

Genesis

A Lesson Series by

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All scripture taken from the New International Version (NIV, 2011)

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Lesson 1

Introduction and Creation

Genesis 1 & 2

Introduction

The Bible differs from the sacred texts of many of the world's religions in that it relates the story of God's quest for humanity rather than humanity's quest for God. Throughout the Bible, God is the central figure, the main character. The Bible is God's story. This story of God's search for us can be broadly divided into four parts.

The first is creation: God gloriously creates everything in existence, with great purpose, and humanity is the pinnacle of creation.

The second is the fall: humanity chooses self-will over God's will, with disastrous and far-reaching results.

The third is redemption: God forever loves his sinful humanity, and he guides and rescues them, first by giving them the law and sending them the prophets, and later by sending Jesus, the son of God himself, to bear our sin and to make righteousness possible for us.

The fourth is consummation, which has not yet occurred: Christ will return as creation's triumphant king, and God will make all things new (Revelation 21 and 22)—this will include the glorious resurrection of those of us who believe, just as Christ himself was resurrected.

In our study of Genesis, we will obviously examine in detail the first two of these parts, creation and the fall. And yet we will also see the beginnings of the redemption to come, primarily through God's covenant with Abraham.

The book of Genesis itself can be divided into two sections. The first, Genesis 1–11, is a sort of prehistory, in which God creates the world and humanity, humanity falls, and sin spreads throughout the earth, even as God remains

loving. The second, Genesis 12–50, is the story of Abraham and his descendants, which is the beginning of the story of God’s redemption.

Creation

We begin by examining Genesis’s two accounts of creation. Some Christians view these accounts as myth—certainly they share numerous characteristics with myths—while others take them literally, with many Christians somewhere in between or not quite certain. Assuming that everyone can agree that “In the beginning God created...,” it will likely be helpful to avoid discussions along the lines of “is this or that literally true?” or “How old is the earth really?” and to instead focus on the implications of the creation stories. That is, to attempt to answer these questions:

- What do these stories tell us about God?
- What do these stories tell us about the earth/creation?
- What do these stories tell us about humanity and humanity’s intended relationships to both God and creation?

Read: Genesis 1:1–25

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Question: What does this account say about God and the earth?

1. Most obviously, God is the creator. The world was not created with help, nor by any lesser being, but by the Almighty alone.
2. God created the world deliberately and intentionally. There is a profound order in the poetic structure of this account. First, God creates the form of the world in order, and then he fills it in order. Days 1, 2, and 3 correspond, respectively, to days 4, 5, and 6: God creates light (Day 1), then fills the heavens with the sun, moon, and stars (Day 4); God creates the sky and seas (Day 2), then fills them with birds and fish (Day 5). God creates the land (Day 3), then fills it with animals (Day 6).
3. Creation is *good*. Each day, after God finishes his creative work, he sees that it is good. God is not limited in his imagination or his ability; everything is created just as he intends it to be.

Read: Genesis 1:26–31

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹ Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Question: What does this account say about humanity?

1. Humanity has a special place in creation. Humanity is the last thing to be created, the pinnacle, made in the image of God, male and female. We get a superlative here: with humanity established and all of his creative work complete, God looks over all that he has made and proclaims it not just “good” but “very good” (1:31).

2. Humanity has a special role in creation. God tells mankind to “rule over” every living creature (1:28). God has established the natural order, and humanity is at the top.

Read: Genesis 2:1–3

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.³ Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

This is the basis for the establishment of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8–11). Just as God “worked” for six days in creating the earth and then rested on the seventh, so humanity is to work for six days and then to rest on the seventh, a day set aside as holy.

From here, Genesis moves without transition straight into a second, more detail-oriented account of creation, one that has some notable differences from what we read in Genesis 1.

Read: Genesis 2:4–9; 15–25

⁴ This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

⁵ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, ⁶ but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.⁷ Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

⁸ Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

* * * * *

¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

¹⁸ The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

¹⁹ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³ The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Note the differences in the order of creation given here. In Genesis 1, God creates light → sky → the land and seas → plants → the sun and moon → animals → people. Here, we see the heavens and the earth → man → plants → animals → woman. Why the differences? Genesis 1 presents God’s perfect will and order in making his “good” creation. The more detailed account in Genesis 2 has different points to make, mostly concerning humanity; it is not concerned with the same things as Genesis 1.

It is best to understand Genesis 1 and 2 as complementary: not to focus on the discrepancies and say, “Aha!” but rather to focus on what each of the accounts says about God, humanity, and creation.

Question: What does this second account of creation have to say to us that the first account does not?

1. Humanity was created to work. 2:5 says that one of the reasons “no plant had yet sprung up” was because “there was no one to work the ground.” God plants the Garden of Eden, causes it to flourish, and then puts Adam there “to work it and take care of it” (2:16). Work is Adam’s function in the garden.

2. There is right and wrong, and there is the freedom to choose. From the beginning, God has instructions for Adam: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (2:16). Adam doesn’t have to go looking for trouble to disobey—God has placed him there, in the garden with the tree—the choice is right before him. And as God warns (and as we shall see), disobedience—that is, sin—comes with profound consequences.

3. The relationship between a man and a woman is a special one. Eve is portrayed as being made from what is “taken out of” Adam (2:22): in contrast to all of the living creatures that have come before, Eve is of the same substance as Adam. She is to be a “helper” to him. The writer of the text emphasizes this partnership when he says that a man “is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24).

Discussion

Question: Genesis 1:26 says, “God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’”

- What does it mean to be made in the image of God?
- What characteristics do we have in common with God?
- What is the connection between being made in God’s image and ruling over the earth?

