abraham unconditionally, and through those promises restores the world lost in Eden. How does this passage confirm that theme?

1) Abraham is a vessel of God's salvation, but that salvation is strictly a salvation of grace. (The promises to Abraham are 'unconditional'.) Abraham is not chosen because his moral quality is higher than the 'pagans' around him. This is shown forcibly in this event because the pagan king appears much more decent, wise, and righteous than Abraham. The writer perhaps wants to guard against the reader inferring from chapters 18-19 that God's people are very, very good and all those who don't worship God are very, very bad.

So we learn that Abraham was not as saintly as chapter 18 perhaps suggested nor were all the Canaanites as wicked as Sodom. Real life is often a mixture of contradictions — the totally pure or completely evil exist only in fiction.

– G. Wenham, "Genesis" New Bible Commentary, 21st Century edition

In light of this, verse 17 is remarkable. There, despite the fact that Abraham has acted despicably and Abimelech has shown himself to be a conscientious, wise, and generous man, it is Abraham who prays to God for Abimelech (not the other way around). Abraham's special relationship to God — as the means by which God will bless the nations — is still intact. Obviously, his status is not one that is earned. It is all by grace. Abraham is chosen but not 'choice'. He has been saved by grace and given a new status, but he has not earned it. He cannot assume moral superiority over those who have not received his call or his place in the people of God.

2) Another way this incident confirms the theme is that it shows that God is committed to fulfilling the promises no matter what. He not only made the promises despite Abraham's unworthiness, he now will fulfill the promises despite Abraham's continued spiritual weakness and failures. God was going to give Abraham and Sarah as son — and that was that. He would not let Abraham's fears and sins ultimately thwart his saving purposes.



What do we learn practically for ourselves? On the one hand there is a set of challenges. 1) Don't be haughty toward others who don't believe or worship God. You are only what you are by grace. 2) Don't think that you ever 'get over' sin. Even besetting sins that you thought you had dealt with long ago can have deep roots that spring up again when you don't expect them. We are to maintain our guard and watch over our heart against those situations that are particularly tempting to us. On the other hand there is a set of comforts: 1) Don't think you have to be better than anyone else to be used of God. God uses broken and failed people. Even his greatest leaders and vessels — Abraham, David, Peter — have been guilty of horrendous moral lapses. 2) Don't think God will ever 'give up' on you. These comforts without the challenges can lead to laxity, but the challenges without the comforts are crushing.

**2. 21:1-7. Isaac means 'laughter'. a) How is Sarah's laughter here different than her laughter in 18:12? b) How was the change from the first kind of laughter to the second brought about? c) Two what two complementary truths, then, does the name Isaac bear witness? d) How does Jesus bear witness even further? Cf. Luke 1:37.**

a) How are the laughs different?

As we saw in a previous study, Sarah's laughter in 18:12 was a humor-less laughter that was equal parts bitterness and unbelief, one-part an attack on herself (e.g. "Old, washed up me have a child? What a joke!") and one-part an attack on God (e.g. "A ridiculous promise! You'll never do it!") Here in Genesis 21:7 we see that Sarah's laughter is quite different. It is clearly the exact opposite of the old laughter — it is a laughter of both joy in herself and confidence of God.

b) How was the change from the first kind of laughter to the second brought about?

We saw in 18:14 that God responded with a remarkable combination of both rebuke and assurance. He asked her literally, "*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*" (18:14) This rebukes her for questioning God, but it is a conviction of the sin of having insufficient wonder and joy in him! It is a challenge with tremendous promise in it. He is saying, in effect: "I will do more than you can even imagine. I will fill your life with wonder."

Now in 21:7, when Sarah says, "*God has brought me laughter!*" she shows that she understands her laughter to be the result of the free grace and gift of God. The combination of humbling-confrontation yet joyful-assurance may even be evident in the ambiguity of the Hebrew phrase, "*and all who hears will laugh (at or with) me*".

The ambiguity of both the Hebrew noun 'yeshack' for laughter and the preposition 'li' which can mean... at or with — is wonderfully suited to the complexity of the moment. It may be triumphant joy, that Sarah experiences at the moment... but Yeshack can also mean mockery and perhaps God is doing something with her as well as for her!

– Robert Alter, Genesis, p. 97

Alter, the Jewish Hebrew scholar, points out that the word 'Isaac' has nuances of both humiliation and exaltation, and Sarah (and the narrator) may well be drawing on both. On the one hand, the birth of Isaac shows Sarah's unbelief to have been silly and foolish. She laughs at her own stupidity. But on the other hand, the birth of Isaac shows Sarah's God to be gracious and powerful beyond all imagining. Her heart is filled with wonder and amazement at his grace. These two realizations — our laughable weakness and his delightful love — only serve to strengthen each other and make us laugh more deeply. The more we see how weak and undeserving we have been, the more his patience, love, and grace shine out and cause us to wonder.

c) What two complimentary truths does the name Isaac witness to?

One way to put it is that our situation is impossible, but nothing is impossible with God. We are faithless and hard-hearted (we laugh at God's promises and summonses), yet God graciously works in our lives despite our weakness and undeservedness (we laugh at God's gift.) God's confrontation and assurance in the gospel (you are more sinful than you dared believe, but more accepted than you dared hope) changes our self-hatred into joy. These two truths together comprise the gospel.

It is hard not to notice that when centuries later another angelic messenger comes to another incredulous woman to tell her about another miraculous birth, he answers her doubt by saying: *"For nothing is impossible with God"* (Luke 1:37). Unless Isaac was born, the world cannot be blessed and saved (18:18), but in the end, he is only pointing to the ultimate *"Isaac"* who turns our self-hatred to joy, Jesus Christ. *"In Jesus we have the true Isaac, in whom we hear the laughter of God's grace, triumphing over all the impossibilities of our condition."* (Edmund Clowney in a taped lecture)

**3. In 21:8-20 and 22:1-18 each of the sons of Abraham undergoes an ordeal How are the two incidents alike? How are they un-alike? What do we learn practically from the parallels?**

a) How are the two incidents alike?

First, in both situations, the boys are taken out into the desolate wilderness. Second, out in the wilderness, each son comes to the very brink of death (21:16 and 22:10). Third, each son is delivered from death by the intervention of

the angel of the Lord, who does so first by *calling* out (21:17 and 22:11) to the parent, and then by providing some physical, life-saving object. In 21:19 it was a well of water which Hagar is given the ability to see. In 22:13 it is a ram caught in a thicket, again something that Abraham 'looked up' to see. Fourth, at the climax of the narratives a prophecy comes that the delivered boy will become the progenitor of a great people and nation. The Ishmael story ends with reference to his getting a wife, and God promises Abraham that Ishmael will be a great nation in 21:13. The Isaac story ends with the promise of descendents in 21:17ff.

b) How are the two incidents different?

The first obvious difference is that Sarah drives Ishmael out, while God calls Isaac out into the wilderness by direct command. The second obvious difference is that it is Ishmael's mother, Hagar, who is with him passively watching him die, while it is Isaac's father, Abraham who is with him actively causing his death. It is the hand of Abraham that is the cause of Isaac's peril.

But the most interesting contrast is less obvious. Ishmael's life is in danger because of Abraham's disobedience. Even though we see that Abraham does not want Ishmael to leave (21:11) and only allows him to go when God assures him that his leaving is part of God's plan to prosper both Ishmael and Isaac (21:12-13), it is still Abraham's faithlessness and foolishness that is the cause of the whole situation. (We explored this in Genesis 16.) The reason that Hagar and Ishmael are part of Abraham's family is because of Abraham's unbelief in God's promise and because of callous exploitation of Hagar. The jealousy, strife, and heartache in the family were inevitable. Ishmael "*was mocking*" (21:9), probably out of competition and hurt that he had been displaced in the heart of his father. Sarah's fury and jealousy are terrible but understandable. All of this is the result of Abraham's failures of faith and wisdom.

But if Ishmael's peril occurs as a result of Abraham's *disobedience*, Isaac's peril occurs as a result of Abraham's *obedience*. It is only because Abraham is now following God's word and promise with almost astounding faithfulness that there is a dagger over Isaac's heart. If Abraham was still the man of Genesis 16, Isaac would not be in danger.

c) What does this teach us?

At the very least we should learn here that there is no exemption from 'dangers, toils, and snares' for anyone! There is a strong tendency to think that if we are obeying God and following his will that life will go smoothly for us. That is a half-truth. The painful brokenness of Abraham's family is a consequence of his sin, and it would not have occurred if Abraham had been wiser and faithful. Perhaps we can say that this kind of suffering is more painful and destructive. But chapter 22 shows that God can call faithful and godly people to endure terrible suffering. In fact, there will be a kind of suffering that

comes because we are obedient. Honesty, keeping promises, refusing revenge, generosity, and a host of other spiritual character traits can often lead to difficult situations that lying, breaking promises, and selfishness can avoid in the short run.

So an obedient life does not move us into a suffering-free life! It leads us into a life of greater usefulness, greater growth, and most of all greater joy — not into a life of greater comfort.

**4. 22:1-2. a) How does this charge to Abraham fit in with his original call in 12:1ff? b) What makes this command, however, the most severe test?**

a) How does this fit with Abraham's original call

It is hard not to notice the "resonance" of this call to Abraham with all the others, especially the first one in Genesis 12. Then and now he was called to "go" (21:2), leaving all his security, comfort, and everything his heart rested in. Then and now he is called to go out without knowing the final destination. (In 12:1, it was to a place "I will show you" while in 22:2 it is to a mountain "I will tell you about".) In other words, then and now he was called to make his heart's dearest objects in to an "offering" to God. In Genesis 12, those things were more general. He was giving up all friends, most of his family. He was giving up life in a civilized, safe place. These are major sacrifices. God was asking him to trust in God's promise as his security and significance, not these other things. That is what he is doing now, as he is called to offer up Isaac, the dearest thing in his life.

In every case, God is saying, "Don't look to anything but me. Make me your ultimate security, worth, and hope. Don't trust in anything but me for your vindication and joy. Don't rest your heart in anything more than me for your significance and acceptability."

b) What makes this command the most severe possible?

But now the ultimacy of this test is summed up in the term God deliberately uses with emphasis, "your son, your only son" (v.2). It is not literally true that Isaac is Abraham's only son. As we have seen, the writer deliberately draws parallels between the stories of Abraham's two sons. But Isaac is Abraham's only son in that all his hopes are focused on him alone. God had said, over and over again, "Give up this... and wait for the promised son. Give up that... and wait for the promised son." Abraham had given up his other securities, the rest of his family, etc, etc — all for the sake of the promised son. As we can see in Genesis 21, God even calls Abraham to give up Ishmael, who he certainly loved, for Isaac's sake (21:13).

That means that now Isaac was everything to Abraham. First of all, Isaac would certainly have been everything *personally* to Abraham. He would have been the emotional center of Abraham's life in a way that nothing in Genesis 12 was. Abraham was now very old and had been stripped down over the years, giving up everything to wait for Isaac. Now Isaac would have been Abraham's very soul and joy.

But there was even a greater test here. Second of all, he was everything *spiritually* to Abraham. Isaac was, essentially, the salvation God had promised. He was going to make Abraham a great nation, which was (in the culture of the time) the greatest possible legacy and vindication. But he was also the promised one through whom God's blessing would come to the whole world. So Isaac is the salvation God had promised for so long. God is virtually saying, "Trust in me, though I am about to damn you." God seems to be contradicting his own word!

"One can only answer all the plaintive scruples about this narrative by saying that this concerns something much more frightful than child sacrifice. It has to do with a road out into utter God-forsakenness... for in this test God confronts Abraham with the question of whether he is willing to give up God's very gift of promise... God appears to want to remove the salvation begun by himself from history."

– Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis

"By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac... He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'it is through Isaac that your seed will be called.'" Hebrews 11:17-18

### Background Note:

Some readers will have understandable objections to this story, especially as it is often interpreted. Many people have interpreted the 'moral' of this story as: "God called Abraham to murder his son, and Abraham showed his faith and submission by getting ready to do it. So we should do whatever God calls us to do." But this is to misunderstand meaning of the firstborn son in Jewish thought and symbolism. If Abraham had heard a voice like God's saying, "Go and kill Sarah", Abraham would have never done it. He would have (rightly assumed) that he was hallucinating (or something!) and that God wouldn't ask him to do something clearly wrong. But God over and over told the Hebrews that because of their sinfulness, the lives of their *firstborn* are automatically forfeit, though they can redeem them with sacrifice (Exodus 22:29, 34:20) or Levitical service (Numbers 3:40-41) or ransom payment (Numbers 3:46-48). In the same way, God punished Egypt by taking their first-born. The first-born or heir was, in those traditional cultures, the bearer of all the hopes of the family for a prosperous future. When God said that the child-heir's life belonged to him unless ransomed he was saying in the most vivid way possible that every family on earth owes a debt to eternal justice — the debt of sin. That is why God's commandment to Abraham was enormously painful, because it appeared

that he was abandoning his promise to bless Abraham and the world through a son (Hebrews 11:17-18). But the charge was not incomprehensible. God was not asking him to murder his son. He was calling in Abraham's debt! And so Abraham was faced with the ultimate question: "I do owe this. Our sin means that Isaac's life is forfeit. Yet God is a God of grace as well. How can a holy God still graciously fulfill the promise?"

**5. 22:3-8. What hints are there about Abraham's thinking and hopes as he goes to the mountain with Isaac. Read Hebrews 11:19. What does light does this shed?**

Did Abraham push himself up the mountain simply saying, "I have to obey perfectly! I have to! I can do it! I must do it!" and so on? No, verse 8 and perhaps verse 5 shows us that Abraham had simply decided to cling to the goodness and promise of God despite all appearances. He says, "*God will provide a lamb*" (v.8). I doubt that he knew exactly what God would do, nor does it seem likely he believed specifically that a ram-substitute would be discovered. He was simply saying, "God will provide... somehow." In other words, he did not go up the mountain saying, "I can do it" like the "Little Engine that Could" filled with will-power and self-talk. Rather, he went up the mountain saying, "God will do it... but I don't know how." Do what? Somehow God would remove the debt on the first-born and keep the promise of grace. Verse 5 also seems to be an indication of Abraham's hope, because he tells his servants that "*we will come back to you.*" (v.5) Abraham's faith in God's provision (somehow!) did not, surely, mean that he went up the mountain with a light heart. It was still agony, as the eloquent and detailed dialogue shows in verse 6-8. Finally, Hebrews 11:19 speculates that Abraham even considered resurrection as a possible way God could be both just and yet gracious.

This, then, is the ultimate test. Abraham was not just exercising 'blind faith' in the general sense. He was not saying, "This is crazy, this is murder, but I'm going to do it anyway." Instead he was saying, "I know God is both holy and gracious. I don't know how he is going to be both — but I know he will." He was specifically trusting in God as both holy and gracious at the same time. How? If Abraham had not believed God was holy and just and that he was owed a debt of sin, he would never have been willing to go up the mountain with his first-born. But, on the other hand, if Abraham had not believed God was *also* a God of grace, he would never have been able to go up the mountain with Isaac. He would have been too crushed and hopeless. He would have just laid down and died. He had hope that God would do something up in the mount — and thus he trusted God.

**6. 22:9-14. What was the provision that God made on the mountain top that dealt with sin and yet allowed Abraham to keep Isaac?**

From Abraham's vantage point, he could not see a whole lot! He saw that God wanted faith from the heart. *"Now I know you fear God"* (v.12) Secondly he saw that once he believed God was able to provide a substitute for Isaac, the *ram, caught by its horns* (v.13). Perhaps Abraham intuited that *"the blood of bulls and goats (or children) cannot atone for sin"* (Hebrew 10:4) and that there was something more to Isaac's deliverance than the ram offering.

Of course, the New Testament writers knew what this incident was pointing to. First, the *sense* of God-forsakenness of Abraham (see Von Rad quote above) was only symbolic. God did not truly forsake Abraham as he obeyed God in this ultimate test. But on the cross, when the ultimate beloved child cried — *'My God, my God — why hast thou forsaken me?'*, as Ed Clowney says, *"the Father paid the price in his silence"*. (E. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery*) Second, the true substitute for Isaac was God's only Son, Jesus, on the cross. Ironically, God years later God led his only son up into those very same mountains. (Jerusalem was in this region — see 2 Chron 3:15). The wood was laid on this true Isaac. But on that day there was no one to say, "stay your hand". Paul understood the true meaning of this story when he deliberately applies its language to Jesus: *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things?"* (Rom.8:32). In other words, Paul is telling us that we can look at Calvary and say to God: "Now, finally, we know that you love us. For you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love, from us."

**7. What are some of the practical lessons we learn from the story of Isaac's offering?**

First, this narrative teaches us that God will identify our idols and ask us to give them up. Isaac had become an idol, even in the midst of all of Abraham's faith and obedience. Isaac was more important to God than God. Idols can be very subtle. For example, Christians can look to their spiritual activities and ministry as a source of significance and worth rather than to God, even though it consists of bringing others into contact with God. All of us have our 'Isaacs' that God wants us to be at least willing to give up. Most idols are (like Isaac) good things that can remain in our lives once we have 'demoted them' to second place behind God. Then they won't control us and bedevil us with anxiety, pride, anger, and drivenness. Nevertheless, we must not make the mistake of thinking that this story means all we have to do is be willing to part with our idols rather than actually leave them behind. If Abraham had gone up the mountain thinking, "All I'll have to do is put him on the altar, not really give him up" — he would have failed the test! Idols are only safe for us to maintain in our lives if they really have stopped being idols. That can only happen when we are truly willing to live without them, when we truly say from the heart: "Because I have God, I can live without you."



Second, this narrative teaches us that sometimes God looks and seems to be killing us when he's saving us. Here he was saving the whole world and turning Abraham into a great man — but on the outside it looked like God was being absolutely destructive. We can't know the reasons that God is allowing bad things to happen, but like Abraham we trust him in those times.

Third, we have seen that you will never be like Abraham simply by trying to be like Abraham. Abraham passed the test not through will power but because he looked to the *"provision"* (21:8). Literally, he said, *"My son, God will see to the Lamb"*. Abraham had his eyes fixed on a provision that he could not even imagine, but he knew was there. But we can see the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. As we look at him and rejoice in what he did for us, we will have the joy and hope necessary — and the freedom from idols and pseudo-securities — to follow the call of God when it is dark and difficult.







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Isaac and his sons

### Study 19 | Genesis 25:19 - 26:33

#### INTRODUCTION

Our purpose is to trace how God's promises to Abraham began to bring about the redemption of the world. Chapters 23-26 are a bridge between the story of Abraham (chaps 12-22) and the story of Jacob (chaps 27-50). In chapter 23 Sarah dies. The lengthy negotiations for a tomb for Sarah show how Abraham finally became a landowner. Chapter 24 tells us how Abraham secured a wife for Isaac who was from Abraham's own relatives. Thus God continues to move the promise forward to the time in which Isaac will have many descendents. Finally, Abraham dies in the first half of chapter 25. Chapter 26 is a "series of snapshots" from the life of Isaac, a man who (in the book of Genesis) is overshadowed by both his father Abraham and his son Jacob. But even this brief look at Isaac shows God fulfilling his promises.

#### 1. 25:19-21, 26b. How long did Rebekah wait until she had children? What did Isaac do about it? What do we learn from this?

A comparison of v.26b with v.20 shows that Rebekah waited 20 years before having children. (Most likely, she was married in her teens and did not have children until she was in her late 30's.) This period of time, easily missed, throws considerable light on the condition of Rebekah and the response of Isaac. As we noted before, the state of being "*barren*" (25:21) in that culture was a condition of social and emotional desolation. Rebekah as well as Isaac would have suffered greatly, especially considering the condition went on for twenty years. In response, Isaac "*prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife*" (25:21). The word in Hebrew means "to intercede". It was a word often used of Moses and Abraham. It means to act as advocate before the Lord, 'arguing' and pleading the case of someone else before him. We learn two things about this incident.

First, we learn how God's sovereignty does not mean human passivity. Our assurance from the promises of God must not lead to complacency. God promised that Rebekah would be the mother of "*thousands upon thousands*" (24:60). It would be easy to infer that, since this is God's will and it was destined and fixed, there would be nothing we would have to do to bring it to pass. And yet here we see that Rebekah conceived because "*the Lord granted his prayer*". (25:21) Some would ask: "Why would Isaac have had to pray for something that we knew was absolutely certain? Rebekah had to have children if God's salvation was to come into the world." But this comes from thinking too reductionistically about how God's sovereignty relates to our actions. We tend to think: "If God is totally in control, our choices don't matter. It will happen anyway." However the Bible never reasons so one-dimensionally. We see here that though God's plans can't be thwarted, he somehow works his plans out through our choices, not just despite them. Isaac has to pray mightily (see below) for Rebekah to have children, even though it was God's will all along.

