

What were we put in the world to do?

Participants 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?**

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?

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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?

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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.**

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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?**

- notes

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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?

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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.**

- 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.

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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?

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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.

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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?**

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?
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?

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?

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?

8. How does this account fit in with the theme of the rest of the theme of Genesis?

What were we put in the world to do?

Isaac and Ishmael

Study 18 | Genesis 20:1 - 22:19

INTRODUCTION

The story of Abraham 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?

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Isaac and his sons

INTRODUCTION

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?

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 it's 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.)**

- ## HEAVEN'S GATE

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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?

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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.

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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?