Question: Genesis 1–2 have much to say about the nature of and the relationships among God, humanity, and the earth.

- Why is it important for us to understand these relationships?
- What relevance do these accounts have for our lives today?

Lesson 2
The Fall
Genesis 3

Previously

In Genesis 1, God creates the world deliberately and intentionally according to his perfect will and order. Humanity is the crowning achievement of this creation, which is pronounced “very good” (1:31). In Genesis 2, we get a second account of creation. Here, God places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it.

In doing so, God gives one command:

Read: Genesis 2:15–27

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

From the start, there is right and wrong, and the freedom to choose. God has placed Adam and Eve in the garden, with the tree of knowledge, to care for it. They don’t have to go looking for the tree to get into trouble: the choice of whether to obey God is always right there in front of them. It is a choice they have to make continually.

And of course we all know what happens next.

Read: Genesis 3:1–7

¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took

some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Question: How does the serpent deceive Eve? What are the implications of what it says?

There are a lot of implications in the serpent's words. *God didn't tell you the full truth. God is holding you back—he doesn't want you to be like him. You should do what you want to do.*

And thus we arrive at history's first case of rationalization, as it were: Eve talks herself into eating the fruit (3:6). Clearly, she has admired the fruit for some time, no doubt wondered what it tasted like, and this promise of divine insight is just too good to pass up.

How long were Adam and Eve in the garden before this happened? The text gives us no indication. But try to think about what's happening from their perspective. Adam and Eve were there, in the garden, working—this was one of the trees they cared for. How often did they walk by this tree and admire its fruit? How long were they there? A month? A year? A hundred years? And every day, they had to decide whether or not to obey God. Given what we know about human nature, it's not hard to get the sense that it was only a matter of time.

The point of conflict here is this: Eve chooses to believe the serpent rather than to obey God. Note that this is not entirely the same as believing the serpent rather than *believing* God—it seems that as with so many aspects of human life, God has not given them a detailed explanation about what would happen if they disobeyed beyond "You will die."

Adam and Eve eat the fruit, and their eyes are opened: if they indeed obtained an insight into good and evil, then they certainly now understood what they had done: they understood guilt, and they understood the weight of disobeying God. They now experience shame—a feeling they futilely try to address by covering themselves with fig leaves.

Read: Genesis 3:8–13

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

¹⁰ He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

¹¹ And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

¹² The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

¹³ Then the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

God is walking in the garden, looking for them. Consider the implication. Walking with the Lord in the garden is a regular event for Adam and Eve. To this point, they have had no barriers whatsoever to the presence of God. They have been free to be with him, to talk with him.

God, of course, notices that things are amiss, and of course he knows exactly what has happened. He asks Adam about it, and Adam responds with history’s first case of throwing someone under the bus, as it were. “The woman you put here with me” (3:12) is to blame, Adam says. It’s quite a clever (if irresponsible) response—Adam simultaneously finds fault with both Eve (for giving him the fruit) and God (for giving him an obviously defective partner). Eve tries a similar ploy, blaming the serpent.

None of their excuses work, however, and Adam and Eve are forced to face the grave consequences of their sin together.

Read: Genesis 3:14–19

¹⁴ So the Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,
“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,

and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”
16 To the woman he said,
“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

17 To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from
the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’
“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

Adam and Eve are not simply at odds with God—because of their sin, they are now at odds with all of creation.

Animals. In 2:18–20, God brings all of the animals to Adam after stating his desire to provide him with a helper. It’s not hard to imagine a relationship of gentle friendship between Adam and the animals in that passage. But now, to the serpent, God says, “he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (3:15). The once-harmonious relationship between humanity and the animal world has become contentious and painful.

Work. In 2:15, God puts Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it. This work is one of Adam’s purposes, one of his daily functions. We can only imagine how fruitful a pre-sin garden would have been—but now, the ground is “cursed” (3:17), requiring “painful toil” to bring forth food and producing thorns and thistles. What once was no doubt a fulfilling task is now arduous labor.

Life. Eve bears a curse as well. The very act of bringing forth life, which has thus far been done by God and pronounced “very good” (1:31), will now be done in “painful labor” (3:16).

It seems that *all* of life has become painful labor. Once in harmony with God and all of creation, humanity is now doomed to struggle constantly—with God, with the earth's living creatures, and with the earth itself.

Read: Genesis 3:20–24

²⁰ Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

²¹ The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. ²² And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” ²³ So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴ After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Here is the most damaging blow to humanity: Adam and Eve are driven out of the garden—they are removed from the immediate presence of God. Yet while God would have been completely justified in wiping Adam and Eve from the earth then and there, he doesn't. He provides for them even as he sends them away, making garments for them (3:21).

In his [explanatory notes](#), Wesley suggests that these garments God gives to Adam and Eve were made from animals that God killed in front of them to show them what death was. Wesley also suggests that these animals were killed as a sacrifice—the first of many animals to be slain as sin offerings, and typifying the ultimate sacrifice of Christ that was yet to come.

People with a weak understanding of the story of the Bible sometimes think that things went something like this: God made a great creation and had a good plan for humanity → humanity sinned and by doing so messed up God's plan → God had to come up with a new plan, so he sent Jesus.

It might be helpful to bear in mind as we study the book of Genesis that this is not at all the case. Was God surprised when Adam and Eve sinned? Did he somehow not see it coming? God was not surprised. Peter writes that Christ “was chosen before the creation of the world” to redeem us through his blood (1 Peter 1:18–20). Jesus was not Plan B. Jesus was *always* Plan A—including at this moment.