Second, more personally, we learn that the chosen recipients of God's promises do not have smoother sailing than other people. Indeed, there is reason to argue (from Biblical passages such as Hebrews 12) that exactly the opposite is the case! We find an unusual amount of female infertility in the chosen line (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel). Beautiful young Rebekah unites with God's chosen family, the most blessed and privileged by God family in the world, and immediately undergoes twenty years of barrenness. (Rebekah's cry "*why... me?*" in v.22 shows that she feels she has been having, in general, a terrible life!) Joyce Baldwin comments on these these verses:

"It is no vain thing to trust the Lord, but faith involves being shut up to God's way and God's time, and demands much patience. This lesson, taught so early on in the Scriptural lesson book, needs to be presented to young Christians in a forceful way to prepare them for the tests that are sure to come... and unsettle them..."

– J. Baldwin, *Genesis 12-50*, p.104

Thirdly, more specifically, we learn about the need for persistent intercessory prayer. "*Isaac prayed...*" is a pithy understatement. Almost certainly he didn't just pray once during a 20 year barrenness! He must have prayed continually for years and years before God answered his prayer. Most people would surely give up after a few years saying, "God has denied my prayer".

There are indications that Isaac was a 'man of prayer'. (See the interesting statement in 24:62 that Rebekah arrived when Isaac was out in the fields "*to meditate*".) Why did Isaac persist in prayer for so long? It was probably a combination of humility and confidence. On the one hand, he had the confidence of God's promise. Surely the man who had almost been slain on the altar of Moriah knew "*God will see to it... somehow!*" as his father Abraham said that day. Isaac knew that God will keep his promise — maybe not in the time or way we would expect or even imagine — but he will keep it. On the other hand, Isaac knew that we cannot presume on God. We must pray, depend, obey, submit to him. Only if we have this same combination of humility and confidence will we persist in intercessory prayer and see God do things through us.

As we saw in Genesis 18, the ultimate reason that intercessory prayer 'works' is the intercession of Christ (Romans 8:34). It is because he stands on behalf of us and because God regards him that we can make our prayers and know they will be heard.

**2. 25:21-26. a) What does Rebekah's cry "why... me?" tell us about her? b) What does the Lord's prophecy mean? c) How does this prophecy fly in the face of conventional expectations?**

a) What is Rebekah's state of mind

Rebekah finds herself pregnant with twins. But all is not joy. Commentators tell us that Rebekah's statement is a sentence fragment, indicating it is more of a

cry and emotional exclamation. She literally cries, “If so, why me — ?” She is saying. “After all I’ve been through — now this!! Why does this always happen to me?” The exclamation indicates that there was something more troubling going on than the NIV translation conveys with word “*jostled*” (v.22). The Hebrew word for what her babies are doing in the womb to each other was literally “to smash” or “crush”, a word used of destruction, as of skulls smashed (Judges 9:53; Psalm 74:14). Rebekah’s pregnancy, therefore, was an exceptionally painful one. More than that, the violent struggle within probably leads her to despair about whether the children will survive. In near despair, she goes went to ask the Lord what was going on. [Note: Elsewhere this involves consulting a prophet. Cf. Exod 18:15; 1 Sam 9:9.]

b) What does the Lord’s prophecy mean?

The word from God explains that the violent competition in the womb foretells the lives and destinies of the two boys and even the two nations that will descend from them. The fact that multiple nations would descend from Isaac and Rebekah was not new information (cf. 17:4-6, 16). But the oracle goes on. Even now, the two children were struggling in fierce competition, as they would in life. But the final outcome will be this: “*the elder will serve the younger*” (25:23d). This is an indication that it is Jacob, the second-born that will become the bearer of the Messianic seed and the one chosen by God to be the new head of the people God is creating for himself.

c) How does this prophecy fly in the face of convention?

As Robert Alter says, “*the birth, like the oracle, again invokes the struggle against primogeniture*” (Alter, *Genesis*, p.128). Here, then, at the beginning of the story of Jacob is a re-capitulation of two themes that we saw in the story of Abraham. First, the birth of the son of promise again must come out of barrenness (11:30; 25:21). God brings life out of barrenness. There is no human ability that can bring about the new birth of the human community and the salvation of God. God has to open wombs and bring about birth where there is no human power to do so. Second, the son of promise is not the expected one — the oldest. Ishmael and Esau, the first born, were in the eyes of the world the ‘chosen ones’. In virtually all ancient, patriarchal societies, the oldest son always got the lion’s share of the father’s wealth and the headship of the clan. God, however, repeatedly refuses to allow his gracious activity to run along the expected lines of worldly power and privilege. He puts in the center the child that the world would put on the periphery.

This connects to a major theme of the Bible, that the kingdom and grace of God makes a ‘great reversal’. God “*raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes; he settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children*” (Ps 113:7-9) but “*the proud he knows afar off*” (cf. James 4:6). Salvation by works and moral effort would

favor the more able, competent, accomplished and privileged. But salvation by sheer grace favors the failed, the outsider, the weak, because it only goes to those who know salvation is by sheer grace. In token of this, Jesus comes not as a wealthy and powerful person but as a poor man, the child of an unwed mother. The people he attracts with his teaching are 'sinners' and other unrespectable outsiders. The way he triumphs is through the weakness and apparent 'defeat' of the cross, followed by the miracle of the resurrection — life out of hopeless death. Thus the Bible does not show us a line of 'heroes of the faith' who go from strength to strength, but rather a series of figures who are usually not the people the world would expect to be spiritual paragons and leaders. God chooses as his vehicles — the barren woman, the second son, the failed, lapsed man.

"The oracle of 25:23 casts its power over the entire Jacob narrative... The oracle is against all conventional wisdom. The Israelites must have wondered about this patriarch who was always in trouble... That is the premise of the ministry of Jesus: the poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry... are the heirs to the kingdom (Matt.5:3-7). This God does not align himself only with the obviously valued ones, the first born. This oracle speaks about an inversion. It affirms that we are not fated to the way the world is presently organized..."

– Brueggemann, Genesis, p.215

**3. 25:27-32. What is Isaac's response to the oracle? What impact does Isaac's treatment of his sons have on them? What do we learn for our own family life?**

a) What is Isaac's response to the oracle?

We should assume that Isaac knew about the oracle, and though it may have been fairly cryptic when first received, the subsequent birth and development of the children would have made the prophecy rather clear to anyone who really reflected on it. It is likely that Rebekah certainly thought about it and understood it. But Isaac evidently either a) made no attempt to understand it, or b) deliberately ignored it, because he clearly showed favoritism to Esau, his eldest. *Isaac... loved Esau.* (25:28) Esau was an 'outdoorsman', probably athletic and skilled with weapons. The fact that "*Isaac had a taste for wild game*" indicates that either Isaac himself was a hunter or else he wished he were. We also see he was (from the famous incident in v.29-32 and comment in Hebrews 12:15-17) impetuous and temperamental. In all these ways he was more conventionally 'masculine' than the quiet Jacob. Isaac may have 'seen himself' in Esau (or seen the self he wished he had been). Or perhaps Isaac was simply following the overwhelming cultural and social consensus that the oldest son was the family's future. At any rate, Isaac favored Esau and, as we see in v.31, had promised Esau the '*birthright*' — the headship of the clan and family.

b) How does Isaac's treatment of his sons account for their character?

We see from 25:27 that Esau was impetuous and assertive while Jacob was quiet and almost "domestic" *staying among the tents*. Immediately we are told that Esau was Isaac's 'boy' and Jacob was Rebekah's 'boy'. We immediately ask: do the parents dote on their favorite because of their nature or is their character a result of their parents' selective love? The wisest answer is that these two factors mutually strengthen one another. Esau may have been naturally aggressive and Jacob may have tended to be quiet, but their parents' inordinate, selective love probably accentuated and distorted the temperments of their sons.

Esau, the spoiled one, the 'golden boy', becomes impulsive, selfish, without any ability to practice delayed gratification. Thus he is willing to sell his birthright for the stew. He exaggerates, "*Look, I am about to die...*" (v.32) All of these are the marks of an undisciplined spirit. On the other hand, Jacob's certainly would have had a sense of rejection and probably of injustice. (Surely Rebekah told him of the oracle.) Commentators say it is unlikely to be a coincidence that Jacob is a great cook (25:29) and his father a gourmand (29:28). Jacob probably longed for the approval and love of his father, but it was not to be. Though staying *among the tents*, because he was so tied to his mother, he schemed to get out and 'on top'. He became a calculating, mistrustful, manipulative, insincere man — the very opposite of Esau!

We know that to play favorites is terribly damaging to a family, but here Isaac's behavior is especially blameworthy. We can understand a father's emotional involvement with a son who is like himself (or like the man the father wishes he were). But Isaac knew that his family was unlike any other family, and the one who got the birthright and blessing was going to be the one who would steer the whole family toward God's purposes. He was under a particular obligation to think out whether Esau was really qualified to do that. He was under a particular obligation to think out the meaning of God's prophecy. He doesn't seem to do any of this, but simply to follow both a) conventional cultural wisdom and b) his own psychological and emotional needs.

What do we learn here? First, we must be very deliberate and thoughtfully reflective about our parenting. We must not simply parent the way our parents did it, or the way everyone we know does it. We should not just 'slip in' to parenting, but think out the implications of Biblical wisdom and Christian doctrine for how we approach our children. We must not simply do what was done to us nor even the opposite of what was done to us. (Re-acting, doing something because our parents did or did not do it, is still a failure to reflect.) Be sure your parenting 'fits' God's Word, the spouses' temperments, and the children's temperments and situation. Second, we must be careful about meeting our emotional needs through our children rather than in God. When we use our children's love or our children's achievements and talents to make us feel consoled or better about ourselves, we will introduce distortions into both our own lives and their lives. Third, we should have a balanced view of how

failures of parents and failures of children relate to each other. On the one hand, we see that Isaac (and Rebekah) are partially responsible for their son's character flaws. But the Bible shows that both Esau and Jacob are held responsible for their own actions. And consider — Isaac's weaknesses were to some degree the product of the failures of Abraham and Sarah, so we cannot blame Isaac fully for the problems of his children. Later, Jacob will terribly hurt his own family with the very kind of favoritism (toward Joseph) that brought him so much pain in his father.

In short, we must neither feel like complete victims nor like complete villains. We are always both sinful and sinned against. Sin is a complex. My sins are partially from my parents and my children's sins are partially from me. Yet that excuses no one. We must learn to understand our weaknesses in terms of family patterns, but we should not be particularly bitter toward anyone. Instead, we should seek grace and mercy for ourselves, that we can resist passing on our own flaws to the next generation.

**4. 25:29-34. a) What does each man do wrong in this incident? b) cf. Hebrews 12:15-17. What are we to learn practically from Esau's failure?**

a) What does each do wrong?

Esau's failure, according to Hebrews, was his inability to forego immediate gratification and comfort and wait for the greater but deferred blessings. He gave up his inheritance for the sensory experience now of a great meal when terribly famished. In the process he lies to himself, saying "Look, I am about to die" (25:32). It seems obvious that since Jacob stayed "among the tents", Esau was not out away from sustenance. He was in no real danger. This is the emotional language of self-deception. (e.g. "I can't take it any more! I know it's wrong, but I just can't help it!")

Jacob here is revealed as scheming and manipulative. Commentators point out how Esau's language is filled with incomplete sentences and wild language. *"Each of Jacob's words, in striking contrast to Esau's impetuous speech, is carefully weighed and positioned, with 'me' held back until the end of the sentence."* (Alter, p. 30). Jacob has planned every syllable. *"The way Jacob states his demand suggests long premeditation and a ruthless exploitation of his brother's moment of weakness."* (Wenham, p.178). While Esau is easy to despise for his unruly, uncontrolled spirit, Jacob is the exact opposite. He has resentfully plotted against his brother for a long time. This is one carefully orchestrated part of a detailed plan to undermine and usurp him.

b) What do we learn from Esau (Hebrews 12:15-17)?

The writer to the Hebrews uses Esau as an example to professing Christians who were in danger of retreating under hardship and persecution. He is



therefore a model of two kinds of people. 1) First, he is a model of the Christian who stays in a state of perpetual infancy because he or she cannot give up immediate gratification for the long-term benefits of obedience. Some people just cannot stay obedient during times of trouble. When everything goes wrong, they stop praying, stop attending worship, stop actively seeking to practice God's Word. Others never are willing to do the costly things which are necessary to grow deeper. They don't tithe and give sacrificially; they don't put in the weekly hours necessary to learn to meet God in prayer; they don't speak up and let themselves be identified publically as converted Christians. If we do any of these things at first the cost usually exceeds the benefits. Later, however, obedient discipline leads to great peace and fruit. (cf. Hebrew 12:11). Esau is a model of the backsliding or perpetually immature and useless believer. 2) Second, he is a model of the person that never becomes a Christian because of the initial cost. These people are like the second 'soil' in Jesus' parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1ff.)

**5. a) Who is most to blame in this incident? b) How does the whole of vv.19-34 illustrate Romans 9:10-16?**

a) Who is most to blame?

This is a trick question. A reader could make the case that Jacob's deliberateness showed greater heart evil than Esau's impulsive decision. On the other hand, Hebrews 12: 15-17 tells us Esau was "*profane*", a word that means, literally, un-aware of God. He was living as a secular man, as if God and the promises did not matter. He shows enormous spiritual obtuseness toward the meaning of his family's relationship to God and to the future and therefore enormous indifference to what the headship of the family meant. However, Jacob shows no evidence that he has any such spiritual interest either. He simply wants to beat his brother.

b) How does the whole of vv.19-34 illustrate Romans 9:10-16?

In Romans 9 Paul is touching on the doctrine of election and predestination. He turns to this chapter in Genesis to illustrate it. Let's discipline ourselves to not treat try discuss this matter as a whole (e.g. "Why doesn't he choose everyone, then?") but see what Paul is saying that helps us understand the meaning of Gen 25:19-34.

Paul says that God chose Jacob, the younger, but not because Jacob was a better person in any way from Esau. "*Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad — in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls — [Rebekah] was told, 'the older will serve the younger'.*" (Romans 9:11-12) In other words, in this passage the writer very carefully and deliberately shows us that there is not moral or character difference between these two brothers. Both are fighting in the womb. Both

have character flaws (though different, even complementary ones). Both sinned terribly in the 'selling of the birthright' incident. And yet it is Jacob who God eventually brings to his senses, disciplines, persuades him to believe in the promised salvation (Heb.11:20-21). Why? Paul says it was a) sheer grace, *not by works*, and also b) *God's purpose*. God had reasons to choose Jacob as his vehicle, but those reasons had nothing to do with his moral merit.

"Jacob is... a visible expression of God's remarkable graciousness in the face of conventional definitions of reality and prosperity. Jacob is a scandal from the beginning..."

– Brueggemann, p. 217

We have already seen that God's love to Jacob goes against the world's *cultural* expectations (because Jacob was a second son), but now we see it also goes against the world's *moral* expectations. Jacob is a crook, a coward, a manipulator, a schemer. If Jacob and Esau are moral equivalents here, in chapter 27 we see that Jacob's deceit and exploitation have grown (when he takes advantage not of his impetuous brother but of his aged and blind father.) And yet God makes him the vehicle of his redemption. Jacob is a scandal, and God chooses him. That makes "*the powerful grace of God... a scandal*" to the world (Brueggemann, p. 217). It not only works with social and cultural outsiders, but moral outsiders.

**Note:** Though can't do a thorough job of treating this idea of 'election', the reader of Genesis should remember that God shows great concern for the *non-chosen*! He saves Hagar and Ishmael and promises prosperity to them, even though their descendents will be violent. Later we will see that Esau is materially blessed as well.

**6. 26:1-33. a) Isaac seems to be a rather bland and uninteresting character. What can we learn from that? b) Make a list of Isaac's right and wrong actions. c) How does this pastiche of stories about Isaac confirm the themes we have been discussing?**

This is the only chapter in Genesis that is devoted simply to the life of Isaac. Narratively, he is greatly overshadowed by his father Abraham and his son Jacob. His significance is first in his role in God's covenant-making with Abraham and second in his role in the life of Jacob. In fact, after chapter 27 he essentially disappears until the brief note about his death in chapter 35:27-28. This chapter 26 is the only place that we see Isaac simply acting on his own, and even here he seems to have far less drive or charisma than either Abraham before him or Jacob behind him.

Some have noted that this may be because, frankly, Isaac is less interesting. He neither seems to have the enormous faith and exceptional talent of his father nor to have the enormous flaws of his son. Great talent and great flaws (or both) make for memorable characters and great stories. (And great

'testimonies'.) Isaac is none of these kinds of people. If that is the case, chapter 26 is designed to show us that God needs neither unusually great and talented people nor unusually broken people to move his purposes forward. This is a great comfort to many of us! God's grace works just as readily with people who are not 'larger than life' and who do not have lots of 'adventures' either because of extraordinary tests or because of extraordinary mistakes.

What does Isaac do wrong? In the first section (vv.1-12) We see God repeating the promise of Abraham to Isaac. Then, in response, we see Isaac making the very same mistake as Abraham, trying to pass off his wife as his sister. He has the same fearfulness (26:7) and tells the same lie. (See above on how the sins of parents are passed down.) Yet just as God did with Abraham, God delivers Isaac by a 'chance' glance that the King of Gerar gets of Isaac with Rebekah (26:8). After this deliverance God blesses him with a *hundredfold* harvest (26:12), a prosperity far beyond anything that Abraham had. In the second section (vv.13-25) Isaac encounters jealousy and opposition from the Philistines. This time Isaac responds with a mixture of peace-making (he moves away from hostile groups rather than fighting them v.17, 22) yet persistence (he keeps on digging wells! — v.19, 22). Finally his relations with other nations and peoples improve.

#### c) How does this confirm the themes?

First, God is a God of grace. He doesn't just humble the proud and lift up the broken, but he works with 'average' people too. He does not favor the spectacular. Isaac's sins don't seem very 'big', and yet despite Isaac's timidity and other shortcomings, God provides safety and prosperity. God continues to be a God of grace and to keep one family true to the faith, so he can build a new people of God out of them. Portia is right in the Merchant of Venice when she says:

"Though justice be thy plea, consider this —

That in the course of justice none of us

Should see salvation." (Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene i)

Second, this chapter's repeated comparisons to Abraham show that God is moving his promises forward, even with a less distinguished 'head-man'. Isaac is even more prosperous than Abraham. Blessings seem to come to Isaac even more easily.

Third, this passage reminds us that the ultimate salvation is not only spiritual but material. God is renewing creation, not simply saving us into an ethereal after life. The material blessing and the feasting all remind us of this. (See Brueggemann, pp.225-226).



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Jacob and the blessing

### Study 20 | Genesis 26:34 - 28:9

#### INTRODUCTION

After Genesis 26:33, Isaac passes off the scene completely. Now center stage is Jacob, an unforgettable character largely because of his great flaws. *"The grandson of the promise is a rascal compared to his faithful grandfather Abraham or his successful father Isaac."* (Brueggemann, p.204). There are three themes running through the life of Jacob that we may look for.

First, there is the theme of God's sovereign *gracious* blessing. If we look at Abraham and Lot or at Isaac and Ishmael we can see character strengths in the former that are not in the latter. Somehow God's choice of Abraham and Isaac 'make sense' to our normal ways of thinking. But when it comes to Jacob and Esau we see no such obvious difference. Despite Esau's impetuosity, he shows lots of good qualities (cf. chapter 33:4). There is nothing more admirable or better in Jacob that gives us any moral basis for God's choosing and using him. It is sheer grace.

Second, there is the theme of God's *sovereign* gracious blessing. Despite the remarkable amount of conspiring and manipulation and 'scamming' that goes on all through the life of Jacob (both *by* him and *to* him!) it is obvious that God is in control. This is a major theme of the Genesis writer. See Joseph's words almost summarizing the whole book: *"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."* (Gen 50:20).

Third, there is the theme of God's sovereign gracious *blessing*. Some commentators have pointed out that while the main concern of Abraham was the promise ("Will God keep the promise of son?"), Jacob is more concerned about the blessing. He cheats Esau of his father's blessing (chapter 27). He won't let the mysterious wrestler go until he blesses him (chapter 32). From his earliest days, Jacob seems to have lacked a sense of affirmation and value, and everything in his life is oriented to procuring it.

#### **1. Compare 26:34-35 with 24:3-4. Compare 27:1-4 with 49:1,28. In light of these comparisons, how did Esau and Isaac contribute to this whole sad affair?**

On our initial reading of this story, it seems that Jacob and Rebekah were the villains of the story, who took advantage of the blindness and age of Isaac and the unwariness of Esau to extract Isaac's blessing for Jacob rather than Esau. However, upon deeper reflection, we see that *"all four participants in the present scene [are] almost equally at fault"* (Kidner, p.155).