As we read about humanity's most disastrous hour, it is encouraging to remember 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

Discussion

Question: The serpent reframed God's command as one possible viewpoint.

-What are the dangers of viewing God's commands as options?

-How do we prevent this from happening in our own lives?

Question: Why do we disobey God?

Question: How do we resist temptation?

Question: What is the difference between viewing obedience to God as an ongoing decision versus moment-to-moment decisions in terms of how we think and how we live?

Lesson 3
Cain and the Descendants of Adam
Genesis 4–5

Previously

In Genesis 1 and 2 God creates the world, calling it “very good” (1:31). Humanity is the crowning achievement of this creation. Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it.

But, as we see in Genesis 3, God commands them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—which they do. Their sin puts them in conflict not only with God, who banishes them from the garden, but also with all of creation: work is now difficult; childbirth is painful.

Adam and Eve must go on to make new lives for themselves, and the trouble continues.

Read: Genesis 4:1–7

¹ Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.” ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Question: Why was Abel’s sacrifice accepted and Cain’s was not?

This has been the subject of debate over the centuries. Some have argued that the difference in the material offered is the reason—that animals were an appropriate sacrifice and that crops were not (because God required blood to be shed for forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22)). However, there is nothing in the account itself that addresses this argument. It should be noted that this is an offering, not a sacrifice, and it is perfectly natural for each man to bring an offering from what they have individually produced.

Nevertheless, there are two elements in the account that do speak to the problem: the quality of the offering and Cain's attitude. Let's look at those.

Offering. The text says that Abel brings "fat portions" from the firstborn of his flock—that is, he has given from the best that he has. In contrast, Cain brings an underwhelming "some" of his produce.

Attitude. God rejects Cain's offering, perhaps publicly, and Cain becomes angry and downcast—that is, he is pouting. But we should not suppose that this rejection is the origin of his bad attitude. The writer of Hebrews says that "By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did" (Hebrews 11:4), suggesting a lack of faith on Cain's part prior to and leading up to this incident. Other biblical writers pile onto Cain as well. John says that Cain kills Abel because "his own actions were evil" (1 John 3:12), and Jude pronounces woe upon those who follow "the way of Cain" (Jude 11).

Question: How are Cain's substandard offering and bad attitude connected?

The substandard offering and the bad attitude are absolutely connected. Why does Abel bring a pleasing sacrifice? Because he fears the Lord, loves the Lord, wants to please the Lord. Why does Cain bring a poor offering? Because obeying and pleasing God are not priorities to him. He does not think they are important. For Cain, bringing an offering to the Lord is more of an obligation than a joy.

Cain has not yet killed Abel, but the wickedness in his heart and lack of respect for the Lord are obvious already. God of course knows all of this—it's the reason he gives Cain a warning: "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (4:7).

But as we know, Cain does not heed this warning.

Read: Genesis 4:8–17

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

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰ The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood

from your hand. ¹²When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

¹³Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

¹⁵But the LORD said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. ¹⁷Cain made love to his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.

Cain kills Abel. This is premeditated murder, the most serious of all crimes. The Lord then confronts Cain about it, and this confrontation provides further insight into Cain’s character. We also see several parallels to God’s confrontation of Adam and Eve’s sin in Genesis 3.

Adam and Eve admit their sin when confronted, even if they try to dodge responsibility. Cain lies. “I don’t know where my brother is,” he says. We can hear the bitterness and the disrespect in his voice when he says, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” There aren’t too many characters in the Bible we can imagine saying to God, “I don’t know where he is; go find him yourself!”

God, of course, knows the answers to the questions he asks Cain beforehand, and he places Cain under a curse for killing his brother.

Question: What is Cain’s punishment?

In Genesis 3:17–18, the ground became cursed so that it would require “painful toil” for crops to be brought forth. Now Cain doesn’t even have this. “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you” (4:12), God says. Cain has lost his livelihood; he must become “a restless wanderer on the earth.”

In verse 14, Cain notes that becoming a wanderer entails being hidden from the presence of God. There is an interesting implication here. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden of Eden and from the immediate presence of God. And yet the account in Genesis 4 indicates that God maintained a certain presence among them afterward. But now Cain is losing this too.

Nevertheless, God is still looking after him. In Genesis 3, God made garments for Adam and Eve. Now he places a mark of protection on Cain to spare him from retribution. Bearing this mark, Cain is forced to leave the presence of the Lord; he settles elsewhere and begins to build a city.

Genesis 4:18–26

Genesis 4:18–24 chronicles six generations of Cain’s descendants. Of interest here is verse 19, where Lamech marries two women—the first instance of bigamy recorded in the Bible. Lamech is the first to break with the structure of marriage established by God, whereby “a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24). If his arrogance isn’t clear in taking this liberty, he makes it explicit when he pronounces himself an order of magnitude more important than Cain, saying, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times” (4:23–24).

Thankfully, Genesis 4 concludes on a somewhat more positive note. Adam and Eve have another son, Seth (4:25), and we are told, “At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord” (4:26).

Genesis 5

Genesis 5 presents Adam’s family line through Seth all the way to Noah. The writer begins by recapping from Genesis 2: “When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them ‘Mankind’ when they were created” (5:1–2). In verse 5 we read that Adam died, as God had said (see 2:17 and 3:19). The effects of creation and the fall are encapsulated in these few verses. In another callback, we are told that Seth is “in [Adam’s] own image” (5:3).

Also of interest here is 5:28–29, where Seth’s descendant Lamech (not the same Lamech) has a son who he says “will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed.” This son is Noah.

Question: What do the two genealogies in Genesis 4 and 5 have to say to us?

Cain was the firstborn. Yet his recorded family tree is short; his line soon fades from history. In contrast, Seth becomes an ancestor of Noah, Abraham, David, and Jesus—an ancestor of the nation of Israel. Through Seth’s line, all of God’s promises to humanity will be fulfilled.

Discussion

Question: After Cain brought his substandard offering and was rejected by the Lord, God gave him a warning: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (3:7).

-Why does Cain not heed God's warning?

-How do we “rule over” sin in our own lives?

Question: After Cain kills Abel, God confronts Cain. While he grudgingly accepts his punishment (he has no choice), Cain shows no repentance for what he has done.

-Why? That is, what keeps a person from repentance, even when confronted with and punished for his sin?

Question: We also never see Cain take clear responsibility for his actions. He has profound shortcomings, and he takes them out on other people. Abel does nothing to Cain, yet Cain kills him. When God punishes Cain for this murder, Cain is resentful.

-What is the connection between taking responsibility for our actions and repentance?

-Does one come before the other, or do they go together?

Question: Cain's attitude—that is, the way he views the world and others—gets him into all kinds of trouble.

-What kind of trouble can our own bad attitudes get us into?

-How can we be mindful of our own attitude?

-How can we as Christians improve our attitude?

Lesson 4
Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel
Genesis 6–11

Note: As with the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, the stories of Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel share certain characteristics with myths, and everyone in a Sunday School class may not necessarily agree on their literalness. Thus, getting bogged down with speculative questions like "Was there *really* a worldwide flood?" or "Could all of the animals in the world *really* have fit on the ark?" is not going to be very helpful. Instead, let's try to understand these stories on their own terms and focus on identifying what they have to say about God, humanity, and creation.

Genesis 6

With Adam and Eve, we had the first sin. With Cain, we had the first murder. Things continue to go badly for humanity over the generations, to the point that Noah's story begins this way: "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5).

Humanity's thoughts were focused on "only evil all the time"—imagine the breadth and depth of that sin, the disregard for God that must have entailed. Jesus provides a short list of what evil thoughts produce: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander (Matthew 15:19).

So God decides to do something that we might consider rather ungodlike:

Read: Genesis 6:6–7

⁶ The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them."

Fortunately for humanity, Noah finds favor with God (6:8)—he is "a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God" (6:9). Seemingly for his sake alone, humanity will be permitted to survive.

God reveals his intentions to Noah, saying, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth” (6:13). “I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish” (6:17).

Everything, that is, except Noah and his family. God makes a promise to Noah: “But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you” (6:18).

Question: Why is God destroying the world *now*?

Reading this, we might be inclined to think, “Wow, God’s already ready to scrub this whole project and we’re only in Genesis 6. He must have really screwed up.” But was God surprised at the sinfulness of humanity? Was this an unexpected turn of events? Was the death and resurrection of Jesus not Plan A even then (1 Peter 1:20)? Again, God is not surprised. There is purpose here, in both God’s actions and God’s timing.

We all know what happens next. God instructs Noah to build an ark to house not only his family but also representatives from every species of bird and land animal.

Genesis 7

In Genesis 6:19, God tells Noah to take a pair of every kind of bird and animal, and that’s the way we usually teach it to our kids. But in 7:2–3, his instructions are a bit different: a pair of every kind of unclean animal and *seven* pairs of every kind of clean animal and bird.

Question: Why would God command Noah to take more of the clean animals?

In the first place, the clean animals were those that could be eaten—thus, more would need to be taken for breeding. They were also the animals that were used as sacrifices—thus, more would be needed to be offered as sacrifices, as we will see in 8:20.

Noah and his family and all the animals get on the ark, and God seals them in (7:16). Then the deluge begins—not only rain from the heavens but also water from “the springs of the great deep” (7:11). For forty days without cease, the waters increase until everything is covered, and the flood remains for 150 days further. Here is the result:

Read: Genesis 7:21–23

²¹ Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind.²² Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. ²³ Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

Question: Humanity’s wickedness is the impetus for the flood, yet God destroys not only humanity but also every living thing—why?

If ever we feel that God is dealing unjustly with us, chances are that we are feeling entitled. We know God is not unjust; therefore, the fault must lie with us. As sinful humanity, what are we entitled to? The answer is simple: not a thing. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul says (Romans 6:23). Nothing in creation is entitled even to its existence—everything that exists does so at the will and pleasure of God.

Genesis 8

Genesis 8 begins thus: “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded” (8:1). What does this mean? That God had forgotten about Noah? Not at all. Rather, God is keeping his promise. He is, as Wesley says in his [Explanatory Notes](#), “return[ing] his mercy to mankind.”

At last, the earth becomes dry, and Noah, his family, and the animals come out (8:18–19). Noah builds an altar to the Lord, sacrificing some of the animals he has preserved (8:20).

God is pleased with Noah. First, he says, “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” (8:21). This calls to mind both the cursing of the ground for Adam in Genesis 3:17 and the cursing of the ground for Cain in 4:11–12). And what greater curse could it endure than its utter destruction by flood? Likewise, God pledges never again to destroy all living creatures.

Genesis 9

God gives Noah and his sons the logical command in this situation: “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (9:1). This is nearly identical to what God says to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

Then God says to them, “The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands” (9:2)—just as he told Adam and Eve, “Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (1:28).