This episode does not really begin in chapter 27 but at the end of chapter 26, where we learn that Esau married Canaanite women. As we have seen from the perspective of the writer of Genesis, polygamy itself is a mistake. (See Lamech in Genesis 4 and the entire sorry history of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.) But more than that, Esau marries Canaanite women, though it was of

the utmost importance to Abraham that Isaac not marry a Canaanite. Abraham sent a servant all the way to Haran in chapter 24 to find a wife from among Abraham's clan. Even though Abraham's relatives were not likely in the kind of intimate covenant with God that Abraham's family was, they were much closer in outlook and would therefore not bring rank idolatry into the family. (In the same way, Paul insists that Christians not marry non-Christians — 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor 6:14-18). Despite this theological principle and family tradition, Esau marries Canaanite women who, in some unspecified way, cause great pain and grief to both Isaac and Rebekah. Esau seems to be unaware of this fact until the very end of the passage, in 28:8-9. What does this mean? It means that Esau shows very little awareness (if any) about the promise to Abraham and the need to guide the entire family into the ways of God (Chapter 17:1ff.) The narrator therefore casts grave doubt as to Esau's suitability to be the head of the family of God.

But Isaac is shown to be blameworthy too, in several ways. First, in this patriarchal society, it would have been virtually impossible for Esau to marry over Isaac's strong objections. Why then did Isaac not forbid Esau the Canaanite wives? Why did he not do for Esau and Jacob what Abraham did for him — why did he not find them suitable wives? It could be that Isaac's rather passive nature is to blame. Or it could be that his love and favoritism to Esau has simply blinded his eyes to his sons' flaws and spiritual "profaneness" (Heb 11:16). Secondly, however, *"Isaac on his deathbed flouted convention and showed total bias toward Esau. When patriarchs knew their death was near, they were expected to summon all their sons and give them each a blessing. [Even the ones who did not receive the birthright of the eldest.] Now, lamely pretending he does not know his day of death (v.2) Isaac summoned only his favorite, Esau. No wonder Rebekah... was incensed."* (G.Wenham, "Genesis" in New Bible Commentary, p.79). Thirdly, Isaac seems not only to be fighting Rebekah and Jacob, but God. He almost certainly knew the oracle of 25:23, and he may even have known of Esau's oath to forego his birthright-blessing of becoming the head of the clan (25:33). But he proceeds anyway. He tries to use the power of his patriarchal blessing — which is God's power, ultimately — to thwart God's will for Jacob to be clan-head.

Of course the lies and trickery of Rebekah and Jacob are completely inexcusable. They had self-assurance that their cause was just. (e.g. "After all, Isaac is fighting against God's oracle!") But *"they made no approach to God or man, no gesture of faith or love, and reaped the appropriate fruit of hatred."* (Kidner, p.155). Jacob would spend the rest of his life haunted by what he did. He found himself often lied to and deceived until the end of his days. And Rebekah as a consequence would have to send the young man away (for his safety) who she loved most in the world, and she would never see him again.

**2. 27:4,7,28-29,33,39. What is the father's 'blessing'? The assumptions of the family about the importance of this blessing are foreign to us. What can you discern about its nature and power from these verses?**

First, we can see from verse 4 (*"before I die"*) and verses 28-29 that the blessing is something like a last-will and testament. This is especially clear when he says, *"be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you."* (v.29b). All in the family and the community will honor such words. He gives the son authority in the family after he dies.

But secondly, the Bible regards the father's words as having a genuine power of their own, beyond anything like what we know in a 'last will'. Isaac says, *"your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness... you will live by the sword..."* (v.39-40), and all who listen know that this will happen. These words will bring about these effects. How? Is this just some primitive magical view? No. Modern people underestimate the power of affirmative words and condemning words especially from parent to child. Words of blessing and cursing enter into the hearer and have a life and power of their own. (cf. James 3:10) Our own counselors and psychologists know this well. Even off-handed comments of criticism and affirmation pass into a child and lodge for years. How much more affecting would be the words of a parent spoken in an authoritative, climactic setting?

"The narrative presumes that symbolic actions have genuine and abiding power... and that spoken words [especially of a parent to child] shape human life. Words here are not a matter of indifference which may be attended to or not, as is convenient... There is pathos in this text, for the sons as well as for the father. It lies in the awareness that nobody wants to live a life that is unblessed. Nobody wants a life without the special words and gestures that bind that life to a precious past and a promised future... The unblessed are left empty-handed..." (W. Brueggemann, p. 228-229.)

Thirdly, the Bible seems to expect that the patriarchs would have prophetic foresight on their deathbeds. A third kind of statement within the blessing seems not to be legal action (e.g. *"you will rule your brothers"*) or deep affirmation and ordination (e.g. *"you will live by the sword"*) but rather a kind of accurate foretelling. *"May nations serve you... May God give you... an abundance"*. (v.28,29). So Gordon Wenham comments, *"Clearly, Genesis sees the deathbed blessing as more than a prayer for the future; it is a prophecy whose fulfillment is certain."* (Wenham, p.216).

In summary, the death-bed 'blessing' is a fascinating and powerful combination of the legal, the psychological, and the prophetic. It entails binding lawful action, identity-shaping symbols and gestures, and accurate spiritual discernment and foretelling.

**3. 27:33. Why do you think Isaac can't or won't take back the blessing?**

Esau's tears and cries of pain ring in Isaac's ears and he says that Jacob got the blessing "*deceitfully*" and literally stole Esau's blessing (v.35). Yet he will not take the blessing back (v.33 — "*he will be blessed*" and v.37 — "*I have made him lord... what can I possibly do for you, my son?*") This does not make sense at all to modern readers. Surely Jacob came fraudulently and therefore the agreement was null and void. All Isaac would have to do is call Jacob back and say: "You crook! I'm not giving you what I said. It was all done under false pretenses. Esau is my heir." If on the other hand the blessing was a kind of 'word of power', why couldn't Isaac undo it?

The answer is that the Biblical blessing cannot be reduced to just a legal action nor to just a magical 'word of power' or something of that nature. It is a very complex composite of legal action and deep psychological shaping and prophetic insight into the future. Isaac's blessing of Jacob is therefore something that really could not be revoked. It was partially the prophetic insight that he received, and it was partly the deep symbolic affirmation and shaping act. The power of the blessing is real and substantial and comes from God (27:7). It immediately goes into effect. Such a moment cannot be revoked. In addition, it is likely that Isaac realizes he has been fighting God.

"Isaac's 'and indeed he shall be blessed' (v.33) expresses more than mere belief that the spoken word is self-fulfilling: he knows he has been fighting against God, as Esau has, and he accepts defeat."

– Kidner, Genesis, p.156

It is significant that the New Testament calls us to "*bless*" others (cf. Romans 12:14). This is not using the term in the sentimental way it is often used today. "To be a blessing" usually means our actions bring someone comfort or joy. "To bless" verbally is a ministry to others which has some of the elements of these patriarchal death-bed blessings. To bless means to offer deep insight into what a person needs to be and can be, and then to offer powerful words and gestures affirming and encouraging them to become that.

**4. Compare the dialogues of vv.6-11 and vv.30-40. Which characters arouse more sympathy in us? Why would the narrator allow this to happen when Jacob is the chosen one? How does this teach us about God's grace?**

The scene of vv.30-40, when Isaac and Esau realize that Jacob has taken the blessing, is one of the most poignant in the Bible. Seldom do ancient Hebrew narrators speak as specifically about emotion, yet we see Isaac trembling violently (v.33) with the recognition that his favorite son has lost the blessing, and we hear Esau crying aloud in his pain (v.34). Brueggemann comments: "*The narrative makes ready contact with every parent whose dream for the child is fractured. Every parent wants to 'fix it' and make it right for his or her precious child. But it is beyond the parent, always, because other things are at*



work that do not yield to us. And so the parent is a mixture of hurt and failure and sorrow.” (Brueggemann, p.233). On the other hand, the scene of vv.6-11 arouses in us almost no sympathy. We see the very opposite — nothing but cold calculation. We see a wife so resentful of her husband that she is willing to take on herself any curse (from God or Isaac-v.11). We see a son who goes on only begrudgingly, afraid of being caught and being cursed.

Many readers have felt that the narrator finds Esau as being a more attractive character than Jacob. Despite his impetuosity he is also seen as a man capable of generosity and forgiveness (cf. chapter 33:4ff.) He is much more accessible, wearing his heart on his sleeve, while Jacob is almost a ‘slimy’ figure, never letting his guard down, never telling us what is up his sleeve. The point is this: God’s grace to Jacob almost seems to move forward even against the tastes of the narrator. Here we come to the theme of God’s grace mentioned in the introduction. Indeed, here is the theme of God’s *scandalous grace*.

Jesus was constantly offending (scandalizing) people because he ate and associated with the ‘wrong’ people, the people who led un-respectable lives. (cf. Luke 15:1-2, Matt. 11:2-6). Paul said that the cross itself was a *skandalon* (a stumbling block) to many because a) it was a method of salvation through weakness and humiliation, not strength and triumph, and b) it identified Jesus with the criminals and outcasts of society (1 Cor 1:23). So here we see (more than in any other Old Testament figure) God’s grace given to someone is singularly unattractive and unworthy, at some points despicable. Unlike Abraham, who regularly rises to model for us exemplary unselfishness (chap 13) and courage (chap 14) and concern for others (chap 18) and amazing faithfulness (chap 22) — Jacob provides us almost no such examples. The stories of Jacob’s life have almost no edifying material in them (to conventional religious or moral sensibilities). There is almost nothing he does that can be pointed to as an inspiring example. He is continually spinning out (and getting caught in) webs of deceit and cunning and favoritism and trickery.

This is therefore the primary example in the Old Testament of the ‘scandalousness’ of God’s grace. God chooses and loves and stays with a disdainful character, unworthy and unvalued. This is ‘scandalous’ to the world’s mind. It makes no sense. Truly, God seems to have chosen Jacob simply because he is so weak, foolish, and despised (1 Cor 1:27-29).

**5. 27:41-28:5. a) How do we see the consequences of sin here? What do we learn about how sin works? b) Rebekah must now make another plan. How does her plan end up fulfilling God’s purposes in ways that she cannot perceive?**

a) What do we learn about the consequences of sin?

Esau’s murderous grudge now poisons the family and leads to its breakdown. Esau is deeply alienated from his mother. Notice how in 28:8 Esau is only

evaluating his married life in order to please his father (despite the fact that his marriages caused pain to both his father and his mother — 26:35). His mother is no longer part of his life. As a result, Rebekah is going to lose Jacob for the rest of her life. When he goes away, she will never see again the son for whom she risked everything. And we will find that Jacob will be deceived and swindled as he himself had deceived and swindled his father and brother. All of these things are natural consequences of their deception, lying, and subterfuge.

The Bible is filled with sayings such as: *“Those who live by the sword”* (Matthew 26:52) and *“he who digs a pit for another will fall into it”* (Proverbs 14). As Derek Kidner puts it: “Sin sets up strains in the fabric of reality that can only lead to breakdown.” (D.Kidner, *Proverbs*, p.???) The laws of God issue from the one who created the world and all moral, spiritual, physical, social, and psychological reality. When God says, “don’t lie” or “you must forgive” he is describing how he designed people to live in the world he made. “Shalom” or God’s peace is not simply some kind of inner tranquility, but it is the multi-dimensional wholeness that comes when all things function as they were designed to function. *Shalom* includes perfect physical health, perfect social harmony and justice, perfect union between our creative aspirations and our achievements, perfect inner harmony, joy, and fulfillment, all flowing from a perfect relationship with God. Every sin is a violation of that *shalom*, an attack on the fabric of reality, the way things ought to be. Thus when we sin against God we attack our own well-being, psychologically, socially, spiritually.

b) How does her plan end up fulfilling God’s purposes?

Rebekah sees Esau’s sustained murderous anger (v.41) and realizes that if Isaac dies while Esau continues in his *“grudge”* Jacob could die. She knows that Jacob must be put beyond Esau’s reach temporarily. So she decides to send Jacob to her own brother Laban’s house in Haran. Her goal is strictly for Jacob’s protection, not for the goal of marriage that she puts forward to Isaac as a pretext for the trip. This is seen in her statement to Jacob that she expects him to be gone *“only a few days”* (v.44). The NIV translation renders this term *“for a while”*, obscuring Rebekah’s true design. She doesn’t want him to stay until he gets a wife, but until she can tell that Esau is over his anger (v.45). Evidently Rebekah knew her impetuous older son and believed that he would ‘get over it’ eventually. Isaac immediately approves of the plan and sends Jacob off. But why didn’t he think of it himself? The evidence is that he is indifferent to who Jacob marries, but he is glad to see Jacob leave the home and reduce the (now) terrible tension.

But God is at work in all this, with designs and purposes far beyond those of Rebekah. Jacob’s long sojourn in Haran not only keeps him from marrying a Canaanite and brings him the family he did need, but it is a refining and humbling time in which Jacob finally begins to grow in character. At this point we are confronted with one of the most important teachings of the Bible — how God works his plan not just in spite of human sin but *through* it.

"The [parties in these texts] discuss as though none were involved except the two of them. They proceed as though they themselves could resolve the issue... What they do not know... is that their bargaining works to implement the purposes of God... There is no conflict between divine promise and human ingenuity. The one is an instrument for the other."

– Brueggemann, p. 217-218

These rival strategems only succeeded in doing 'whatsoever God's hand and... counsel foreordained' (cf. Acts 4:28). As a crowning touch, at a moment when Isaac was in no mood to care whom Jacob might marry, Jacob found himself thrust out of the nest he had feathered, to seek refuge and a wife among the very kinsmen to whom Abraham had turned in obedience to the vision (24:3ff.)

– Kidner, p. 155

The Bible teaches that God's sovereignty is absolute. Human choices and sin cannot thwart his will. But this goes further. It shows us that God actually can and does work his will out *through* our sinful choices, and yet that does not render those choices less sinful. Jacob is one of the most vivid cases in point. On the one hand, we see that his sin was terrible and it had consequences that he experienced for the rest of his life. He is held responsible for those choices. Yet, if Jacob had not sinned and ruined his family relationships so that he had to flee for his life, he would never have come to Haran and married and had the children through whom the Messiah eventually came. Many people believe that if we sin, we somehow force God to give us a secondary course in life, a "Plan B". But how can the Messiah be "Plan B"? Jacob met exactly who he had to meet and marry in order to bring Jesus into the world. Jacob went exactly to the place he had to go in order to learn humility and faith and become the head of God's family and people.

None of this would have happened if Jacob hadn't sinned. Does that mean God *made* him sin, so that he couldn't help himself? No. His sin was his choice and the consequences were terrible. And yet, when you belong to God by his grace, your sins cannot screw up your life and put it on "Plan B".

As usual, the ultimate example of this is Jesus Christ himself. In Acts 2:23, Peter says to the people of Jerusalem: *"This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose... and you with the help of wicked men put him to death..."* There it is! Jesus death was absolutely fixed and certain. God infallibly and unchangeably planned for people to put him to death. It was planned by God in order to save the world. Yet the people who did the crucifixion were *"wicked"* and thus responsible for their behavior. So God's sovereignty and our free responsibility are both true. And it means that even those who were responsible for the death of Jesus can be saved by the very thing they did wrong. That's Peter's whole point. He is saying to them. "Though you did something wrong, God will bring grace and life out of it! Repent and turn to the one you put to death. There is all the hope in the world."



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Heaven's gate

### Study 21 | Genesis 28:10-22

#### INTRODUCTION

Now Jacob is essentially on the run for his life. Jacob may have had a better grasp on his situation than did Rebekah, who naively assured him that he would be back in a few days (27:44) because Esau would 'get over it'. He also would have been unconsolated by Isaac's dignified words of sending and blessing at his departure (28:1-3). He knew that his father had shown little concern for his future choices and likely was just glad for him to depart. In short, Jacob was little more than a fugitive, unwanted by anyone but this mother, and completely unsure of his future. He is so resourceless that he is sleeping out in the open at night. And yet now God comes to him. Despite his moral and spiritual inferiority to his grandfather Abraham or even to his father Isaac, Jacob is given two major 'visitations' from God. The first one comes here.

**Background Note:** The famous word *ladder* (as in "Jacob's Ladder") is missing from verse 12. The NIV is right to consign it to the footnotes and put the word "*stairway*" in its place. The Hebrew word really describes more of a "ramp". (The description of a stream of messengers coming and going fits in better with the idea of a broad ramp or staircase than a ladder.) The word is used to describe the "*siege ramp*" — a man-made mountain, as it were — that is built up against a walled city in order to conquer it.

What is being described is a "ziggurat", a temple building which was common in the ancient Near East. Ziggurats would appear to our eyes as huge 'pyramids', but the reason for their shape and size was that they were man-made mountains. Ziggurats were efforts to 'unite heaven and earth'. The religious person could ascend up toward the gods to make sacrifices. The gods could more easily descend and come down to earth. When someone built a ziggurat, they often called it a 'heaven-gate', a place where the worshipper could meet and connect with the gods. Scholars tell us that the very name "Babylon" means "the gate of the god". It is not surprising that when Jacob saw a stairway to heaven, he called it "*the gate of heaven*" and began to worship (v.17).

#### 1. 28:12-15. What does Jacob see, and what do you think each one of these things mean? (Make reference to the promises God makes.)

##### a) What are the things that Jacob sees

The visual elements of the encounter were three: a) First, he saw a stairway linking heaven and earth. It reached all the way in both directions and it touched both. (It literally says that the stairway "*set against the ground with its top touching heaven*" – v.12a.) b) Second, he saw angels ascending and descending on it. (v.12b) c) Third, he saw the Lord himself above him (v.13).

**Note:** Unfortunately, the Hebrew prepositional phrase at the beginning of v.13

could mean “*over it*” (meaning Jacob saw God up at the top of the stair) or “*over him*” (meaning Jacob saw God standing just over him, having come down the stair). Though the second picture is more intimate, the basic picture is the same. The stairway means access to the Lord himself.

b) What does each one mean?

Although the Biblical writer does not tell us directly what these elements mean, we can speculate with some confidence, because of the explicit words that come afterwards (see below).

First, the *stairway* (v.12a) gives us “*the news that there is traffic between heaven and earth... Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods. Heaven has to do with earth.*” (Brueggemann, p.243). We saw above that the peoples of the Near East built their own ziggurats. (The tower of Babel itself was probably a ziggurat. See chapter 11.) These buildings were an effort to coax the gods to come down and pay attention to the needs of the worshippers. But this is quite different. Here we have God himself establishing his own connection with the earth. This is not then (like the ziggurats) a stairway *to* heaven as much as it is a stairway *from* heaven! This is not human religion, in which man seeks to reach up to heaven and merit the gods’ attention. Instead, this is the gospel, in which heaven itself has sought and come down to the earth. This is so remarkably different than so many of the other ancient religions, which saw the ‘salvation’ and spiritual growth as a process of ascending out of and away from this evil, material world. The idea that heaven sought out earth, literally *setting* the bottom of its stair into the dirt was radical! Other religions saw the earth as the accidental result of some great celestial battle, not the design of a concerned *Creator*. In this ‘stairway *from* heaven’ we have the seeds of the truth that God will embrace and renew the world.

Second, the *angels* (v.12b) tells us that God’s sovereign plan and purposes are actively being carried out. We do not have to fear. He is in charge. The Hebrew word translated “*angels*” means messengers or heralds. It connotes royal decrees and power. Just as a king’s royal messengers and attendants proceed out into the world from the throne, so we see angels ascending and descending from the royal power of God out into the world. Most of all (in this situation), the vision of the angels speaks of protection. God’s power is everywhere. In a similar way, in 2 Kings 6:17 Elisha prays that the eyes of his servant would have “his eyes opened” so that he would not fear although they were in a besieged city. Suddenly the servant is able to see an angelic host — “*chariots of fire all around Elisha*”. In the same way, Jacob was having the normal human blindness ‘peeled away’ and for a moment he sees the earth full of the glory of God’s kingly power and purposes. Remarkable!

Thirdly, *the Lord standing beside him* (v.13) tells us that fellowship with God is possible as is access to his very presence. **[Text note:** The Hebrew word in the verse could be translated "*over it*" or "*over him*", meaning that God may have been standing over the ladder — thus at the top of the ladder — or over Jacob — thus at the bottom of the ladder. However, in Genesis 35:13 the same term is used when God appears to Jacob at Bethel a second time. After the term is used it says clearly "*God went up from the place where he had talked of him.*" Therefore we conclude that in Genesis 32 God has come down the ladder to stand just over and near Jacob.) What an image! Since *the angels* signify the very royal presence of God, the dream-vision is depicting the possibility of a pathway right into God's heart, to his inner royal chamber, his inmost presence. See Isaiah 6:1-6, or notice the golden cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant, which is his royal throne in the Holy of Holies. We can come right in.

## **2. 28:12-15. What does Jacob hear, and what do these things tell him about God and his purposes?**

First in vv.13-14, Jacob hears the familiar. God says things he has said before to both Abraham and Isaac, and these are promises that almost certainly Jacob has heard before. God says: a) He will give to Jacob and his descendents the land of Canaan, *the land on which you are lying* (v.13c). b) He will give Jacob a great number of descendents and make of him a great nation (v.14a). c) God is doing all this not simply to prosper and honor him or a small number of favorites, but he is doing this for the blessing of all the nations of the earth (v.14b). Thus Jacob is called into the 'active duty' of God's redemptive purposes.