God then tells Noah and his sons, “Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (9:3)—much like he told Adam and Eve, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food” (1:29).

God’s first instructions to Noah and his family upon this fresh start are nearly identical to the first instructions he gave to Adam and Eve. And God then reminds them that “in the image of God has God made mankind” (9:6). In all, this feels a lot like another creation story.

God then makes a covenant with Noah, pledging never to destroy the earth via flood, with the rainbow as the sign of the covenant.

Genesis 9 concludes with an unusual story. Noah plants a vineyard, makes some wine, gets drunk, and falls asleep naked inside his tent. One of his sons, Ham, sees Noah in this state and goes to tell his brothers, leaving him like that. It’s not difficult to imagine that this went something along the lines of “Ha ha, come see what dad did!” But Shem and Japheth respectfully cover their father. When Noah finds out what happens, he’s extremely upset. He places a curse on Canaan, the son of Ham, asking that God make Canaan a slave to Shem and Japheth.

Genesis 10

Genesis 10 contains a list of the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and the nations they founded.

And this brings us to another puzzling story.

Genesis 11

¹ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. ⁶ The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

⁸ So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

What’s going on here? Is God really feeling insecure? Is he threatened? Surely not.

Question: Why does God confuse the people’s language and scatter them?

To find the answer, it might be more helpful to try to find the answer to a different question: What were these people doing wrong? The only real clue in the text is in Genesis 9:1, where God tells Noah and his sons to “fill the earth” to repopulate it. But here, the people say, “Let us build ourselves a city ... otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (11:4). They don’t *want* to spread out and fill the earth—they all want to stay here together. By confusing their language, God is able to force them to go their separate ways, to ultimately fill the earth.

Genesis 11 concludes with an account of Shem’s family line. Why not Ham or Japheth? Because Shem is the ancestor of Abram, who will become Abraham.

Discussion

Question: What does the story of Noah's ark tell us about the character and nature of God?

Question: What does the story of the Tower of Babel tell us about the character and nature of God?

Question: What do these two stories tell us about human nature?

Question: What significance does the story of Noah's ark have for us as Christians today?

Question: What significance does the story of the Tower of Babel have for us as Christians today?

Lesson 5
The Promise
Genesis 12–18

Prologue (Genesis 11:27–32)

Abram's father Terah, a descendant of Noah through Shem, packs up the whole family and leaves his homeland, Ur of the Chaldeans, to travel to Canaan. But they don't make it to Canaan—for reasons unknown, they settle in Harran instead, where Terah dies.

Genesis 12

The story of Abram (Abraham) begins when he is seventy-five years old. He is childless—his wife Sarai cannot conceive (11:30). The story begins with God, who comes to Abram with a command and a promise.

Read: Genesis 12:1–3

¹ The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

² "I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

Question: What specifically does God promise to Abram?

God commands Abram to leave his home, promising that he will make Abram into a great nation—a remarkable statement to a 75-year-old with no children. God will bless not only Abram and his descendants but also "all peoples on earth" (12:3).

Abram obeys. This is not simply a case of moving the family—he's taking the whole clan, including Lot and his family plus all "the people they had acquired in Harran" (12:5; this has been suggested to include their slaves/servants as well as people who had converted to the worship of God).

At Shechem, in the land of the Canaanites, God promises to give Abram's descendants this land. But Abram doesn't stay. Because of a famine, he continues down to Egypt, which because of its strong government and the Nile River was typically able to produce more food than it needed and to sell the surplus.

Once there, Abram becomes afraid that Pharaoh will kill him to take Sarai because of her beauty, so they pretend that she is his sister. Pharaoh does indeed take her, giving Abram livestock and servants in return. God punishes Pharaoh's household with serious diseases for this adultery. When Pharaoh realizes what's happening, he is indignant with Abram. He returns Sarai to Abram and then deports him.

It is interesting that Abram has enough faith in God to relocate his household without recorded complaint but not enough faith to tell the truth about his wife. And Pharaoh's response, "Why didn't you tell me?" (12:18), suggests that he wouldn't have taken Sarai otherwise. By telling the truth—by trusting God for his and his wife's safety—it seems that Abram could have saved himself and others a great deal of trouble.

Genesis 13

Abram returns to the Negev. He has become very wealthy by this time, both in terms of livestock and silver and gold. Lot settles near Sodom, whose people "were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (13:13), while Abram settles in Canaan. Here the Lord comes to Abram again and revisits his previous promises:

Read: Genesis 13:14–17

¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

Yet Abram still has no children. Nonetheless, he builds an altar to the Lord.

Genesis 14

The land of Canaan is not a unified nation, nor will it be until Israel possesses the land under Joshua hundreds of years in the future. The population is a variety of people groups living in independent city-states with their own kings, who frequently warred against one another to expand their territory or exact tribute.

Here, in a dispute over sovereignty, the kings of five cities (including Sodom, where Lot lives) battle the kings of four cities. Sodom is sacked, and Lot and his possessions are carried off. Although he is a nomad, Abram is also a warlord himself—he assembles his band of 318 trained men to rescue Lot, the other prisoners, and their possessions, and they are more than adequate to the task.

When Abram returns with the spoils of war, he has a famous encounter:

Read: Genesis 14:18–20

¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying,
“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
²⁰ And praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”
Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

The writer of Hebrews has much to say about Melchizedek (see all of Hebrews 7), comparing him to Jesus, who serves as our high priest in the new covenant. Indeed, some people read this as an appearance of Christ himself, although there is nothing explicit in the text to indicate this.