We have spoken of this before, but we should take a moment to review what those purposes are. God made the world an Edenic paradise of *shalom*. When human beings lived with one another and the earth under the rule of God, there was harmony, justice, creative growth, and delight. But humanity turned away from the rule of God and creation was deeply marred. But God is creating a new humanity, a new people, who will live under God's rule and authority and embody his *shalom*. Out of this people will eventually come the Messiah, the King who will save the world and eventually renew the whole creation completely. All of this is far beyond Jacob's imagination, and yet it is all foreshadowed in this familiar promise. The land is important because God's salvation is not just 'spiritual' but means the renewal of all of creation — spiritual and material. The descendants have to increase so they can be a new nation, a new society showing the world what human life can be under God. And the call to *be* a blessing tells us that all who take part in this must get past self-interest. This new people of God lives for others. (Of course Jacob in particular needed to realize this last challenge!)



But secondly, in vv.15 Jacob hears some new things that no one has ever heard before. God says: a) *I will be with you...* (v.15a) This is a promise of intimacy and nearness. The average reader underestimates the force of the word “with”. Jesus appointed his disciples *that they might be with him* (Mark 3:14). *In the beginning the Word was with God* (John 1:1). We see that it is a term that speaks of relational intimacy. Though many others were to hear these words as a covenant promise, Jacob was the first. Of course, he had not idea of the extent to which God would go to make this a reality for his people. The ultimate example of *God-with-us* is Jesus himself (Matt.1:23). So we see how committed God is to coming near, becoming accessible, having friendship with us. God then says: b) *and will watch over you...* (v.15b). This is a promise of protection. The word literally means that he will “guard” Jacob. It goes along with the first promise. God is saying, “I will not simply be with you on your life-journey, but I will guard and protect you at every turn.” While very reassuring, it is interesting to reflect on the meaning of this in light of Jacob’s subsequent history. (See below). Then God says: *and I will bring you back to this land* (v.15c). This is the promise of homecoming. A true “home” is a rich concept in any language or culture. It includes elements of — belonging, stability, community, familiarity. The opposite of “home” is alienation, restlessness, isolation, instability and so on. Jacob is being promised that God will bring him home. Finally, God says: d) *I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you* (v.15d). This is a promise about all the other promises, namely that they are unconditional. While this was strongly implied in God’s oath to Abraham in Genesis 15, here it is explicitly stated. There is no “if” in the promise. God is saying: “I will not stop until I get all this done for you.” Period.

### 3. 28:12-15. At what point in Jacob’s experience does this come? What do we learn about the grace of God from this appearance?

Derek Kidner writes: *This is a supreme display of divine grace, unsought... unstinted... [and] also immediately apposite*” (p.158). Kidner uses three words that are a bit unusual, but his analysis is incisive! Let’s take them in reverse order.

First, the grace of God is *healing* — *exactly matched and suited to Jacob’s precise needs*. (“Apposite” is the opposite of opposite!) Jacob sleeping out in the open is the perfect embodiment of all three aspects of his great need. Jacob was completely alone and abjectly lonely. There was only one person in the world who cared about him, and she was far behind (never to be seen again.) And God says “I will be with you.” Jacob was completely defenseless, in danger from his brother, in danger in the wilderness, and at the mercy of the strangers he was about to meet. And God says, “*and will watch over you*”. Jacob was of course homeless. He only had his mother’s story of the strange oracle. “You will be the head of all this house”, she said. But now all that was in tatters! How *naïve* to think Esau would ever ‘get over it’! He had no home,



no money, no family. He was, like Cain, a wanderer in the earth. And God says, *"and I will bring you back"*. How remarkable that God has lovingly adapted his message to the particular hurts and weaknesses and needs of Jacob. He did not simply "deliver the truth", but applied the truth like a physician, father, and shepherd in order to assure, heal, and build up.

Second, the grace of God is *free — unsought and unconditional*. God met Abraham in the night after he pleaded with God for more assurance (Gen 15). God met Moses in the wilderness where he fled after trying (clumsily) to liberate an Israelite from oppression. (Exodus 3). God met Elijah in the wilderness where he fled demoralized after trying to turn Israel's rulers back to God from Baal (1 Kings 19). But Jacob is isolated, alienated and despondent because of his own grasping and dishonesty. He is not seeking God at all, nor is he repentant, nor is he weary and crushed by his efforts to serve others. And yet God appears to him! And moreover, he makes a promise that is unconditional, not contingent on Jacob at all. There is no demand made and no requirements listed. *"I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* (v.15d). That is free, unmerited grace.

Third, the grace of God is *extravagantly lavish* ("unstinted"). Remarkably, there is not a word of condemnation or even criticism, despite the fact that Jacob has shown no contrition or change of heart or character development. The lack of such a word is not evidence that God is unconcerned with all of that! But when this repentant spirit and heart develops, it will be in response to this free and un-moderated grace. The free-flowing breadth of this grace is stunning. It is *"a stream of assurances flowing from the central 'I am the Lord' to spread from the past (13a) to the distant future, from the spot where Jacob lay (13b) to the four corners of the earth (14) and from his person to all humankind (14b)."*

**4. 28:15. How do we assess God's promise to "guard" Jacob considering how much heartache and trouble he continues to experience for the rest of his life? What light does Luke 21:16-19 shed?**

After God's promise, Jacob's life is far, far from 'blessed' and comfortable. In chapter 29 his uncle Laban swindles him and forces him to marry someone he does not want to. In chapter 35 the love of his life dies in childbirth. In chapter 37 he loses the second love of his life — Joseph — through the deceit and jealousy of his other sons. He lives his life in permanent grief and mourning. This is *"guarding"?! Readers can be excused for asking: "If this is what God means by 'watching over' and 'guarding' someone, what use is it?"* There are many places in the Bible that reflect on God's promise to *"keep"* us. (This is the same Hebrew word translated here as *"watch over"* or *"guard"*.)

The Lord watches over you...

the sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night.

The Lord will keep you from all harm —

He will watch over your life... (Psalm 121:5-7)

The life of Jacob seems to contradict this promise of God being our “keeper”. Jacob suffered a great deal of “harm” under God’s keeping, and others (e.g. Job) have suffered even more than he. How do we answer this?

Part of our problem is our own cultural expectations. When a civilization like ours experiences unprecedented peace and prosperity for so many years, it becomes natural for us to expect that a long and trouble-free life is “the natural right of all decent people.” When we read about Jacob’s life we ask why God allowed all these bad things to happen. But we must realize that most people throughout most of history expected to bury at least a couple of their children in infancy and a couple of different spouses. Contemporary people in the West have expect more comfort and safety than anyone ever has.

But the ultimate problem is that we lack perspective. God puts every incident you experience in the context of a) your whole life, and b) everything that is going on in the world and in history. He also can see all the different lives we *could* have had if this or that happened, in light of everything that is going on in the world and in history. In other words — something that feels pretty terrible might help us avoid something far more terrible if we had the eyes and wisdom to see it. In histories like that of Jacob it is possible to see a bit of this bigger perspective as readers. We can see how Jacob’s troubles honed him and humbled him and prevented him from bigger mistakes, and so on. Jacob was being protected from “harm” in a broader and deeper way, though he often was literally harmed by the conflicts he suffered. (He was permanently crippled by his mysterious wrestling contest.)

A fascinating passage that shows how different God’s perspective is than ours is in Luke 21. Here Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the kind of opposition they will face.

“They will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you... to prisons... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish.” (Luke 21:12, 16-18)

Rather startling isn’t it? Jesus can calmly say that they will be hounded, imprisoned, and put to death, but “*not a hair of your head will perish*”. There is no mistake. He says “you will be killed” and “you won’t be harmed” in virtually the same sentence. What does that mean? First of all, the reference to “*not a hair*” means that God is not simply staying aloof and watching, but he is exercising minute control over the situation. Second of all, Jesus is thinking of

*"perishing"* (cf. *"harm"* in Ps 121) differently than we are! This is because he is thinking of 'happiness' in a more multi-dimensional way than we do. People are ultimately "happy" who know themselves well, know God well, rely on his grace, accomplish things for him, and as a result live with little or no fear. In short, people are only "happy" who are like Jesus. The many strong assertions that God is a God of love, that our anguish is anguish to him, that he has suffered immeasurably in order to eventually wipe all suffering and tears out of our lives. That means that God never allows suffering or trouble unless it is absolutely necessary to make us like Jesus. He is 'watching over' us even in the suffering, because a) he is with us in it, b) he gives us resources for it, and c) he only allows it if it is some way to get to his goal of a new world and a new 'you' in Christ.

**5. 28:16-22. How does Jacob respond to God's visitation? What do we learn about worship from this incident?**

Jacob wakes up and begins to worship. Although he does so in accordance with the customs of his time, his actions nonetheless give us good guidelines for how to conduct (and how to recognize) any act of worship.

First, we see that worship is coming into the presence of God. Jacob says, *"Surely the Lord is in this place... This is none other than the house of God... the gate of heaven."* (v.16,17). Of course the Bible assumes the omnipresence of God. He is everywhere (Psalm 139). But Biblical worship assumes there is a special presence, the "face" of God. That is why Jonah can *"flee from the presence of the Lord"* (Jonah 1:3) and yet in turn around and confess that God is everywhere, Lord of all heaven and earth (Jonah 1:9). There are many ways to speak of this "presence", his relational nearness. In the New Testament the disciples had a prayer meeting and as a result the house was shaken and the fullness of the Holy Spirit came down upon them (Acts 4:31). The David speaks of having *"gazed upon the beauty of the Lord"* in the temple (Ps 27:4) *"seeking your face"* (Ps 27:8). Moses was told that he could not look upon the face of God and live (Exodus 33), so David is probably not talking of a direct vision to his physical senses but an experience of the presence of God. To be in the presence of God is to sense his reality, to have intellectual concepts (such as his love, power, glory) become vivid, affecting, clear, delightful, consoling, and transforming. That is why David can say, *"I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Your steadfast love is better than life..."* (Psalm 63:2-3) That is what it means to enter God's *"house"*.

Jacob has never had never experienced the presence of God. It is his first personal encounter. Before his religion was second-hand. The sense of *"awe"* he refers to is the difference between a sense of being in the presence of the holy and majestic God and the intellectual belief that he is holy and great.

So we see that worship is not primarily the following of a ritual form nor just a time of teaching and instruction nor just a time for fellowship. None of these things are the primary goal or essence of an act of worship. Worship is coming into the presence of the Lord, through his grace.

Notice one implication of this definition. Jacob calls this place *"the house of God"* and *"the gate of heaven"* though there is no building there, nor any human made object at all! Pagan temples and ziggurats had to be built by human beings in the hope that the gods would make it their home. But Jacob has encountered the God of grace, who takes the initiative and 'comes down' to a man who was not seeking or sacrificing at all! God's sovereign grace and presence turns a nowhere place (*"a certain place"* v.11) into the house of God. Buildings are not important. The presence of God amidst his people called by grace — that is the true 'sanctuary'.

Second, we see that worship consists of hearing from God and then responding to God. Jacob's acts of worship are a response to the promise and words of God. Worship does not start with us seeking God and then God responding to us. Worship starts with God's Word. When his Word penetrates and convicts us, it evokes the awe and worship that we see in Jacob. Another interesting example of this is in 2 Samuel 7, where God sends a prophet to give David a word from the Lord. David turns and says: *"O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, you have revealed this to your servant... Therefore your servant finds this prayer in his heart."* (2 Sam 7:27). Hearing God's Word deep in the heart creates — adoration, confession, petition, thanksgiving. This is the essence of the 'rhythm' of any personal or corporate act of worship. This has always been the basic dynamic in the structure of any Biblical worship service. We hear the Word (by reading it, chanting it, hearing it, preaching it) and in response we give back to God our prayers and gifts.

Third, we see that our worship response is giving God what he is worth. Notice all the things that Jacob does. First, he gives God the stone on which he laid his head. He honors it, setting it apart with oil from ordinariness to commemorate the grace of God. (v.18). It was a way of saying 'everything about this place is now precious to me'. Second, he gives God of his income — he promises God a tithe of his money (v.22b) Third, he gives God himself — *"The Lord will be my God"*. So we see that in response to the Word of God we are to give God all — our sins (in confession) our hearts (in dedication) our resources (in offering) our needs (in petition) our love (in praise and thanksgiving). The old English word for this was originally *"worth-ship"*. An act of worship has two parts: a) seeing the worthiness of God (through his Word) and then b) giving him what he is worth.

**6. 28:20-22. Many people believe that Jacob's vow is weak and just a form of bargaining. What do you think? What do we learn from God's response to Jacob's vow?**

It is true that Jacob seems to be bargaining. There was never a contingency clause in anything God said at all. He never said: "I'll do this *if*..." Yet Jacob starts his vow with "*if*". Some people have felt that there was nothing wrong with what Jacob said at all. Derek Kidner thinks that "*the vow was no more a bargain than any other vow — the 'if' clause is inherent in the form*" (p.158) but I don't think that is right. God was able to avoid the word "*if*", and this audacious bargaining attitude fits in perfectly with what we know of his character, He is not going to change on the spot! He has just had his first encounter with the living God, and he is responding as best he can. Joyce Baldwin's insight is better (and comforting!) when she says:

The terms of his vow sound calculating... Jacob was dull and unresponsive to the loving reassurance of god. Before he could commit himself completely Jacob wanted the circumstantial evidence of the outworking of God's promises in his life... 'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails...I will not believe,' said Thomas with the same desire for tangible evidence (John 20:25). Marvellously patient, the Lord meets us where we are.

– Baldwin, p.119

This does not mean that it is 'all right' to come to God with conditions! It just means that God so often accepts our half-hearted and fitful efforts at dedication and helps us purify them over time.

**7. Compare 28:17 with Isaiah 6:1-6 and John 1:51 and 2:21. What 'progress' do we see here through the ages?**

Jacob found '*the house of God*' in the wilderness, where God temporarily let his glory and presence appear. Later, God becomes even more accessible, when he brings his glory and presence into the tabernacle and temple. That means that people could know where they could find him, and they could approach him any time through the sacrifices and the priesthood. Later, however, Jesus makes a cryptic and remarkable claim. When he tells Nathaniel something secret about his past, Nathaniel is amazed and calls him "*the Son of God*". (John 1:49). Jesus is almost bemused that Nathaniel is so easily impressed. Then he says — "*you will see greater things than that — you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man*" (John 1:51). Jesus now reveals why a holy God could be so gracious to a sinner like Jacob — or like us. He is the true gate of heaven, the true "house of God" (John 2:21), the real link between heaven and earth. It is because of his life, death and resurrection that the very presence of a holy God,

forbidden to Moses, can come right into our lives. The angels and all the vision signified — the life of heaven come down to earth, the kingly reign of God, the intimate presence of God into our lives — all can come because Jesus is the true stairway. He was of heaven but touched down on the earth. He died to bring us to God.

This means that when we belong to him — we become now the temple of God (1 Peter 2:4-5; Eph 2:20-22) filled with the glory and presence of God. We have an access to the presence of God through Christ that Jacob could only dream about. We have not come to fire and smoke and visions in the night, but to Jesus, who brings us to God. (Hebrews 12:18-28). *'Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire'* (Heb 12:28).

The stairway was a picture in Jacob's dream. But what the dream promised became a reality in Christ's Incarnation. God came down in the person of His Son to dwell on earth. Christ is the link between earth and heaven. He is the true Bethel, the House of God, Emmanuel, God with us. Jacob anointed a stone with oil to memorialize the presence of God... but God anointed his only Son with the Spirit.

– Edmund Clowney, The Unfolding Mystery, p.67







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Jacob's new family

### Study 22 | Genesis 29:14 - 30:24

#### INTRODUCTION

The next part of the Jacob story spans three long chapters — 29 through 31, which covers Jacob's long years living away from Canaan, with his uncle Laban. This is a continuous and self-contained account which is best studied all together, despite its length. It begins with the kiss of meeting (29:11,13) and ends with the kiss of departure (33:55) and so stands as a unity. It stands between two personal encounters with God, at Bethel on the way to Haran (chapter 28) and at Peniel on the way home from Haran (chapter 32). It begins with Jacob escaping from the problem of Esau and it ends with Jacob returning to face the problem of Esau. At the center of this section can be seen the heart of it — the birth of children to Jacob. If we outline the larger passage we can see how it centers on how Jacob receives a new family (based on Brueggemann, p.249):

29:1-14a – The kiss of meeting. Jacob is received by Laban.

29:14b-20 – The contract with Laban

29:21-30 – The 1st “sting” – Laban outwits Jacob

29:31-30:24 – The birth of Jacob's children

30:25-43 – The 2nd “sting” – Jacob outwits Laban

31:1-42 – The dispute with Laban

31:43-55 – The kiss of departure. Jacob leaves Laban

We will focus our study on the central sections about a) how Jacob got married and b) how Jacob's children were born. This is all crucial because here we see God fulfilling his promise to Jacob and to the world. In order to understand the selected passage, we will provide a summary of the rest of the narrative before and after the passage, in order to provide a context.

#### PRE-PASSAGE SUMMARY

**29:1-14a.** On the surface, Jacob's entrance to Haran appears very 'lucky'. He arrives at the very well that Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, will soon use. The shepherds at the well were merely standing around, neither watering nor grazing their animals, because there was a large stone over the well and that

was not rolled away until all the shepherds of the area got there to remove it. Jacob shows he feels this is a waste of time (v.7). When Rachel come with her flocks, Jacob rolls the stone away all by himself and waters her sheep. He gets to show his new family his physical strength, his enterprise and his initiative, and then he caps it off with a tearful dramatic announcement. He is the son of Rebekah, her father's sister. Rachel runs to Laban who runs to Jacob (much like Laban had run to meet the servant of Abraham some 40 years before — 24:29). The whole scene is sunny and joyful. What an entrance! Is this 'luck'? The narrator has shown the readers the promise of God in 28:15. There is no luck about it.

Like Abraham's servant years before (chapter 24) Jacob travels to Haran where he finds a bride. However, Abraham's servant went laden with wealth and possessions (24:10) to convince the prospective brides families that their daughters would be marrying into prosperity. Jacob came with nothing, however, and this left it to the very money-conscious Laban to figure out a way to get wealth from this suitor.

### 1. 29:14-20. What signs or hints can already be seen of Laban's calculation?

We should ask what Laban knows about Jacob and his situation. Before he speaks.

Laban knew that Jacob had come looking for a wife. (Though we are not told this specifically (see 29:13), it seems natural that this would have been understood. Isaac had gotten a wife from Haran, and now Jacob had come as well. (Laban was there both times.) But there is a now major difference. Though Isaac was more wealthy than Abraham had been (cf. 26:12-14), Jacob had to come himself, without a servant or a bride-price (as in 24:10). This showed that all is not well with Jacob and his family, whether Jacob had divulged the struggles or not. Laban knew that Jacob was economically vulnerable.

Also, it is hard to imagine that Jacob's adoration for Rachel (v.18, 20) escaped Laban's notice. Rachel was unusually beautiful. (29:17 explicitly refers to her sexual attractiveness, her (lit.) "great figure".) Someone has pointed out that Jacob and Rachel constituted a rarity in the ancient world and in the Bible — a marriage based on romantic love. So it is unlikely in the extreme that Laban did not know of Jacob's lovesickness. Therefore Laban knew also that Jacob was emotionally vulnerable.

If we look at Laban's statements in this light, we begin to see hints of his scheming. First, the offer of "*wages*" (v.15) seems generous on the surface, but now we realize that he very likely wanted to get Jacob to make an offer on a bride price. This way he could trap Jacob into providing Laban far more financial value than if he had just asked for a workman's wage (see below). So Laban's offer was a bit of a risk, financially. Jacob was working for nothing, and wages would put a dent in Laban's profit. But Laban has read Jacob well.

Second, after Jacob makes an offer to work seven years as a bride-price for Rachel (v.18), Laban is very indirect in his response. Jacob says: "I'll work seven years if you'll give me Rachel" — and Laban never gives an unambiguous "Yes!" or "Agreed!" to Jacob's statement. He makes an oblique comment, that *"it's better that you get her rather than someone else"* (v.19), and Jacob takes it for a positive agreement. But if the "her" in Laban's statement is Rachel (even that is not certain), he is only saying that it would be good for Jacob to get her for a wife. He did not 'shake' on the specifics.

**2. 29:21-26. Laban's scheme is finally revealed. In what ways is it ingenious, though cruel? What did Laban get out of it?**

a) In what ways is the scheme ingenious

The day of the wedding arrived. (v.22) The wedding would begin with a procession from the bride's home to the place of the wedding. Then the marriage covenant would be read and entered into. After that there would be a great feast, at the end of which the groom would put his cloak around his bride and lead her into his tent and consummate the marriage. After that would come more days of feasting. All day, of course, the bride would be heavily veiled. We can still see the importance veiling in Near Eastern cultures. (See Wenham, p. 236) All day Jacob assumed that the veiled bride was Rachel, when it was really her older sister Leah. Jacob made vows to Leah and took her into his dark tent and consummated the marriage — all thinking it was Rachel. Only the next morning does he discover his mistake.

Laban's scheme was based on the weaknesses of Jacob that we already have seen as well as some others. First, it was based on a legal technicality — a custom of their region (v.26 notice his word *"here"*) — that Jacob probably did not know about. Second, it was probably only possible to hide the bride's identity from Jacob (until it was too late!) because Jacob had no family at this wedding. Had there been female members of the groom's family present, it would have been very difficult to hide the scheme from them during all the preparations that women did together. But all the women in this wedding were under Laban's control. The conspiracy stayed hidden until it had succeeded.

Finally, the scheme took in to consideration the aftermath. Laban knew that Jacob would be furious, and that his answer — that this was "just the custom"—was a thin and inadequate one. That answer does not excuse the lying and subterfuge. But Laban knew that Jacob was still emotionally and economically vulnerable. After seven years of labor all he had was a wife he did not want, and the love of his life was still there. Laban knew that Jacob would be compliant through it all because of his lack of financial and emotional leverage. (There was another reason he accepted Laban's new terms. See the next question below.)

## b) What did Laban get from it?

He made out very, very handsomely.

It was a requirement that a suitor made the family of his bride a gift — a 'marriage present' or a 'bride price'. Deuteronomy 22:29 put a 50 shekel 'cap' on the bride price that could be expected or demanded, and typically the gifts were far lower. Jacob's offer of 7 years labor was then remarkably handsome, since the going wage-rate for a laborer was 1.5 shekels a month. (See Wenham, Genesis 16-50, p.235.) In fact, the extravagance of the offer requires an explanation. The reader of the narrative would immediately wonder at Jacob's voluntary offer of a sum 3-4 times higher than was normal. (Jacob did not ask a price from Laban. There was not haggling.) The most natural conclusion was that Jacob wanted Rachel — and everyone else — to know how much he valued her. He was a man incredibly in love, and he wanted others to know about it. (There was probably a lot of bravado in this, just like Jacob's showing his strength off for Rachel in removing the stone from the well.) He could have gotten off with a lot less — but he'll show her and everyone how much loves her! And this plays right into Laban's hands. He has him now. Wow — seven years! What a deal! But Laban was able to get much, much more.

29:17 tells us "*Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had an attractive figure and was beautiful.*" No one knows what the word translated 'weak' really means. It usually means 'soft' but here it clearly has a negative meaning. It could mean that her eyes were particularly unattractive in some way. She may have had some kind of eye-disorder. The overall point however is clear. Leah was physically unattractive and undesirable, and as a result it was very unlikely that she would ever be married. And here we see an even more base and mercenary aspect of Laban. He sees an opportunity to not only get Leah married, but to get an enormous bride-price for her as well. As we immediately see, Laban puts her into a situation in which she is unloved and despised, but that does not seem to be any concern to him.

So Laban pulls off a 'career-making' deal. He gets enormous sums for his daughters. We also know that (at least during the first seven years!) he got a shepherd who was strong and vigorous and enterprising. (cf. 29:1-14) Laban grew rich by exploiting Jacob's many weaknesses.

**Note:** We should stop a moment and address an issue that will trouble many modern readers of the text. Today we find the concept of 'bride-price' repellent. Here we have women being virtually bought and sold and evaluated on the basis of their looks. Doesn't this show us that the Bible is a primitive book that in many ways we have 'gotten beyond'? But we must keep two things in mind. 1) First, the writer of this passage is not lifting this process up as a good and worthy model. Far from it! The Bible in no way is enjoining its readers to follow suit. Rather, the writer is simply giving an account of what really happened. In these early days of God's dealing with human beings, there is much in their lives that is undesirable and corrupt. But God's revelation of his will and nature

was progressively greater over time. He unfolded more of his will for our lives at Sinai, and later even more in the life and teaching of Jesus. 2) Second, we should not think that our present culture is that much different than this one. Legally and superficially, we have more individual 'rights' today. But it is a simple fact that a woman's looks are still to a huge degree a kind of 'currency'. This is probably more true today than it was in those days, because we live in a media-driven world in which image and looks is far more important than previously. Women are very much judged on the basis of their looks. And further — a woman's physical attractiveness is still the best predictor of the amount of money her husband will be making. Yes, this is repugnant. Our point here is that this is how sinful human nature has worked for centuries. It is not fair to look at ancient times and feel superior to them over matters like this. The Bible vigorously calls us away from all of this — and one of the ways it does so is through narratives such as the one we are reading.

**3. 29:25-29. Why did Jacob, who is clearly shocked and furious in v.25, agree so compliantly to Laban's explanation and further offer? How was Laban's deceit with Jacob parallel to Jacob's deceit with his family?**

Jacob was shocked and furious with Laban in verse 25. The narrator helps us understand the depths of the fury by showing us Jacob's almost pathetic longing for Rachel in verse 21. When he says: *"Give me my wife... I want to lie with her,"* his statement is so bald and explicit about his burning sexual desire that Robert Alter tells us rabbis have spent years trying to explain or justify its rudeness and lustfulness! He is overwhelmed with emotional and sexual desire for Rachel. The narrator lets us see this so that we can imagine the depths of horror and shock he must have felt when the amazing turn takes place and he finds Leah in his bed. Verse 25 reads literally, *"and in the morning, behold she (was) Leah."* This is a vivid statement of what the event looked like through Jacob's eyes. Jacob's first question: *"What have you done?"* is the same question that God asks Adam and Eve in the garden after they sinned (Genesis 3:13). So he begins his conversation with Laban with thunder.

It is at first difficult to understand why Jacob seems to agree with Laban's weak and inadequate answer — "Well surely you knew — that this is the way we do it here?" Many devastating 'comebacks' are possible. Jacob could have said, "That's not the point! Why didn't you *tell* me? Or why didn't you procure a husband for Leah before that? Our commitment was over Rachel! Seven years for Rachel. I said! If you couldn't do that, you should have told me then!" And it is also remarkable that Jacob should have agreed to the other seven years for Rachel. He could have very easily demanded that he marry her as well. If he had appealed to others around Laban they would have probably agreed. Jacob could have kept up his indignation and blown through the cool exterior of Laban. But his indignation seems to melt away. Why does Jacob seem to quietly give in?

The answer is (as most commentators note) Jacob's own words in v.25 and Laban's words in v.26 would have suddenly forced Jacob to painfully relive his past, something like the way Jesus' three-fold question "do you love me?" made Peter relive his three-fold denial of his Lord. First, when Jacob asks in v.25 "*Why have you deceived me?*" he uses the very same verb that Isaac uses to describe what Jacob did to him (27:35 – "*deceit*") And thus Jacob is condemning himself! "Why did you deceive me for your own profit? Why did you exploit my weaknesses?" Does Jacob know what he is saying? Perhaps it dawned on him as the words were out of his mouth. But if not, it all would have dawned on him when Laban makes his retort.

Laban says, "Around here it is not the custom to put the younger before the firstborn." Those words must have been like a dagger in Jacob's heart. Alter says: "*Laban is an instrument of dramatic irony*" (p.155). Perhaps Laban was saying this unconsciously, since it was perfectly true. Or perhaps Laban had learned what Jacob had done and was making reference to it. But either way, these words could not fail to make Jacob think of what he did and set his guilty conscience on fire. ("Oh no! He's only doing to me what I did to my father and to Esau!") The deceiver has been deceived. The parallels are hard to miss. Jacob's deceit and Laban's deceit both entailed deception and exploitation of weaknesses and the switching of the first-born and second-born.

And there is a second irony and parallel between Jacob's deceit and Laban's. The very form was the same. In both situations, a man in the dark was not able to see who it was he was touching. Robert Alter even quotes a Rabbi who imagines an angry encounter with Leah the day after.

And he said to her, "I called out 'Rachel' in the dark — and you answered! Why did you do that to me?" And Leah said to him, "Your father called out 'Esau' in the dark — and you answered! Why did you do that to him?"  
(My paraphrase, from Alter, p.155.)

**4. What is God doing with Jacob? Look ahead to the prayer of 32:9-12. How does the affirmation of chapter 28 and the discipline of chapter 29 work together to get Jacob to this place?**

What has just happened to Jacob was enormously painful, and Laban's sin against Jacob (and his daughters) was terribly wrong and will have lasting consequences. But as Genesis 50:20 tells us Laban "*meant it for evil*" but God "*used it for good*". There is no better parenting than this! A simple punishment (like a spanking or confinement to a room) is never as effective as a true 'taste of one's own medicine'. There is no better way to convict a exploiting deceiver than to give him the experience of being exploited and deceived! God is lovingly but firmly saying, "How do you like it?"

Therefore, just because God is 'with you' does not mean that there are no consequences to your behavior and no discipline. Heb. 12:5-6 and Prov. 3:12

tells us that he disciplines those he loves. In fact, Amos 3:2 says: *"You only have I known/loved of all the families of the earth — therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities!"* We are not only disciplined despite being freely, unconditional loved — but because we are. He disciplines us in love to change us.

All through his life we see that Jacob is a "man of conflict" — a wrestler. Robert Altar comments on his moving the stone from the well in 29:10 — *"He must contend with a stone to get the water — a motif that was his narrative signature."* (p. 152) Jacob was a man who, because bereft of his father's affirmation and 'blessing', feels the need to force life to give him the honor and blessing and things that he wants. So he is a 'wrestler' He wrestled with his brother in the womb. He wrestled the blessing away from his father. He marries two women wrestling with each other (30:8) and with him! Even at the end of chapter 28, his response to the grace of God is a negotiation — "I'll do this *if* you do these things for me." He trusts no one. He serves no one. There is no free giving and free receiving. There is only negotiation, wrestling, maneuvering. He is always looking out for himself. But God did not deal with Jacob in the same way — and that was his (and is our) salvation. So how will God break him of this and lead him to be unselfish, humble, trusting, and loving?

God begins this work of growth and healing in Jacob's life when he meets with him at Bethel. There he gives Jacob the free grace affirmation and blessing that he needs, but Jacob is only partially helped by it. He picks it up with suspicion and bargaining, though he clearly is amazed and grateful and changed. But now comes the harder part. God simply lets him meet a bigger wrestler and conniver than himself — Laban!

So see how God is proceeding with him. First in Genesis 28 comes the "Good News" of God's love and grace. God promises unconditional support, love, generosity. And now, secondly, in Genesis 29 comes the "Bad News" of Jacob's selfishness and dishonesty. This incident convicts Jacob of how cruel and wrong his deeds have been. He sees how much pain they have inflicted. Notice, that God brings in the good news of love first and then the bad news of his sin. Why? Only if we have the confidence and assurance of being loved will we be able to admit how weak and unlovely we really are. (Otherwise we would stay in denial. God's unconditional grace frees the heart from its denial and repression.) See how assurance of grace and conviction of sin mutually deepen and support one another! Because he knows he's chosen and loved, he can begin to finally admit how bad he is. But because he sees his own sin, he can begin to appreciate and be amazed at the assurance of grace. This is how God can move Jacob away from the halting, partial response of 28:20-22.

In summary, God uses this experience to bring Jacob to conviction over his lying and deception in general, and to conviction over his sin in general. This is why we will see by Genesis 32 that Jacob can finally say, *"I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown me. Save me... for you have*



said, 'I will surely make you prosper...' (v.10,12). We see here both a humble appreciation of God's love and a more complete reliance on and confidence in God's help.

**5. Jacob has promised (28:21) that the Lord will be his God. Yet chapter 29 and 30 reveal three people who make other things beside the Lord their God. What does Jacob make 'an idol'? What is Rachel's idol? What is Leah's idol?**

Jacob has clearly set his heart on Rachel in an inordinate way. He is willing to do virtually anything to get her, as we have seen. This feeling — "I must have her" — makes Jacob an complete pawn in Laban's hands. This overwhelming desire for Rachel is in fact Jacob's 'Achilles' heel'. It makes him easy to dupe. Later it leads to a favoritism of Rachel over Leah that created enormous pain inside the family for years to come. Not only does Leah feel rejected, but Jacob comes to love Rachel's children far more than Leah's, which sows poison in the individuals hearts and in the corporate life of the family for generations. A mark of emotional idolatry is its non-negotiability and its delusional quality. No matter what Laban did, Jacob agreed to it. No matter how much hurt it sowed in his family, Jacob remained blind to it.

Why did Jacob make Rachel such an idol? One commentator offers a fascinating suggestion. There is a very good chance that Rachel, being Rebekah's niece, could have looked very much like Jacob's mother, the only person who ever loved him. But this is speculation. It is more likely that because of the general lack of affirmation and 'blessing' that Jacob had received, he loaded his hopes and dreams inordinately on to Rachel. "If I have a woman that beautiful as my wife — that will make amends for my unhappy life. Finally, everything will be fixed."

What was Rachel and Leah's idol. On the one hand in 29:31-35 we see the most pathetic description of a woman yearning for the love of her husband. Leah was used to being ignored as the unattractive and ungainly older daughter. She was used to being treated as if she 'wasn't there'. But being married to a man who did not love her (29:29-30) and probably resented her made the rejection far more poignant and traumatic. So she kept having children, saying "now, maybe my husband will finally love me!" That was a legitimate assumption in ancient times, when child-bearing was such a desirable thing. But she is continually disappointed. On the other hand, Rachel makes a clear statement of emotional idolatry in 30:1 "*Give me sons or I will die!*" Alter says:

Surprisingly... Rachel speaks with the impetuosity reminiscent of her brother-in-law Esau, who also announced to Jacob that he was on the point of death if Jacob did not immediately give him what he wanted. (p. 158).



All commentators notice that the two women seem to make an idol out of the one thing the other sister has that they do not. Leah wants her husband's love but just has children. (cf. 30:15) Rachel wants children but has her husband's love. But if we reflect on this we see a 'far idol' under the 'near idols'. Leah and Rachel's real idol was to be better than her sister. Over the years, Leah chafed under Rachel's beauty and for various reasons Rachel chafed under Leah's being the oldest. Rachel acknowledges that their competition had been a life-long struggle, memorialized in the name of Naphtili (30:8)

Idols are devastating. Everyone has them because 1) we must get our identity — our sense that we are distinctive and special — out of something, and 2) whatever that something is, becomes a non-negotiable center. We must have it "or we die". That means if we lose it we are inconsolably shattered, and if it is threatened we become uncontrollably angry or afraid. Idols control us. They dominate those who don't know God personally, but (as we see here) they continue to operate in the lives of those who have personally encountered God and who have entered into a covenant relationship with him.

**6. 29:31, 30:22. cf. Hebrews 7:14. How does God deal with the love-lessness of Leah and with the bareness of Rachel? What does this tell us about God's salvation?**

Look at the comfort of 29:31. *"When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb."* This is more than simply an evidence of God's merciful compassion. It *is* that — but much more. First, it reinforces that God particularly loves the outcast, the rejected, the outsider. God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, the despised things to shame the accepted (1 Cor 1:21ff.) God's own son came as a poor man, a man who was rejected and killed. He brought salvation in the way of suffering and death, not achievement and power. All through history, therefore, God has preferred as the instruments of his salvation the ones the world rejects. He has to do this over and over again to break us of our addiction to status, influence, beauty, privilege. Second, it shows us God as the true bridegroom (Ezek 16). He is being the husband to Leah that Jacob is not! He is loving the wife who is unloved. He is the father of the fatherless and defends the widow and 'sets the lonely in families' (Psalm 68:5). Leah is really a husband-less wife, but God is her husband and groom.

But thirdly, God gives her the most astonishing gift of all. The last (and climactic) child of this passage is her fourth son — Judah. All commentators notice something strange about Leah's statement when he is born. Finally she seems to 'get past' (at least for the moment — see 30:15ff.) her yearning for her husband's love. She stops singing songs of 'lament' and gives an undiluted note of praise, almost defiantly so. *"This time, I will praise the Lord."* She gets some kind of triumph over her idolatry and seems to feel particularly blessed and loved by God. Of course she couldn't know (but maybe sensed intuitively)

that God had just blessed her remarkably. Judah (as the Genesis writer knows) is the one through whom the coming king will come (cf. Gen.49:8-10). Look, then. Not beautiful, loved Rachel, but unattractive rejected Leah becomes the mother of our Lord. Why? Because even God's foreshadowing of his salvation must be true to its nature. It is the way of the cross, of repentance, humility, unselfishness, sacrifice. God saves not the great and proud but those who know they are not great at all. It is the people that the world rejects who soonest grasp the gospel of grace. God becomes the true bridegroom to Leah and lets her give birth to the true bridegroom of the world (cf. John 3:29-30; Eph.5:21ff.)

And yet, God does not reject Rachel. He opens her womb, and she gives birth to Joseph, who is really the 'star' of the rest of the book of Genesis. Through him will come the first concrete fulfillment of God's promise that through Abraham's seed the nations of the earth will be blessed. The theme of God bringing life out of barrenness is one of the key themes of Genesis. At every generation (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel) in the life of the chosen family there has been a natural human inability (barrenness) which God breaks through with his power. Over and over this shows us that God's salvation is not the fruit of our human ability 'topped off' with God's help. It is by grace and his power from first to last. It is a miracle.

So we have the birth of the royal line through the rejected wife, and the birth of greatest son (of that generation) through the barren wife. So Genesis continues the 'pattern of inversion' that we have seen all along. The deceiver becomes deceived. But the empty-handed fugitive will leave Haran as a man of means and wealth. In this generation it is the son not loved (Jacob) and the wife not loved (Leah) who bear the Messianic seed into the world. The gospel turns things upside down. The weak are really the strong. The repentant are the righteous. The people who think they are righteous are rejected. The cross is a victory.

It is amazing that God works with such unpromising material! Everyone in this narrative is desperately needy and wrestling and struggling. There are no heroes at all. No one is close to being admirable, though some are pathetic, at times. What kind of book is this Bible? Where are the good examples for us to emulate? Where are the inspirational stories? Where are the heroic quests? Instead we are given, in detail, the squabbles of a very, very dysfunctional family. But out of all this comes chastened, humble, strong, gracious character. And out of this the Messiah comes! This should not surprise us. God brings his salvation through ordinary people who he hones and shapes through the troubles of life and their own sins. And even when they 'give themselves' to him they do so fitfully and imperfectly and lapse regularly. Yet he saves the whole world through them. So why shouldn't he do great things through you?

## 7. What can we learn from this passage about family life?

Bigamy and polygamy is not explicitly condemned in Genesis and this has bothered many people. But as we have said previously, the overall story of Genesis does more to undermine the institution than any simple prohibition could. Genesis 2:24 strongly indicates that marriage as God instituted it was between one man and one woman. The rest of the history of the book bears this out with a vengeance! We already saw the problems of Abraham's bigamy, but the storminess of Jacob's marriages to four women is laid out in the most detail. It is quite compelling evidence that polygamy doesn't work.

If we want to extrapolate a little further, we can safely learn a few other things from the narratives, all by way of negation.

First, 'put your spouse first'. Nothing is more evident than that the wives of the patriarchs were dying to have the primary place in their husband's hearts. The same of course is true in reverse — a husband needs to have primary place in his wife's heart. We must not be 'married' to someone or something else. (This goes for your career or other interests, not just other persons.) A spouse needs to feel that he or she has the spouse's primary loyalty only next to God.

Second, 'love your children equitably'. The obvious favoritism of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Rebekah for one child over another wreaks havoc on everyone for years. In fact, it is likely that it was 'passed on'. Isaac saw Abraham do it, then he did it, and then Jacob (though hurt by it) continues to do it. The reasons for favoritism are many, but they are at best just a selfish lack of discipline on the parent's part and at worse a form of idolatry by which the parent makes up for a need in the life that God should be filling.

Third, 'don't make idols' of romance (as with Jacob — *"this will make it all better"*) or spouse (as with Leah — *"if only my husband will love me"*) or children (as with Rachel — *"give me children or I die!"*) It is strange that the Bible, thought to be the source of 'family values' should give so many examples of people who made an idol out of family!

In summary, we see that in order to lead a family to wholeness takes wisdom, faith, and a 'right ordering of our loves' through a healthy relationship to God.

What if we have already made a lot of seemingly irrevocable mistakes with our family? Keep in mind that the founders of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob, were fathered by a liar with deep need to be honored and loved and mothered by women using everyone around them to fill their inner emptiness. In to that family these people were born, and they grew up with many problems. Yet through them God created his people and saved the world. It is by grace you are saved, through faith. That is our hope.