The king of Sodom is present as well. He offers all of the city’s recovered goods to Abram, who refuses, saying, “With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’ I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me—to Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them have their share.”

Question: What do Abram’s dealings with these two kings tell us about him?

Genesis 15

God comes to Abram again, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (15:1). But Abram at last points out the hitch in God’s plans. He says, “What can you give me since I remain childless? ... You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir” (15:2–3). But God says, “A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir” (15:4), and he again promises that Abram will have numerous, uncountable descendants. Abram believes the Lord, and God credits this belief to him as righteousness. God then makes a covenant with Abram to seal his commitment to the promises he has made.

Read: Genesis 15:13–16

¹³ Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

This covenant will shape the course of history for Abram’s descendants. Moses and Joshua will spend their lives obeying God’s commands to fulfill this prophecy.

Genesis 16

Eventually, however, Abram and Sarai run out of patience waiting for God’s promises to come to pass, and they take matters into their own hands.

Read: Genesis 16:1–4

¹ Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ² so she said to Abram, “The Lord has kept

me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.”

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

Question: Why does this plan cause problems?

The result of this plan flips the social hierarchy of Abram’s household. Hagar now has what Sarai has always wanted: a son for Abram. Hagar is bearing the heir; she naturally views herself as deserving higher status than she has—perhaps even higher than Sarai. The resentment between the two women escalates, and Sarai’s abuse eventually becomes so severe that Hagar runs away.

But an angel comes to Hagar and commands her to return. The angel tells her to name her baby Ishmael, promising that his descendants will be “too numerous to count” (16:10). But the angel also includes this unusual prophecy: “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” (16:12). Hagar obeys, returns, and gives birth to Ishmael. Abram is now 86 years old.

Genesis 17

Thirteen years later, when Abram is 99 years old, God appears to him again, saying, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers” (17:1–2). God changes his name from “Abram,” meaning “exalted father,” to “Abraham,” meaning “father of many,” promising to make him exactly that.

“I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you,” God says. God establishes circumcision as the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants.

Now God catches Abraham by surprise. Abraham has Ishmael by this point, and Sarai is old; naturally, he assumes that it is through Ishmael that God is going to fulfill all these promises. But no; God says that Sarai’s name is to be changed to Sarah: she will have a son of her own, and she will become “the mother of nations” (17:16).

This prospect is so ludicrous that Abraham laughs. He says, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!”—in other words, “That’s too crazy; we have Ishmael, and we’re fine with that.” But God says no, he will certainly bless Ishmael, but Sarah will have a son, Isaac (“he laughs), and it is through his line that this covenant will be established—and she will have him in the next year.

Genesis 18:1–15

Not long after, God appears to Abraham again: Three men visit him, and Abraham showers them with hospitality.

Read: Genesis 18:10–15

¹⁰ Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

¹³ Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”
But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.”

No matter how often God appears to Abraham and Sarah—even when God is standing there with them—this promise seems too preposterous to believe.

Discussion

Question: We believe that an all-powerful, all-knowing God created the entire universe. So why do we find it so hard to believe God’s promises?

Question: What promises has God made to us that have not yet been fulfilled?

Question: It can be hard to wait for God to fulfill his promises to us, and it can be tempting to take matters into our own hands.

-What negative consequences resulted from Abram’s and Sarai’s attempt to fulfill God’s promise themselves?

-God blesses Ishmael anyway—what does this tell us?

-In what ways do we take matters into our own hands because of our impatience and lack of faith?

Lesson 6
Abraham and Isaac
Genesis 18–26

Previously

God comes repeatedly to Abram, promising to bless him and make him into a great nation, even though he has no children. Abram and his household, including his nephew Lot, settle in the land of Canaan, which God has promised to give to Abram's descendants. God makes a covenant with Abram, changing his name to "Abraham," meaning "father of many."

In the first half of Genesis 18, which we looked at last week, the Lord—in the form of one of three men—visits Abraham and Sarah, promising that they will have a son by the next year despite both their old age and their incredulity.

Genesis 18:16–33

As the two angels depart (see 19:1), the Lord mentions to Abraham that the sin of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah has become so great that he plans to destroy them. But Abraham's nephew Lot lives in Sodom, and so Abraham bargains with the Lord to spare the city for the sake of whatever righteous people may live there. But Abraham himself must know that there aren't many: he first asks that the city be spared for the sake of 50 righteous people; realizing that this total is unlikely, he then asks for 45, then 40, then 30, then 20. Finally, the Lord agrees that he will not destroy Sodom if ten righteous people can be found there.

Genesis 19

The two angels arrive at Sodom, and Lot takes them into his house to show them hospitality. That evening, a gang of men from the city arrive at Lot's house, demanding that Lot send out his visitors so that they can rape them. Lot refuses to give them up, then indefensibly offers his two daughters to the men instead. The angels come to the rescue by afflicting the gang of rapists with blindness.

The angels tell Lot what's coming and instruct him to flee the city. Lot warns his (would-be) future sons-in-law, who do not believe him. Finally, the angels take hold of Lot and his family and lead them out of the city. They say, "Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain!" (19:17). In the morning, God rains down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying them completely. Lot's wife famously looks back and becomes a pillar of salt (see Luke 17:30-33 for the application), but the rest of the family escapes.

Another strange story follows. Feeling unsafe in the town of Zoar, Lot settles in the mountains, which is where the angels had told him to go in the first place. Here, his two daughters decide that their prospects for marriage are slim to none. They get Lot drunk and sleep with him so that they can bear children. Both become pregnant, and they give birth to Moab and Ammon.