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Jacob wrestled with God

### Study 23 | Genesis 30:25 – 32:32

#### INTRODUCTION

This is one of the most powerful and dramatic pieces of narrative in the Bible. It is also one of the most mysterious. But it clearly stands as the centerpiece of Jacob's life. In this incident, all the themes of his life converge. Though God's promise had actually come to him as an unborn child, his first direct 'experience' of God was at Bethel where he enters into a covenant with God. Though all have noticed how imperfect his attitude was (28:20-22), it is at Bethel where we see that he has a conscious, personal relationship with God. After receiving that new awareness of God in his life, Jacob begins to learn about his sin and the deceitfulness of his heart (Chapters 29-31). Now, however, he is returning to his homeland and is about to meet Esau. This is a moment that he has dreaded for years. And at this climactic moment, when surely Jacob is reviewing his whole life and what it all means, God meets him in a very unusual way. It is quite different than the first encounter.

It is fair to say that after this encounter, rather than after Jacob's first encounter, he is a 'changed man.' It is not good to impose our post-Cross and post — Pentecost experience back on Jacob and try to determine where he was really 'born again.' But we can learn for ourselves that it usually takes more than one "encounter" experience for us to understand the true dimension of our sin and of his gracious provision. And looking back over our usually multiple experiences, it is not easy to tell exactly which one was the conversion experience. God know, but we often can't be sure.

#### EARLY PASSAGE SUMMARY

**30:25-32:2** After Rachel finally has a child, Jacob decides to go home (30:25-27). It may be that this was the final evidence (to Jacob) that God was going to honor all his promises to him. He asks Laban's permission to leave. Laban's refusal is cast in very courteous and pious-sounding terms (as we might expect!) He insists that God is blessing him because of Jacob and then offers him a higher salary (30:28)! This was a veiled way to say, "I'll let you go if the price is right!" Laban asks him to name a higher salary figure (30:31).

Jacob makes the following offer. He wants as his salary the dark sheep or the bi-colored sheep and goats (v.32). The great majority of the sheep and goats are white, but a small percentage is either black or black-and-white ('streaked,' 'spotted,' or 'speckled'). Jacob names them as his — and thus his wages. This makes sense on several fronts. First, it is a very clear way to be sure 'whose were whose' and was a check against theft or cheating (v.33). Second, it is very just and equitable. It would seem that this percentage of bi-colored and dark animals would be a generally fixed percentage. Thus, if the flocks increased under Jacob, both Jacob and Laban would profit. If they decreased, both would suffer loss. Laban agrees to the deal (30:35-36). This way, these animals could not mate with others and increase their genetic characteristics in the flock at all.

However, despite Laban's machinations, the number of the bi-colored animals that were born during the next mating season was unusually great. Why? The text tells us that Jacob carefully put bi-colored branched in front of the stronger animals. He (and perhaps the author of Genesis) thought that this actually produced the bi-colored sheep. This certainly is what happened, and Jacob probably thought that his intelligence had finally triumphed over Laban's scheming. But most modern readers can see even more clearly than Jacob that God intervened and prospered him at Laban's expense so he could return home with real substance. Although Laban's sons felt cheated and were furious (31:1), Laban had been "outwitted" with a freely negotiated deal that that followed its own letter strictly. There was nothing that Laban or anyone else could do about it. Jacob had not 'cheated.' God had worked in the situation to fulfill his promise to Jacob that he would eventually return to his land and take up his inheritance (28:13-15).

But now Laban and his sons were resentful toward Jacob (31:1,2). Jacob realized that he had to go immediately or risk some kind of counter-move (even a violent one) by his in-laws. He convinces his wives to leave their father (31:4-16) and then takes off when Laban is away from home, giving himself a three-day head start (31:19-22). When Laban discovers their flight, he set out in hot pursuit of Jacob almost certainly with the intention to have a literal fight with him to bring him back. But God intervenes again and warns Laban in a dream (31:24). Laban meets Jacob and they make a very testy and wary covenant not to harm each other (31:48-53). As Jacob comes near his homeland, he has a vision of angels to encourage him and remind him of God's protection (32:1,2).

In Rachel's behavior, we are again reminded about how impartial and incomplete (but progressive!) the work of salvation is in the lives of even these central Biblical figures. Rachel steals Laban's household idols (Gen 31:19) as she flees to the Lord's promised land! Why did she steal the *teraphim*, when they were of no particular value — they were not made of silver or gold? Rachel reveals here how incomplete is her understanding of the power and grace of Jacob's God. She wants to have 'all her bases covered.' The gods are a superstitious 'insurance' policy (cf. Wenham, vol2, p.274). Maybe the Lord will help her the next time she is in trouble — but if not, maybe the old gods will 'do the trick.' But this supposed spiritual 'safety' valve almost becomes a disaster for Jacob's whole household (31:31-35). The Lord God cannot be 'added' to a life as one more hedge against failure. He is not one more resource to use to help us achieve our agenda. He is a whole new 'life agenda.' Rachel has not learned this. The family that bears the salvation of the Lord into the world is itself deeply flawed and in need of grace.

- 1. 32:1-2. Jacob now turns away from his fear of Laban to his fear of what lies ahead. What does the name 'Mahanaim' mean? What does that show about Jacob's state of mind? What does that show about God? (cf. Psalm 32:2; 2 Kings 6:15-17; 1 Corinthians 10:13)**

The word "*Mahannaim*" means "two camps." Jacob was of course very anxious and frightened by the prospect of meeting Esau. He felt rather small and vulnerable. The name seems to indicate that he had seen angels that appeared to be in a troop or as an army of soldiers, because they appeared to be a 'camp.' Thus, the name is the sign of an encouraged heart. Jacob realized that he was not alone. He was only in charge of one camp, but there was a second 'camp', which he did not command but which was marching with him.

God does not promise that is children will be exempt from suffering, temptations and tests. But there are numerous places where God promises to give us what it will take to meet the tests. (1Corinthians 10:13 is one of many examples.) We need a sense of his presence, or an increase of courage and self-control, or wisdom to make a good choice, and so on. We may not know what we need for the situation, but God promises to give it to us. These two little verses (32:1,2) demonstrate that.

- 2. 32:3-22. What evidence do you see here of changed character in Jacob? What do we learn about prayer from Jacob's prayer?**

Jacob hopes that time had healed the wound and bitterness of his brother Esau, but the initial scouting report is alarming. "*We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you and four hundred men are with him,*" (32:6). This is stunning news. It can mean only one of two things: Esau is coming to welcome Jacob royally or he is coming to attack him. Since there seemed to be absolutely no likelihood of the former possibility, Jacob was horrified. This was the greatest crisis of his life. His response reveals, however, very marked change in Jacob's character over the years under God's hand.

The most immediately obvious change is *the fact and the grace-awareness of prayer* of 32:9-12. The fact that Jacob prays in a crisis is in itself a major change. In the past, He dealt with crises through his own ingenuity. But the content of the prayer is also significant. It is theological, humble, specific. First it is *theological*. He takes time to remember that this God is the "*God of my father Abraham... my father Isaac.*" (v. 9) He puts his personal need into the greater context of God's saving purposes and actions in the world. He does not come pointing to his fear or hurt, but to God's own Word and character (v. 9 – "*[you] said to me 'Go back to your country and your relatives,'*" and v. 12 – "*but you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper'*"). Second, it was humble. "*I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown me.*" (v. 10). There is a major change from the negotiated, conditional vow he made to

God at the end of chapter 28! There he says that he will serve God if God will show himself reliable (28:20-22). But now he admits that God has been supporting and serving his needs though *he* has not proved reliable. This is the first overt expression of grace-awareness in Jacob. He has moved from deep self-pity toward God ("I am not getting anywhere near what I deserve") to conditional obedience toward God ("I hope to get pretty much what I deserve") to grace-based gratitude toward God ("I am getting far, far better than I deserve.") Third, the prayer was specific. Jacob does not hide his real intention under flowery phrases. He comes to the point. *"Deliver me... from the hand of my brother."* (v. 11)

But the second change is the *balance between (resourceful) resistance and (obedient) acceptance of his dangerous situation*. We have already noted his awareness of "two camps," of his confidence in the presence of God's unseen forces, exercising his power in the setting. In the past, he had no such awareness or confidence at all. For example, in chapter 27, he knew of God's word that he was the heir of Abraham's promise (25:23) but he took it upon himself to fulfill God's promise for him by deceit and exploitation of his father Isaac. He believed that he had to 'take the whole matter into his own hands' if justice was to be done. He lied, cheated and exploited. What was he doing? He was putting himself, almost literally, on God's throne. He was breaking God's law left and right in order to bring about an outcome he believed had to happen. Like God, he was determining what ends justify what means.

Now we see a very different man. On the one hand, he is not passive! When he hears Esau is coming, he immediately devises a plan and puts it into action. He divides his company so that it cannot be attacked all at once (32:28). He sent ahead of him three waves of choice gifts for Esau in order to mollify him (32:13ff). Jacob is still very resourceful and filled with shrewd plans. But on the other hand, he does not resort to lying or deception or to any effort to ambush Esau. Most interesting of all — Jacob does not do the most risk-free act of all. He does not run or flee! Why? As he says in his prayer, he is obeying the Lord who called him to return to Canaan. When we obey God's word, even though disobedience would be safer — we are putting ourselves in God's hands and trusting him. When we disobey him in order to be 'safe' — we are actually running into spiritual danger. Sin against God ultimately leads to spiritual, personal, relational breakdown. In the past, that was what Jacob would have done. He does not do that now. He is a changed man.

### 3. 32:22-24. Why do you think Jacob wanted to be alone? How is the mysterious wrestler an unlooked for answer to Jacob's prayer?

These verses that introduce the famous incident are not unimportant. The very strong implication is that Jacob sent everyone away so that he could be alone to both think and especially to pray.



In Jacob's mind, the next day would be the climax of his life — the day of revelation. All the 'lines of his life' were converging. All his life he had wrestled with Esau for the blessing. In 25:22 we saw that Rebecca, pregnant with Esau and Jacob, had sought a prophet to understand the nature of the violent wrestling and struggling going on in her womb. Then in 25:27ff we see Jacob beginning to struggle with Esau for the favor and love of his father, and for the honor and leadership of his family. But Jacob had overreached and awakened murderous anger in his physically more powerful brother, and he had gone into exile for it. This is how Jacob would have seen his whole life — as one long wrestling match with Esau. Esau was the one who had kept him from his blessing, his happiness, his destiny, his father. And now Esau was coming with a small army. Tomorrow would be the last battle. Was this to be the final defeat? Or would he be able to win his brother over? What would happen? No matter what happened, the next day would be the day that set the course of the rest of his life, even if it ended his life.

It is not surprising then, that Jacob wanted to spend this last night alone before the most crucial day of his life. It was highly unlikely that Esau would attack by night, so Jacob didn't need to be protected by his company. Almost the only reason that he would have sent everyone else across the Jabbok ahead of him was so that he could spend the last hours alone with God before he faced Esau. We already saw in verse 9 that he has developed the instinct to turn to God in prayer in a crisis. That is surely what he was doing in the deep darkness, all alone.

This makes the strange attack even stranger. The sentence of verse 24 says *"And Jacob was left alone"* but finishes with *"and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day."* The artistry of the narrator is remarkable. First, notice how the writer shows the mysterious nature of this figure. He was attacked, even though he was alone. The text is deliberately paradoxical. Was he alone or was he attacked? The answer is that he was alone — and yet he was still attacked. Obviously, this 'man' is not an ordinary man. Also notice how sudden and out of the blue this attack is. There is no introduction. The attack comes in the middle of a sentence that showed no hint of it as it began. That is how sudden and absolutely astonishing this attack must have been to Jacob.

But what is most strange is that this is *"God"* (v.30). Jacob is praying to God for strength and protection — and God attacks him. Literally! God assaults Jacob in a life and death struggle that leaves him permanently crippled. Is this any way to help a man who is scared, weak and at the end of his rope? Is this the way to answer the prayers of the man you promised to bless and love? The answer of course is that God does sometimes respond to prayers for protection with difficulties and even wounds. He sometimes allows us to go through great troubles for mysterious reasons that the Bible insists are wise and loving. But there is no more vivid depiction of this principle than this incident. Jacob is praying: "Oh, Lord! Give me peace and strength! Protect me! And God in response literally smacks him to the ground."

This is the teaching — that God may sometimes answer prayers for peace and protection with difficulties and wounds. But we should not wield this principle in a light way. We should not say breezily to someone in pain, “I see you are suffering but I am just sure God is doing this to you for a loving purpose.” The Bible does definitely say that if we trust him, then even the bad things that happen to us will be used by him as part of his plan for good and glory. (Romans 8:28). But we must also remember other aspects of God’s attitude toward evil and suffering in the world. We need to see Jesus weeping and angry at the death of his friend Lazarus and at the grief of his family (cf. John 11:1-53). Suffering and death is not God’s original design for the world and the cross shows his willingness to enter pain and suffering in order to some day end it all without having to judge and end us along with it! So we must not imagine God coldly inflicting pain on us in a clinical way. Yet this passage starkly shows us how God may answer our heartfelt prayers in very counter-intuitive and shocking ways. Our God is not a “tame” God.

**4. 32:24-30. How is the identity of the mysterious wrestler slowly revealed? What are the pieces of evidence?**

The narrator deliberately keeps the identity of the “*man*” of v. 24 as obscure to the reader as it was to Jacob. And in the end, though the conclusion is drawn, the evidence is as spotty and enigmatic to us as it was to Jacob.

First, there is the powerful “*touch*” (v. 28). Commentators note that the Hebrew word means “touch” quite literally — it is nothing but the merest contact or tap. Yet immediately, Jacob’s hip is permanently damaged. “*A touch that dislocates indicates an opponent with super human power.*” (Wenham, vol 2, p. 96).

Second, there is the requirement to leave “*for it is daybreak*” (v. 26). Some have thought that the man was afraid of daylight — and therefore this was supposed to be some kind of a “night spirit” who would disintegrate under the sun. But the cumulative evidence best accounts for the man’s reticence about daybreak not as a concern for *his* safety as much as a concern for *Jacob’s* safety. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God insisted that no one could look upon God’s face and live (Exodus 33:20). That was the real reason for his desire to leave is borne out by the names given to the place — *Peniel* “the face of God.” Jacob’s claim that he “*saw God’s face and lived*” (v.30) probably indicates that in the first grayness of incipient dawn he was able to make out the lines of the face of the divine wrestler just before he left or vanished.

Third, there is the wrestler’s remarkable knowledge of Jacob’s whole life. Though he asks Jacob to speak his name, this is not due to lack of knowledge, because when he says: “*you have struggled with God and with man and have overcome*” (v.28) he shows he knows his whole life history and can sum it all up in a sentence. (cf. How Jesus does this with Nathaniel in John 1:43-51).

Fourth, and most decisively, he changes Jacob's name and declared that he has wrestled with "God" and come out victorious (28b). No one has the right to name or rename someone except a person in great authority — a parent or a king. Or a Creator. And who has the right to pronounce a man's whole life a triumph? Who has the right to say that he is victorious with God? But the most overt piece of evidence of all is that the wrestler simply says that Jacob has been wrestling with God himself. No wonder Jacob finally concludes, "I saw God face to face" (v. 30).

**5. Who won the match? Make a case from the passage for the thesis that the wrestler won. Make a case from the passage that Jacob won.**

This question brings the paradoxes and oppositional aspects of this strange wrestling match into greater focus.

Thesis: "The wrestler won."

First, the mysterious wrestler shows his enormous power in his 'touch' that permanently cripples Jacob (v. 25, 31-32). This shows that he was only holding back his strength. Second, the wrestler names Jacob — that is a sign of authority and power, not humiliation or defeat. But thirdly, the wrestler is God and God has promised to bless and make Jacob great and be with him (28:13ff; 31:2). So isn't this what God wanted? Didn't he want Jacob to hold on to him in faith and seek the blessing from him? Fourth, there is no place that says that God "lost." Though God declares that Jacob has "overcome" or "prevailed" — i.e. victorious — there is not a place that says directly that God was defeated. God got all that he (obviously) wanted to happen. So God won.

Thesis: "Jacob won".

First, there is the remarkable evidence that "*the man saw that he could not overpower hi [Jacob]*" (v.25). Even if we balance this statement with the evidence of the "power-touch," this seems to indicate a genuine limitation on the wrestler's power with Jacob. It suggests that God voluntarily limited himself, brought himself down and wrestled with Jacob as an equal. Second, the divine wrestler directly says that Jacob won (v.28). Why? Jacob finally got the blessing (v. 28) that he had longed for from the beginning (cf. 27:19). Jacob was victorious because once he began to realize the divinity of this mysterious wrestler, he does not flee but rather holds on despite his pain and weakness (v. 26) and seeks the blessing from God. In this he triumphs. So Jacob won.

**6. Someone has said that this is both a defeat and a victory for both parties. How does each party win through losing? Where do we see the ultimate example of triumph through defeat?**

But how is it possible that both wrestlers won? It is possible because both “won through losing.” First it was Jacob who “won through losing.” Derek Kidner shows that Hosea 12:4 and its comment on this is illuminating.

It was defeat and victory in one. Hosea illuminates it: ‘He strove with the angel and prevailed’ — this is the language of strength; ‘he wept and sought his favor’ — the language of weakness. After the maiming, his combativeness is turned into dogged dependence, and Jacob emerged broken [but] named and blessed.

Jacob would have initially been fighting in order to get the man off him, out of his reach and clutches. Verse 25 says that the man was trying to “*overpower*” him, and so Jacob’s wrestling would have been aiming to put him off. But when the maiming happens, and Jacob is now broken, aware of his vulnerability and weakness, he changes his strategy. He begins to hang on! The one he was struggling to get away from he is now wrestling to stay near. “*I will not let you go until you bless me.*” (v. 26) What has happened? Jacob has spent all of his life thinking that Esau was the one he was struggling with, the one who was keeping him from leading a blessed, successful, happy life. But now, in the most vivid way possible, we come to see that it is *God* he has been wrestling with all his life — not Esau, Laban, or Isaac. And it is from God that he should have been seeking his “blessing”, not any other source.

This conflict brought to a head the battling and groping of a lifetime, and Jacob’s desperate embrace vividly expressed his ambivalent attitude toward God, of love and enmity, defiance and dependence. It was against [God]... that he had been pitting his strength, as he now discovered; yet the initiative had been God’s as it was this night, to chasten his pride and challenge his tenacity.

– Kidner p.169

It was the weakness and pain that he experienced that led Jacob to the realization of a lifetime — that he had been fighting God, and that he needed God’s presence and blessing in his life over anyone else’s. By clinging bravely and doggedly to God in this weakness, he triumphed. He was saying, “I see now that what I need above all is you. Not you as a means to the end of something else. You. I won’t let go until I have your blessing and presence permanently in my life.” But it was only through terrible weakness that Jacob won.

Second, however, it is obvious that God also voluntarily made himself weak. God, though Lord of the universe, limited himself so he was able to fight on Jacob’s level. He experienced weakness. He put himself in a position where he had to ask to be let go! But think — it is only by limiting his power that he won Jacob’s mind and heart and transformed his character. So God triumphed through becoming weak. But, of course, this points to another time when God became weak yet triumphed.

What kind of God is this who will be pressed to a draw by this man? certainly no ordinary God! ... There is something new underway here about the weakness of God... This theology of weakness in power and power in weakness turns this text towards the New Testament and the gospel of the cross. This same dialectic stands behind Jesus' encounter with his disciples (Mark 10:35-45). They want thrones, an equivalent to 'asking the name.' Jesus counters by asking them about cups, baptisms and crosses. Like Jacob, they are invited to be persons of faith who prevail, but to do so with a limp... Jacob's struggle... may hint at an anticipation of the Crucified One. (Breuggemann, p. 267, 269, 271)

Why can Jacob come so close to God and still have his life spared (v.30)? It is because Jesus came in weakness and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. In this his weakness became our strength, his defeat our victory. Jesus was thus the ultimate Jacob, who came and was overpowered by the justice of God. He took the devastating blow of justice we deserved, so that we like Jacob could only receive the bearable wounds of love and grace to wake us up!

### **7. What does Jacob receive from God? How are they analogous to what all Christians receive from their saving encounter with God?**

First, he receives a new name. "*Israel*" (v.28). This shows that when we meet God we do not just receive an added boost to our lives. Instead there is a complete new start, a whole new identity is forged. But it is interesting that this name incorporates what Jacob already is and yet still expresses a transformation. "Jacob" meant "wrestler" — the one who grapples, claws, grasps. "Israel" literally means "God fights" and refers to Jacob's triumph in his wrestling with God. When Jacob realized who he was struggling with, he did not stop the wrestling. He is a wrestler after all! But he turned his prowess toward holding on to God rather than resisting God. As Derek Kidner said, Jacob's "combateness" was turned into a "dogged dependence." In short, the new birth does not wipe out our old temperament and personality. We are new and yet continuous with what we were. As Paul says, the Christian is "me, but not me" (cf. Galatians 2:20). The new birth takes our fundamental capacities and directs them to new ends.

God would have all of Jacob's will to win, to attain and obtain, yet purged of self-sufficiency and redirected to the proper object of man's love, God Himself."

— Kidner, p. 169

Second, he receives the blessing. When he says, "*You have overcome.*" In verse 28, God is saying — "You have won!" even though he has been maimed and crippled and is simply holding on for dear life. Yet he has won! Jacob is declared a winner. This is a good image of justification by faith. Though we have all sorts of flaws and failures, and though we still have all our lives ahead of us, God declares us victors if we put our faith in Christ. "*Now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" (Romans 8:1)

Third, he receives a limp. The permanent crippling would be a reminder to Jacob of his foolishness in fighting with God. It was a permanent humbling. How remarkable that along with the great affirmation of Jacob's victory comes an abiding reminder of his failure! This is a great picture of what it means to be a justified Christian. Luther said that we are *simul justus et peccator*. If we are saved by works, then we are bold (but not humble) when succeeding in our moral performance or humble (but not confident) when we are failing in our moral performance. But if we are saved by sheer grace, we are both bold and humble together. We joyfully limp. The sun rises on us but we walk haltingly. We know that we are accepted, but we are accepted only by sheer grace.

**8. Cf. V.29 with Exodus 3:13ff and Judges 13:18. Why do you think God doesn't tell Jacob his name? What can we learn from this?**

When Moses asks God for his name, he is told that is "I am that I am." When the parents of Sampson ask for God's name, they are told that it is "wonderful beyond imagining." (**Note:** some translations translate the word "beyond understanding" and thus see the response as a 'brush off' similar to the response to Jacob. But actually the name is given.) Unlike the request to see God's face (Exodus 33:20) God does not automatically deny the request to know his name. God's name is of course, multi-dimensional, as God himself. But it is a bit surprising that God will not answer Jacob at all.

Some believe that Jacob's question is an effort to put himself on the same level with God in his new relationship. God asked Jacob his name in a re-naming ceremony (v.27-28). Now Jacob wants to know God's name in an effort to simply 'stay even.' This would explain why the name is withheld, but the theory doesn't ring true to me. Others believe Jacob simply wants to put the matter of the wrestler's identity totally beyond doubt. That makes the most sense as his motivation. But then why was the name withheld?

Maybe the main thing to learn is (again) that this God is not a 'tame' God who is under our control. He has his curriculum laid out for every one of us. He knows what we need when we need it. We may see Moses or Sampson's parents getting something from God and we assume we can get it too. But every person is unique and God's training curriculum for every person is tailored to our particular needs.











# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation

### Study 1 | Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

#### INTRODUCTION

It is far too easy to read the first chapters of Genesis with the questions of our time: “were the days of creation 24 hours long?” “how long ago did this happen?” “is this history or myth?” “how does this square with modern views of science and evolution?” Of course, these are important questions and we can probably learn some things from Genesis 1-11 that are relevant to them. But we don’t learn very much from a text if we ask it questions that it was not written to answer. Genesis is, frankly, about deeper issues than biological origins. It is answering questions like: “what *are* human beings? what are we here *for*? what is our relationship to the nature and the world? Essentially, Genesis 1 is not about the “*How*” of creation but rather about the “*Why*”. That is, ultimately, far more important.

**Note:** Though the discussion will certainly begin to touch on them, we will give more time in next week’s session to the discussion of 1) creation and evolution, and 2) the meaning of the “*image of God*”. Keep this in mind.

1. **vv.1-3. a) Was the earth ‘without form and void’ (v.2) before God began to create (v.1) or after? Why is this a significant question? [Look at Hebrews 11:3 for help with the answer.] b) What does v.2-3 tell us about the ‘means’ by which God always creates?**
  
2. **A quick reading of Genesis 1 reveals a highly repetitive, patterned text. a) What are the main repetitions — words, phrases, ideas? b) What broader repetitive pattern do you see between the first six days? i.e. how are days 4-6 a recap of 1-3?**

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





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation, work and rest

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

#### INTRODUCTION

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

- 1. Compare 1:1-26 and 2:4-25. a) Do you notice any differences in the details and order of creation between the two chapters? b) Do you notice any differences in style and literary form between the two?**
- 2. Since a single author either wrote both accounts or else put them together, they could not have been seen as contradictory, but rather as complementary. How could you best express how the two accounts supplement each other?**

3. a) What do we learn from the fact that God worked 6 days and then rested? (2:2) (Why did the author depict the creation of God as a typical 7 day-week?)  
b) What do we learn from the fact that God planted a garden (2:8)?
4. 2:8-25. a) List all the human needs that are fully provided for in the earthly paradise. b) What do we learn from the fact that God put us to work in a garden in paradise (2:15)?
5. Read Exodus 20:8-11. a) Make a list of some common views of work which are prevalent today but which differ from the Biblical view and attitude toward work. b) Which of these wrong views do you tend to fall into? What can you do about it?



6. 1:31-2:3. The phrase 'Sabbath observance' has a negative ring to us, but that is not the case here! a) What does the text imply about what God's 'rest' is? Read Exodus 23:10-11, Deut.7-11; Lev.25:8-17. b) How can we follow his example of Sabbath rest better in our own lives?

7. Read Hebrews 3:7-4:11 and Mark 2:23-3:6. a) What deeper and fuller kind of 'rest' do they speak of? b) How is Jesus the key to relating this deeper kind of rest to our weekly pattern of rest and work?



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation and culture

### Study 3 | Genesis 1:26 - 2:25

- 1. 1:26-28. a) What does the very term 'image' imply about who we are? What sorts of things bear an 'image'? b) What light does Col.1:15 and 3:5-10 shed on the 'image of God'?**
- 2. What are some of the practical implications of the image of God? How should that effect the way we regard others and even ourselves?**
- 3. 1:28 What are the two basic directives in our 'job description' of 1:28? a) What does each mean, and b) what are the practical implications of each?**

- 4. What further information are we given in 2:8-20 about how our work is an extension of what God does in his creative work in Genesis 1? a) What does 'gardening' tell us about our work? b) What does 'naming the animals' tell us about our work?**
- 5. In light of all we have learned about work last week and this week — devise an appropriate set of guidelines for choosing a job or a line of work.**





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Creation and marriage

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

#### INTRODUCTION

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

- 1. 1:26-28. What principles can we learn from this text a) about the importance of gender for our own self-understanding, b) about the relationship of the genders to one another, and c) about the relationship of the genders to God.**
- 2. 2:18-25. a) Why would Adam be lonely if he has a right relationship with God? b) Does the fact that this part of his creation is "not good" mean that God made a mistake? c) What are the practical implications of this passage for handling loneliness?**

- 3. 2:18-25. a) Look up Exod.18:4; Deut.33:26,29; Ps.33:20; 121:1-2. What light does this shed on how woman is 'help' to the man in v.18? b) How does the mode of Eve's creation (v.21-22) shed light on what 'help' means?**
- 4. 2:18-25. a) Why does God make Adam search through the animals looking for a companion? b) What does it teach us that God gives Adam neither an animal nor another male?**



5. 2:24-25. What do we learn about marriage from this famous verse? What do we learn about the purpose and boundaries for sexuality? What does it mean that they were 'naked and unashamed'?
6. Read Eph.5:22-33 and 1 Cor.7:27-31. How do these passages put marriage into perspective for Christians who are both single and married?



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Paradise lost: I

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

#### INTRODUCTION

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

**Note on the origin of Evil:** The Genesis 3 account tells us about the entry of evil into the world, but does not tell us much directly about the origin of evil, which has occupied thinkers for ages. The narrative does rule out a couple of theories of the origin of evil. First, God does not tempt the human couple himself. He is not the author of evil. Second, the human couple do not disobey out of their own impulse and energy. They were not created sinful. There is not yet an ‘inner voice’ of temptation from the human heart. The tempting voice ‘comes from the outside’. But who is the serpent, the source of the temptation? Genesis is (maddeningly) silent on this! Kidner says: “*The malevolent brilliance [of the serpent] raises the question, which is not pursued [in the text], whether he is the tool of a more formidable rebel.*” (p. 67,71). But in 3:15, which we do not look at until next week, there is a strong implication that the serpent is simply the tool of a supernatural being, the devil (cf. Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9). Nonetheless, this does not answer the basic philosophical questions: a) how did Satan become evil? b) why did God let this happen (or why did God create us as we are), if he obviously knew it would happen? C.S. Lewis gives the classic ‘free-will’ answer for these questions:

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

- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

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

1. 2:16-17. a) What explanation does God give Adam and Eve for this prohibition? Why is this a good test? b) How would this test provide 'knowledge of good and evil' regardless of the human response? (cf. 3:5, 22)
2. 3:1-3. This is the first approach or strategy of temptation. Neither the serpent nor the woman re-capitulates God's command properly? What does this teach us of the first strategy of the serpent?

- notes*

**5. 3:7-8. a) How is v.7 so unexpected, after the threat of 2:17? b) What immediate results do we see to our sin? b) What three results of sin are immediately obvious?**

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







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Paradise lost: II

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

#### INTRODUCTION

Genesis 3 answers the fundamental question — what is wrong with the world and with us? Why is there death, disease, evil? This chapter describes the “fall”. Last week we looked at how sin entered the world and the human heart (Genesis 3:1-7). This week we look at the rest of the chapter in which is describes the results and outworking of sin into the fabric of human life.

**1. 3:7-8. How is v.7 so unexpected, after the threat of 2:17? How does the rest of the chapter shed meaning on the ‘death’ God spoke of in 2:17? How does Romans 8:19-22 shed light on this ‘death’?**

**2. 3:7-19. a) Make a list of all the results and consequences you can see of sin.  
Note: Be sure to analyze the interview of vv.9-13.**

3. Why is it so important to remember both the goodness of creation (from Genesis 1-2) and the fallenness of creation (from Genesis 3)? What kinds of problems result when you forget one or the other?
4. 3:14-15. Gen 1-2 tell us of creation, and Gen 3 tells us of the fall. What do we learn, though, even here about hope for a future redemption?
5. What did you learn today about sin that most impressed you? How can it make a practical difference in the way you live?





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

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

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3. **How does Hebrews 11:4 shed light on the difference between the sacrifices of Cain and Abel? How does Genesis 3:15 shed light on the difference?**
4. **4:6-7, 9. Cf. Gen.3:9-11. What do we learn about God as we see him asking questions?**
5. **4:7. What do we learn about sin from this chilling metaphor?**

6. 4:11-16. a) Is Cain's reaction repentance? b) Many see the 'mark of Cain' as a curse. Is that what it is? c) What do we see here of both the justice and the mercy of God? d) cf. Heb.12:24. How does the New Testament tell us that God can be both just and merciful?
7. 4:19-24. What signs do we see here of the unfolding development of sin and of the mercy of God in Cain's descendents and in human culture?
8. 4:25-26. What is the significance of the birth of Seth? See the rest of chap 5.





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Judgment and grace

### Study 8 | Genesis 6:1 – 8:22

#### INTRODUCTION

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

**Background note:** In order to be true to my own principle, I won’t bother you with information about the different views of the flood. Let me just lay out my own assumptions. I believe Noah’s flood happened, but that it was a regional flood, not a world-wide flood. On the one hand, those who insist on it being a world-wide flood seem to ignore too much the scientific evidence that there was no such thing. On the other hand, those who insist that it was a legend seem to ignore too much the trustworthiness of the Scripture. After Genesis 1, the rest of Genesis reads like historical narrative. If, it is asked, ‘what of the Biblical assertions that the flood covered every mountain over the whole earth (Gen.7:19,21), we should remember that the Bible often speaks of the ‘known world’ as the ‘whole world’ — compare Gen. 41:56,57; Acts 2:5,9-11; Col.1:23.

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

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

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

**5. How can we see the gospel promise of Genesis 3:15 continuing to be the basic theme here in Gen 6-8?**

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

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





# What were we put in the world to do? Creation renewed

## Study 9 | Genesis 8:20 – 9:19

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

**2. How can we follow Noah's example today? (cf. Heb.13:15,16)**

- 3. 9:1-7. Compare God's mandate to Noah's family to God's mandate to Adam and Eve (Gen.1:26-31 How are they alike and how are they different?**
- 4. 9:3-6. What do we learn here of: a) our relationship with animals, and b) our relationship with other human beings. What do we learn here about God's attitude toward life in general?**



**5. 9:9-12. What does this 'covenant' imply about the our relationship with the natural environment?**

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



# What were we put in the world to do?

## City of Man; City of God

### Study 10 | Genesis 9:18 - 12:3

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

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

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

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

**Note:** This list of names is essentially a list of all the nations that ancient Israel knew about anywhere in the world. *"Most of the names appear to be those of individuals [but] they meet us later in the Old Testament as peoples. The natural sense of the chapter seems to make these the founders of their respective groups; but the interest lies in the group so founded and its relation to other peoples. This is born out by the sprinkling of plural (e.g. Kittim, Dodanim, v.4)... which show that the compiler of the list did not automatically ascribe ancestors to the groups he recorded."* (Kidner, p.105)

**5. 11:1-9. a) With what purposes do the builders of the first skyscraper use their technology? b) Look carefully at v.4. What two ways are these people looking to get 'a name' — an identity?**

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

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



# What were we put in the world to do?

## The call of Abram

**Study 11**  
**Genesis 11:27 - 12:20**

### INTRODUCTION

We now begin the second major section of Genesis, the narratives of “the Patriarchs” which last the rest of the book, chapters 12 through 50. Genesis 1 begins with God calling creation into being. Now Genesis 12 begins with a call as well, but God is now calling his *new* creation into being. Genesis 1-11 showed us that God’s original designs for his creation have been unfulfilled. From the time of Fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, there is a ‘downward spiral’ of sin and evil which judgment can only retard but cannot remedy (e.g. the Flood and the confusion of Babel). It seems to the reader that God’s only option is to simply destroy the creation that will not answer his call to service and fellowship with him.

But instead, God begins with a single human being, Abram, and calls to him to go to a new land and to begin a new nation which will provide a new hope for the eventual “*blessing*” and salvation of the whole world. God’s general call of creation is now supplemented by his special call of ‘re-creation’ or salvation. He will create a people for himself who will bear into the world his saving truth and grace which will eventually bring the whole universe to God’s originally designed fulfillment. This all begins with the call of Abram in this chapter. Not only is everything else in Abram’s life an unfolding of the meaning of this call, but so is the rest of the entire Bible. Paul, in the book of Galatians, is absorbed with showing how Christ is the fulfillment of the promise to Abram. (And after spending Fall and Winter on Abram and Genesis, we will turn to the book of Galatians to see St. Paul’s reading of how the call and promise is realized in our daily lives through faith in the gospel.)

**Note:** It may be a bit confusing occasionally that we go back and forth between calling this man “*Abram*” and “*Abraham*”. “*Abram*” means ‘exalted father’. Mid-way through the *Abraham* story God gives him the name Abraham, which means ‘father of a multitude’. Don’t be confused — it’s the same guy!

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

THINK  
APPLICATION

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

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



4. 12:1-7. Continue to analyze the call to Abraham. a) What does God promise to him? b) v.7. What is the one promise that is necessary to make all the other promises come true? b) In what ways do we also participate in these blessings? (cf. Numbers 6:22-26.)
5. 12:10-20. What does this incident add to our understanding of Abraham's call and ours?
6. The call of Abraham is radical. A person might say: "I can't answer such a call because: a) I'm not sure I trust God, and/or b) I'm not sure I trust myself." What would you say to such a statement?



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Abram and Lot

### Study 12 Genesis 13:1 – 14:24

# THINK APPLICATION

#### INTRODUCTION

Lot was the nephew of Abram, the son of his deceased brother Haran. Lot was also evidently the only member of Abram's extended family that went out to Canaan with him (12:4-5). Within the bigger history of Abram is woven the narrative of Lot, a much sadder story, which begins here in chapters 13-14 and ends in chapters 18-19.

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

**Review:** We saw last time that Abram had failed to exercise faith in the Lord when a famine came upon the land (12:10) and he left for Egypt. There he allowed his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's harem out of a cowardly desire to save his own skin. Yet despite Abram's faithlessness, God did not abandon him. God intervened by enlightening Pharaoh to the true situation and yet preventing him from killing Abram (12:17-18). Instead, Abram was sent back *"with his wife and everything he had"* (12:20). What could have been an enormous disaster was averted.

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

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

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

- notes



# What were we put in the world to do?

## The oath of God

### Study 13

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

# THINK APPLICATION

### INTRODUCTION

Even though there is no exciting event in this chapter and it is therefore much less famous than others in the Abraham narrative, this account is *“theologically... probably the most important chapter of this entire collection.”* (W.Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p.140.) The first part of this passage is a crucial part of Paul’s great treatise on faith in Romans 4. The second part of this passage is a crucial part of Paul’s great treatise on grace in Galatians 3.

1. 15:1. **“After this” (v.1) shows that God’s word to Abram is connected to what just has happened. Why do you think Abram needs to be told ‘do not be afraid’? Have you had a similar experience?**
2. 15:1. **How does God’s promise to Abram relate well to Abram’s situation and circumstances? Why is God’s promise both wonderful and challenging?**

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



5. a) How is Abram's faith both like and unlike ours? b) Why do we need the work of Christ to help us 'make sense' of God's radical act of credited righteousness?
6. 15:7-21. Abram again expresses doubts and fears in v.8, and God deals with them in a final way. a) Why is he asked to bring and cut up animals? Read Jeremiah 34:18. b) What does it mean that (1) God goes through the pieces and (2) only God goes through the pieces?
7. How does this help our doubts about God? How does this help our doubts about ourselves?



# What were we put in the world to do? The God who sees

## Study 14 Genesis 16:1-14

### INTRODUCTION

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

An additional background note. Sarai's proposal of Hagar was not original to her. Near Eastern documents from the period show us that the arrangement was culturally and legally acceptable.

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

– R.Alter, Genesis, p.67

In other words, Hagar's son born through Abraham would belong to Sarai because Hagar was Sarah's property. However, it was still a brutal, cruel, and unwise custom. In his quote above, Robert Alter points out that the narrator is criticizing, not supporting, what Sarai and Abram did with Hagar.

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

THINK  
APPLICATION

2. **What are some typical ways that we can be tempted to 'take matters into our own hands' because of God's seeming inaction? What is the result?**
3. **16:1-4a. a) What is wrong with Sarai's reasoning and motive? b) What is wrong with Abram's response? cf. Galatians 4:22-23, 28-29 for Paul's answer to this question. (Notice how he describes Abram's two sons.)**

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

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

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

- 7. 16:7-12. a) What is the good news and 'bad news' of the angel's message to Hagar? b) Why is it the best thing for Hagar to return? c) How do you respond when God asks you to do something difficult and even unfair?**
- 8. 16:13-16. What do we learn about God from a) the fact that God heard an Egyptian slave, b) the fact that he heard a slave that did not (apparently) pray to him? (See v.11.)**







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Our covenant God

### Study 15 Genesis 17:1-27

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a reference to Abram's age (99 years) and hinges on somewhat on Sarah's age (90 years). This brings up the subject of the long life-span of the 'patriarchs' in the book of Genesis. The ages given often seem to make no sense. For example, when Sarai is called a woman of remarkable physical beauty (12:11) she is at least 66 years old (cf. 12:4 with this chapter, in which Sarai is said to be nine years younger than Abraham.) Many have thought that the patriarchs counted shorter years, but that is hard to justify historically. Derek Kidner probably has the most reasonable view:

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

– D.Kidner, Genesis, p.117

- 1. 17:1-16. How is this covenant making event the same as that in chapter 15:9-19? How is it different?**
- 2. How does this covenant-making relate to the covenant of chapter 15? Why is it significant that God's oath came first before Abram's oath? (See Romans 4:9-11)**

THINK  
APPLICATION

**3. 17:3-6, 15-16. What do the new names mean? Why did God give Abraham and Sarah new names as they ratified the covenant?**

**4. What does that mean for us, practically?**

**5. Now let's look at the outline of the covenant. a) vv.4-8, 15-16. "As for me". What does God promise to give? b) vv.1-2, 9-14. "As for you". What is Abram required to do?**

**6. Why do you think God chose circumcision to ratify the covenant with Abram? Read Colossians 2:11-12. How does this rite shed light on what Jesus did for us on the cross?**

**7. What does this rite of circumcision tell us about how our children are to be involved in our faith and relationship to God?**



# What were we put in the world to do?

## The friend of God

### Study 16 Genesis 18:1-33

#### INTRODUCTION

At this point in our study we should pause and ask the question: “What is the point of the writer of Genesis? What is the main theme, the main message?” It is important to ask that question as you go through a book so that you don’t simply study every episode and story as if it was a stand-alone little tale, put there to teach us some ‘moral’. What is the book of Genesis really about? Here is a candidate for the Genesis theme: the main theme of Genesis is how God fulfills his promises to Abraham unconditionally and through those promises restores the world lost in Eden. In the beginning God created a world filled with creatures who would become themselves (what they were designed to be) in worship and service of the Lord (Gen 1-2). But the creation has turned from God and begun disintegrating (Gen 3-5). God’s judgement retards the spread of disintegration but cannot stop it; creation will not answer God’s call to service (Gen 6-11). God determines then to begin a new creation, making Abraham capable of answering his call (Gen 13-15) and creating a new people out of his seed who will obey and serve him. Within this new creation, this covenant community, fellowship with God and with one another will be restored (Gen 16-17). All of this however, is based on the gracious, miraculous birth of the son of promise. Through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3).