Genesis 20

After all this destruction, Abraham relocates, settling in Gerar. To protect himself and his wife, Abraham tells King Abimelek that Sarah is his sister, and Abimelek takes her as a concubine. If this sounds familiar, it's the exact same ploy Abraham used with the king of Egypt (Genesis 12), with bad results.

Again God intervenes, coming to Abimelek in a dream before he consummates this sinful relationship. He commands Abimelek to return Sarah to Abraham and to give gifts to him on top of it. Much like in the Egypt incident, Abimelek's quick obedience in response to God and rebuke of Abraham for lying suggests that he never would have taken her had he known the truth.

Genesis 21

At last, Sarah conceives, and she gives birth to Isaac—Abraham is 100 years old; she is 90 (17:17). Sarah says, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age" (21:6–7).

But there's trouble immediately, as jealousy rears its head again. Hagar is causing problems, and Sarah tells Abraham to send her away. Abraham is reluctant, but God tells him to go ahead and do it, because he will bless Ishmael as well.

Hagar and Ishmael end up in the desert and quickly use up their provisions—Abraham has given them little to take with them. They are on the verge of death when an angel appears to Hagar. The angel promises that Ishmael will become a great nation in his own right, and then he leads them to water.

Genesis 22

Read: Genesis 22:1–18

¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"
"Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love— Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

¹⁵ The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Here is perhaps the most famous moment in the life of Abraham. He pleaded for the city of Sodom, negotiating earnestly with the Lord, but he makes no such effort here. There is only obedience. We can perhaps see some measure of

faithful hope here, as Abraham tells the servants “We will worship and then we will come back to you” (22:5).

Questions

- What might Abraham have been thinking and feeling during this episode?
- How might it have affected his relationship with and attitude toward the Lord?
- How might it have affected Isaac?

Genesis 23

Decades later, Sarah dies at the age of 127. The Hittites, among whom Abraham now lives, consider him “a mighty prince” (23:6), and they negotiate with him to provide a tomb for her.

Genesis 24

Abraham does not want his son to marry a Canaanite woman. He sends a servant back to his own country and relatives to find a wife for him. Abraham tells the servant that God will send his angel to help him, and the servant obediently goes. In an effort to make things easy on himself, the servant prays and asks God to send a woman to provide for him and his camels at the center of town, as a sign that this woman would be the one. Immediately, Rebekah appears, and she does everything the servant has just asked for. The servant gives gifts of gold and jewels and clothing to her family, and she goes to become Isaac’s wife.

Question: Why doesn’t Abraham want Isaac to marry a Canaanite?

Genesis 25

Abraham remarries and has six other sons (25:2). But these are not part of the covenant any more than Ishmael was—in the course of time, Abraham gives them gifts and sends them away; he leaves everything he owns to Isaac. At the age of 175, Abraham dies, and Isaac and Ishmael bury him alongside Sarah.

We are then told that Ishmael’s descendants go to settle near the border of Egypt, where, as prophesied (16:12), they live “in hostility toward all the tribes related to them” (25:18).

Meanwhile, Rebekah is infertile. Isaac prays to the Lord concerning this matter, and God answers his prayer. Rebekah gives birth to twins, Jacob and Esau—we will focus on them next week.

Genesis 26

Some years later, famine breaks out, and Isaac travels to the land of the Philistines. God appears to him, reaffirming the promises he made to Abraham: “I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions” (26:3–5).

Isaac carries on the family tradition of using the ploy that never works: he tells the Philistines that Rebekah is his sister. Naturally, the ruse doesn’t succeed, as the king, Abimelek (not the same Abimelek), spots Isaac being affectionate with her. Abimelek proceeds to rebuke Isaac (“One of us might have slept with her!”) much in the same manner as the previous kings rebuked Abraham. For a third time, a foreign king is suggested to be more honorable than the Patriarchs gave him credit for. Abraham and Isaac may have been very faithful to the Lord, but it seems they could be poor judges of character.

Isaac plants crops in this land; God blesses him, and he reaps a hundredfold. Isaac becomes so wealthy and his household so large that the Philistines feel threatened. Abimelek says, “Move away from us; you have become too powerful for us” (26:16).

Isaac relocates to Gerar, Abraham’s old stomping grounds. At Beersheba, God appears to him again, reiterating his promises: “I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham” (26:24).

Discussion

Question: Why did God test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac? What did it accomplish?

Question: What parallels are there between the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) and the sacrifice of Christ?

Question: We see both Abraham and Isaac show faith in God for large and significant matters, yet on multiple occasions, they take matters into their own hands and attempt to protect their wives from foreign rulers by deceit.

-Why might these heroes of the faith not show faith in these matters?

Question: In matters obviously out of our control, such as the ability to conceive a child (a struggle faced by both Abraham and Isaac), we have no choice but to trust God, as both Abraham and Isaac did. In contrast, perhaps they thought they could deceive the kings and protect their wives on their own.

-Is it easier or harder to trust God for things we think we can control than for those we can't?

-Is it good or bad to say "I'll just take care of this problem myself"?

-Why?

Lesson 7
Jacob and Esau
Genesis 25–35

Genesis 25

The saga of Jacob and Esau begins with a prophecy. Isaac's wife Rebekah goes childless for nearly twenty years before she finally becomes pregnant. She inquires of the Lord, who tells her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (25:23). This of course is exactly what happens.