Of course, from our vantage point we can see that this is not just the theme of Genesis, but of the whole Bible and therefore of all of human history. God is recreating the world that was lost by creating a new people of God (by calling them out by his grace) and through the ultimate son of promise, born of Mary, who truly is going to bless all the nations.

**Note1:** One helpful piece of background information to remember is that hospitality to travellers was considered an essential virtue in the ancient Near East. Abraham’s welcome of the three travelers was elaborate, but not totally out of the ordinary. It is not necessary to posit that he knew who these strangers were in order to account for it.

**Note2:** “Christians commentators have been tempted to discern three Persons of the Trinity here; but the passage differentiates clearly between the Lord and his two companions” (see verse 22, and 19:1) D. Kidner, Genesis, p.131.

1. 18:1-8. a) Contrast this communication from God with previous ones. b) Why the difference? How does this story of God’s meal with Abraham relate to the main theme of Genesis — God’s promises to Abraham?

2. 18:1-33. If this is in some ways meant to be a picture of fellowship with God, what can we learn practically from it? cf. James 2:23; Rev.3:20; Heb.13:1-2; Matt 25:35; John 15:13-15.
3. 18:9-15. Who has the main dialogue with God at Abraham's tent? Why does God have this conversation — what is his purpose? How does God help Sarah's progress in faith?
4. 18:18-19. What do we learn from God's summary of Abraham's call in v.18-19? What is the relationship between God's favor and Abraham's obedience as seen in v.19?

**5. 18:17-33. What do we learn from this passage about intercessory prayer?**

**6. 18:17-33. What is the basic argument Abraham uses in his intercession to seek to spare the city? What is God's response to it? (Does he agree with it or disagree with it, do you think?)**

**7. How does Jesus fulfill Abraham's prayer? How does Jesus help us to become priestly pray-ers like Abraham?**





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Judgment on Sodom

### Study 17 | Genesis 19:1-38

#### INTRODUCTION

The first bit of background information we need is to remind ourselves of the moral significance of hospitality in ancient times. The way a family, village or city treated travellers was considered a crucial index of its character.

Another piece of background information has to do with the destruction of the cities of the plain. The famous text tells us that the cities perished in *“fire and brimstone”* or *“burning sulphur”* (Gen 19:24). But geological studies show us that God probably used existing conditions and materials (just like he does for judgment through storms and rain). As we saw in Gen 14:3,10, the region of the cities was filled with underground pits and beds of petroleum and bitumen, salt and sulphur. *“Exudations of bitumen, petroleum and probably natural gas... catching fire from lightning or human action would adequately account for recorded phenomena.”* (J. Baldwin, Genesis 12-50) The Bible tells us that this ‘natural’ phenomenon was a judgment of God, not a random accident.

- 1. Begin by re-reading Genesis 18:20-21. What does God say is the reason that he judges a city? (Who do you think is doing the ‘outcry’?)**
- 2. vv.1-3-What hints does the narrator give us immediately about the condition of Sodom? What does Lot’s seat in the gate tell us about his position and influence in the city?**

5. vv.11-29. Trace the ways that God (through the angels) seek to save Lot and how Lot and his family respond to each effort. What do we learn here about how God works in our lives?

- notes



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Isaac and Ishmael

### Study 18 | Genesis 20:1 - 22:19

#### INTRODUCTION

The story of Abraham and the offering up of Isaac is so famous that it is usually studied all by itself. That has obscured the interesting parallels (and lessons!) that come from comparing the two stories of Ishmael and Isaac. We will look at chapters 20 through 22 in order to better understand what the writer is trying to tell us about the redemptive purposes of God in the birth and wilderness experiences of the two sons of Abraham. Chapter 20 shows us the last threat to the birth of Isaac — and it comes from Abraham himself! Chapter 21 tells us of the birth of Isaac and the crisis this touches off in Abraham's family. Chapter 22 tells of the climactic test of Abraham's faith. (We will skip the incident of 21:22-32 where Abraham secures legal rights to a well near Beersheba, the first actual piece of land Abraham receives in Canaan. This is a small but significant way that God continues to fulfill his promises to Abraham.)

#### **READ Genesis 20:1-18**

- 1. 20:1-18. How does this incident continue to confirm and throw light on the main theme of Genesis? What do we learn practically?**

**2. 21:1-7. Isaac means 'laughter'. a) How is Sarah's laughter here different than her laughter in 18:12? b) How was the change from the first kind of laughter to the second brought about? c) Two what two complementary truths, then, does the name Isaac bear witness? d) How does Jesus bear witness even further? Cf. Luke 1:37.**

**3. In 21:8-20 and 22:1-18 each of the sons of Abraham undergoes an ordeal How are the two incidents alike? How are they un-alike? What do we learn practically from the parallels?**

**4. 22:1-2. a) How does this charge to Abraham fit in with his original call in 12:1ff? b) What makes this command, however, the most severe test?**

- notes





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Isaac and his sons

### Study 19 | Genesis 25:19 - 26:33

#### INTRODUCTION

Our purpose is to trace how God's promises to Abraham began to bring about the redemption of the world. Chapters 23-26 are a bridge between the story of Abraham (chaps 12-22) and the story of Jacob (chaps 27-50). In chapter 23 Sarah dies. The lengthy negotiations for a tomb for Sarah show how Abraham finally became a landowner. Chapter 24 tells us how Abraham secured a wife for Isaac who was from Abraham's own relatives. Thus God continues to move the promise forward to the time in which Isaac will have many descendants. Finally, Abraham dies in the first half of chapter 25. Chapter 26 is a "series of snapshots" from the life of Isaac, a man who (in the book of Genesis) is overshadowed by both his father Abraham and his son Jacob. But even this brief look at Isaac shows God fulfilling his promises.

- 1. 25:19-21, 26b. How long did Rebekah wait until she had children? What did Isaac do about it? What do we learn from this?**
- 2. 25:21-26. a) What does Rebekah's cry "why... me?" tell us about her? b) What does the Lord's prophecy mean? c) How does this prophecy fly in the face of conventional expectations?**

**3. 25:27-32. What is Isaac's response to the oracle? What impact does Isaac's treatment of his sons have on them? What do we learn for our own family life?**

**4. 25:29-34. a) What does each man do wrong in this incident? b) cf. Hebrews 12:15-17. What are we to learn practically from Esau's failure?**

5. a) Who is most to blame in this incident? b) How does the whole of vv.19-34 illustrate Romans 9:10-16?
6. 26:1-33. a) Isaac seems to be a rather bland and uninteresting character. What can we learn from that? b) Make a list of Isaac's right and wrong actions. c) How does this pastiche of stories about Isaac confirm the themes we have been discussing?



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Jacob and the blessing

### Study 20 | Genesis 26:34 - 28:9

#### INTRODUCTION

After Genesis 26:33, Isaac passes off the scene completely. Now center stage is Jacob, an unforgettable character largely because of his great flaws. *"The grandson of the promise is a rascal compared to his faithful grandfather Abraham or his successful father Isaac."* (Brueggemann, p.204). There are three themes running through the life of Jacob that we may look for.

First, there is the theme of God's sovereign *gracious* blessing. If we look at Abraham and Lot or at Isaac and Ishmael we can see character strengths in the former that are not in the latter. Somehow God's choice of Abraham and Isaac 'make sense' to our normal ways of thinking. But when it comes to Jacob and Esau we see no such obvious difference. Despite Esau's impetuosity, he shows lots of good qualities (cf. chapter 33:4). There is nothing more admirable or better in Jacob that gives us any moral basis for God's choosing and using him. It is sheer grace.

Second, there is the theme of God's *sovereign* gracious blessing. Despite the remarkable amount of conspiring and manipulation and 'scamming' that goes on all through the life of Jacob (both *by* him and *to* him!) it is obvious that God is in control. This is a major theme of the Genesis writer. See Joseph's words almost summarizing the whole book: *"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."* (Gen 50:20).

Third, there is the theme of God's sovereign gracious *blessing*. Some commentators have pointed out that while the main concern of Abraham was the promise ("Will God keep the promise of son?"), Jacob is more concerned about the blessing. He cheats Esau of his father's blessing (chapter 27). He won't let the mysterious wrestler go until he blesses him (chapter 32). From his earliest days, Jacob seems to have lacked a sense of affirmation and value, and everything in his life is oriented to procuring it.

- 1. Compare 26:34-35 with 24:3-4. Compare 27:1-4 with 49:1,28. In light of these comparisons, how did Esau and Isaac contribute to this whole sad affair?**

**2. 27:4,7,28-29,33,39. What is the father's 'blessing'? The assumptions of the family about the importance of this blessing are foreign to us. What can you discern about its nature and power from these verses?**

**3. 27:33. Why do you think Isaac can't or won't take back the blessing?**

4. Compare the dialogues of vv.6-11 and vv.30-40. Which characters arouse more sympathy in us? Why would the narrator allow this to happen when Jacob is the chosen one? How does this teach us about God's grace?
5. 27:41-28:5. a) How do we see the consequences of sin here? What do we learn about how sin works? b) Rebekah must now make another plan. How does her plan end up fulfilling God's purposes in ways that she cannot perceive?





# What were we put in the world to do?

## Heaven's gate

### Study 21 | Genesis 28:10-22

#### INTRODUCTION

Now Jacob is essentially on the run for his life. Jacob may have had a better grasp on his situation than did Rebekah, who naively assured him that he would be back in a few days (27:44) because Esau would 'get over it'. He also would have been unconsolated by Isaac's dignified words of sending and blessing at his departure (28:1-3). He knew that his father had shown little concern for his future choices and likely was just glad for him to depart. In short, Jacob was little more than a fugitive, unwanted by anyone but this mother, and completely unsure of his future. He is so resourceless that he is sleeping out in the open at night. And yet now God comes to him. Despite his moral and spiritual inferiority to his grandfather Abraham or even to his father Isaac, Jacob is given two major 'visitations' from God. The first one comes here.

**Background Note:** The famous word *ladder* (as in "Jacob's Ladder") is missing from verse 12. The NIV is right to consign it to the footnotes and put the word "*stairway*" in its place. The Hebrew word really describes more of a "ramp". (The description of a stream of messengers coming and going fits in better with the idea of a broad ramp or staircase than a ladder.) The word is used to describe the "*siege ramp*" — a man-made mountain, as it were — that is built up against a walled city in order to conquer it.

What is being described is a "ziggurat", a temple building which was common in the ancient Near East. Ziggurats would appear to our eyes as huge 'pyramids', but the reason for their shape and size was that they were man-made mountains. Ziggurats were efforts to 'unite heaven and earth'. The religious person could ascend up toward the gods to make sacrifices. The gods could more easily descend and come down to earth. When someone built a ziggurat, they often called it a 'heaven-gate', a place where the worshipper could meet and connect with the gods. Scholars tell us that the very name "Babylon" means "the gate of the god". It is not surprising that when Jacob saw a stairway to heaven, he called it "*the gate of heaven*" and began to worship (v.17).

1. **28:12-15. What does Jacob see, and what do you think each one of these things mean? (Make reference to the promises God makes.)**

- [illegible]

- notes*



# What were we put in the world to do?

## Jacob's new family

### Study 22 | Genesis 29:14 - 30:24

#### INTRODUCTION

The next part of the Jacob story spans three long chapters — 29 through 31, which covers Jacob's long years living away from Canaan, with his uncle Laban. This is a continuous and self-contained account which is best studied all together, despite its length. It begins with the kiss of meeting (29:11,13) and ends with the kiss of departure (33:55) and so stands as a unity. It stands between two personal encounters with God, at Bethel on the way to Haran (chapter 28) and at Peniel on the way home from Haran (chapter 32). It begins with Jacob escaping from the problem of Esau and it ends with Jacob returning to face the problem of Esau. At the center of this section can be seen the heart of it — the birth of children to Jacob. If we outline the larger passage we can see how it centers on how Jacob receives a new family (based on Brueggemann, p.249):

29:1-14a – The kiss of meeting. Jacob is received by Laban.

29:14b-20 – The contract with Laban

29:21-30 – The 1st “sting” – Laban outwits Jacob

29:31-30:24 – The birth of Jacob's children

30:25-43 – The 2nd “sting” – Jacob outwits Laban

31:1-42 – The dispute with Laban

31:43-55 – The kiss of departure. Jacob leaves Laban

We will focus our study on the central sections about a) how Jacob got married and b) how Jacob's children were born. This is all crucial because here we see God fulfilling his promise to Jacob and to the world. In order to understand the selected passage, we will provide a summary of the rest of the narrative before and after the passage, in order to provide a context.

#### PRE-PASSAGE SUMMARY

**29:1-14a.** On the surface, Jacob's entrance to Haran appears very 'lucky'. He arrives at the very well that Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban, will soon use. The shepherds at the well were merely standing around, neither watering nor grazing their animals, because there was a large stone over the well and that

was not rolled away until all the shepherds of the area got there to remove it. Jacob shows he feels this is a waste of time (v.7). When Rachel come with her flocks, Jacob rolls the stone away all by himself and waters her sheep. He gets to show his new family his physical strength, his enterprise and his initiative, and then he caps it off with a tearful dramatic announcement. He is the son of Rebekah, her father's sister. Rachel runs to Laban who runs to Jacob (much like Laban had run to meet the servant of Abraham some 40 years before — 24:29). The whole scene is sunny and joyful. What an entrance! Is this 'luck'? The narrator has shown the readers the promise of God in 28:15. There is no luck about it.

Like Abraham's servant years before (chapter 24) Jacob travels to Haran where he finds a bride. However, Abraham's servant went laden with wealth and possessions (24:10) to convince the prospective brides families that their daughters would be marrying into prosperity. Jacob came with nothing, however, and this left it to the very money-conscious Laban to figure out a way to get wealth from this suitor.

**1. 29:14-20. What signs or hints can already be seen of Laban's calculation?**

**2. 29:21-26. Laban's scheme is finally revealed. In what ways is it ingenious, though cruel? What did Laban get out of it?**

3. 29:25-29. Why did Jacob, who is clearly shocked and furious in v.25, agree so compliantly to Laban's explanation and further offer? How was Laban's deceit with Jacob parallel to Jacob's deceit with his family?
4. What is God doing with Jacob? Look ahead to the prayer of 32:9-12. How does the affirmation of chapter 28 and the discipline of chapter 29 work together to get Jacob to this place?
5. Jacob has promised (28:21) that the Lord will be his God. Yet chapter 29 and 30 reveal three people who make other things beside the Lord their God. What does Jacob make 'an idol'? What is Rachel's idol? What is Leah's idol?

**6. 29:31, 30:22. cf. Hebrews 7:14. How does God deal with the love-lessness of Leah and with the bareness of Rachel? What does this tell us about God's salvation?**

**7. What can we learn from this passage about family life?**







# What were we put in the world to do?

## Jacob wrestled with God

### Study 23 | Genesis 30:25 – 32:32

#### INTRODUCTION

This is one of the most powerful and dramatic pieces of narrative in the Bible. It is also one of the most mysterious. But it clearly stands as the centerpiece of Jacob's life. In this incident, all the themes of his life converge. Though God's promise had actually come to him as an unborn child, his first direct 'experience' of God was at Bethel where he enters into a covenant with God. Though all have noticed how imperfect his attitude was (28:20-22), it is at Bethel where we see that he has a conscious, personal relationship with God. After receiving that new awareness of God in his life, Jacob begins to learn about his sin and the deceitfulness of his heart (Chapters 29-31). Now, however, he is returning to his homeland and is about to meet Esau. This is a moment that he has dreaded for years. And at this climactic moment, when surely Jacob is reviewing his whole life and what it all means, God meets him in a very unusual way. It is quite different than the first encounter.

It is fair to say that after this encounter, rather than after Jacob's first encounter, he is a 'changed man.' It is not good to impose our post-Cross and post — Pentecost experience back on Jacob and try to determine where he was really 'born again.' But we can learn for ourselves that it usually takes more than one "encounter" experience for us to understand the true dimension of our sin and of his gracious provision. And looking back over our usually multiple experiences, it is not easy to tell exactly which one was the conversion experience. God know, but we often can't be sure.

#### EARLY PASSAGE SUMMARY

**30:25-32:2** After Rachel finally has a child, Jacob decides to go home (30:25-27). It may be that this was the final evidence (to Jacob) that God was going to honor all his promises to him. He asks Laban's permission to leave. Laban's refusal is cast in very courteous and pious-sounding terms (as we might expect!) He insists that God is blessing him because of Jacob and then offers him a higher salary (30:28)! This was a veiled way to say, "I'll let you go if the price is right!" Laban asks him to name a higher salary figure (30:31).

Jacob makes the following offer. He wants as his salary the dark sheep or the bi-colored sheep and goats (v.32). The great majority of the sheep and goats are white, but a small percentage is either black or black-and-white ('streaked,' 'spotted,' or 'speckled'). Jacob names them as his — and thus his wages. This makes sense on several fronts. First, it is a very clear way to be sure 'whose were whose' and was a check against theft or cheating (v.33). Second, it is very just and equitable. It would seem that this percentage of bi-colored and dark animals would be a generally fixed percentage. Thus, if the flocks increased

under Jacob, both Jacob and Laban would profit. If they decreased, both would suffer loss. Laban agrees to the deal (30:35-36). This way, these animals could not mate with others and increase their genetic characteristics in the flock at all.

However, despite Laban's machinations, the number of the bi-colored animals that were born during the next mating season was unusually great. Why? The text tells us that Jacob carefully put bi-colored branches in front of the stronger animals. He (and perhaps the author of Genesis) thought that this actually produced the bi-colored sheep. This certainly is what happened, and Jacob probably thought that his intelligence had finally triumphed over Laban's scheming. But most modern readers can see even more clearly than Jacob that God intervened and prospered him at Laban's expense so he could return home with real substance. Although Laban's sons felt cheated and were furious (31:1), Laban had been "outwitted" with a freely negotiated deal that that followed its own letter strictly. There was nothing that Laban or anyone else could do about it. Jacob had not 'cheated.' God had worked in the situation to fulfill his promise to Jacob that he would eventually return to his land and take up his inheritance (28:13-15).

But now Laban and his sons were resentful toward Jacob (31:1,2). Jacob realized that he had to go immediately or risk some kind of counter-move (even a violent one) by his in-laws. He convinces his wives to leave their father (31:4-16) and then takes off when Laban is away from home, giving himself a three-day head start (31:19-22). When Laban discovers their flight, he set out in hot pursuit of Jacob almost certainly with the intention to have a literal fight with him to bring him back. But God intervenes again and warns Laban in a dream (31:24). Laban meets Jacob and they make a very testy and wary covenant not to harm each other (31:48-53). As Jacob comes near his homeland, he has a vision of angels to encourage him and remind him of God's protection (32:1,2).

In Rachel's behavior, we are again reminded about how impartial and incomplete (but progressive!) the work of salvation is in the lives of even these central Biblical figures. Rachel steals Laban's household idols (Gen 31:19) as she flees to the Lord's promised land! Why did she steal the *teraphim*, when they were of no particular value — they were not made of silver or gold? Rachel reveals here how incomplete is her understanding of the power and grace of Jacob's God. She wants to have 'all her bases covered.' The gods are a superstitious 'insurance' policy (cf. Wenham, vol2, p.274). Maybe the Lord will help her the next time she is in trouble — but if not, maybe the old gods will 'do the trick.' But this supposed spiritual 'safety' valve almost becomes a disaster for Jacob's whole household (31:31-35). The Lord God cannot be 'added' to a life as one more hedge against failure. He is not one more resource to use to help us achieve our agenda. He is a whole new 'life agenda.' Rachel has not learned this. The family that bears the salvation of the Lord into the world is itself deeply flawed and in need of grace.

1. 32:1-2. Jacob now turns away from his fear of Laban to his fear of what lies ahead. What does the name 'Mahanaim' mean? What does that show about Jacob's state of mind? What does that show about God? (cf. Psalm 32:2; 2 Kings 6:15-17; 1 Corinthians 10:13)
2. 32:3-22. What evidence do you see here of changed character in Jacob? What do we learn about prayer from Jacob's prayer?
3. 32:22-24. Why do you think Jacob wanted to be alone? How is the mysterious wrestler an unlooked for answer to Jacob's prayer?

5. Who won the match? Make a case from the passage for the thesis that the wrestler won. Make a case from the passage that Jacob won.

6. Someone has said that this is both a defeat and a victory for both parties. How does each party win through losing? Where do we see the ultimate example of triumph through defeat?
7. What does Jacob receive from God? How are they analogous to what all Christians receive from their saving encounter with God?
8. Cf. V.29 with Exodus 3:13ff and Judges 13:18. Why do you think God doesn't tell Jacob his name? What can we learn from this?