Esau is born first, with Jacob grasping at his heel—a bit of foreshadowing of the kind of man he will soon become. As they grow up, Esau becomes a hunter, while Jacob's tendencies are more domestic. Isaac loves Esau more; Rebekah prefers Jacob.

Read: Genesis 25:29–34

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰ He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)

³¹ Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

³² "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"

³³ But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left.

So Esau despised his birthright.

Question: Who is at fault here, and why?

Although Jacob is beginning his career as the Bible's greatest opportunist, both brothers are at fault: Jacob for taking advantage of Esau, and Esau for regarding his oaths so lightly. After he eats, Esau goes off, thinking that surely Jacob was joking, or else that no one could possibly expect this bargain to be enforced.

Genesis 27

Rebekah too must have thought that Isaac would never have accepted this agreement. When the time comes for the blessing to be given, she plots to help Jacob steal it.

Isaac has become old and blind; he senses that his death is near. He asks Esau to go and hunt the wild game that he likes so well; then he will give Esau his blessing. But Rebekah quickly dresses Jacob up as Esau and prepares food for him to take to Isaac. Isaac has questions about Jacob's voice, but the smell of Esau's clothing and the false hairy arms Jacob is wearing persuade him.

Isaac gives Jacob the blessing of the firstborn: "May God give you heaven's dew and earth's richness—an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed" (27:28–29).

Later, Esau comes in to see Isaac, and both men realize what has happened. A bitter exchange ensues, and Isaac can only offer this lesser blessing, which may sound more like a curse: "Your dwelling will be away from the earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck" (27:39–40).

Jacob receives the earth's richness and heaven's dew; Esau will live away from them. Jacob will rule over Esau; Esau will serve. Naturally, Esau holds a grudge against Jacob, and he plots to kill his brother after Isaac dies.

What happens next indicates that Rebekah was aware of the consequences her scheme would have, even if Jacob may not have had a chance to fully consider them. Rebekah has already alienated herself from Esau; she does not want to lose Jacob also—she knows how angry Esau must be. So she plans to send Jacob far away, back to her hometown, to stay with her brother Laban, until such time as Esau's fury subsides.

Rebekah explains this to Isaac with another bit of deception. It is previously mentioned that Esau has married two Hittite women (recall that Abraham went out of his way to find a wife for Isaac from among his own people) and that these women are "a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah" (26:35). Thus, Rebekah says to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob

takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living” (27:46).

Genesis 28

While Isaac may not have agreed with the idea of sending Jacob away to save him from Esau, he is completely on board with finding Jacob a wife from among his own people. Isaac blesses Jacob and sends him off to Rebekah’s family. Esau finally realizes how much his parents dislike his Canaanite wives. In what may not have been the wisest solution to this problem, he goes and marries one of Ishmael’s daughters in addition to his current wives.

Jacob departs for the house of his uncle Laban, and on the way, he has a dream of a stairway (more popularly, a ladder) reaching to heaven, with angels going up and down. God appears and reiterates the promises he has made to Abraham and Isaac: “I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (28:13–15).

When Jacob awakes, he erects a pillar and vows that if the Lord will be with him and take him safely back to his father’s household, he will give God a tenth of everything that he gets.

Genesis 29

Jacob arrives at Laban’s home, where he immediately falls in love with Rachel, the younger of Laban’s two daughters. He agrees to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for her—these years “seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her” (29:20).

If Jacob is the greatest opportunist in the Bible, Laban is the second greatest. When the wedding day arrives, unbeknownst to Jacob, Laban swaps the older daughter Leah in, and Jacob doesn’t realize what’s happened until after the marriage has been consummated (if this seems difficult to believe, the combination of alcohol, eagerness, and darkness explain it nicely). In the morning, Jacob confronts Laban, who says, essentially, “Hey, the older daughter has to get married first.” Laban then lets Jacob marry Rachel in exchange for another seven years of work.

It's tough to imagine, but think about how Leah must have felt. She is less attractive than her younger sister, to the point that her father is apparently having difficulty marrying her off. She is coerced into marrying a man who has no real interest in her and who furthermore is madly in love with her sister—whom he marries as well, the first chance he gets, the very next week. Leah is doomed to spend the rest of her life in Rachel's shadow. Thus, it seems like something of an understatement when we read that Jacob's "love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah" (29:30). But God comes to Leah's aid, and she gives birth to four sons before Rachel has any, earning her status within the family and some measure of Jacob's favor.

Genesis 30

Rachel is naturally upset about not having any children. She takes a page out of Sarah's book and gives Jacob her servant, Bilhah, as a concubine to bear children. Not to be outdone, Leah does the same thing with her own servant, Zilpah. Between Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Jacob is borne ten sons. Only then does Rachel bear a son of her own.

Meanwhile, Jacob has worked off his 14-year debt to Laban, and now he's understandably ready to establish some measure of independence from Laban. He asks Laban to give him the speckled and spotted sheep and goats from the flocks in return for continuing to tend Laban's flocks. Laban agrees—and then removes all of the speckled and spotted ones ahead of time. To counter this trick, Jacob takes the scientifically dubious approach of making striped patterns out of branches and putting them in front of the strongest animals while they mate so that they will give birth to streaked and spotted young, with the end result that the strongest animals born go to Jacob and the weaker ones to Laban.

Genesis 31

It is no surprise that Jacob's new prosperity is revealed to be due to God rather than his avant-garde approach to animal husbandry (31:4–12). After twenty years with Laban, God tells Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you" (31:3).

Jacob leaves without telling Laban; Laban pursues, and catches up to him after a week. After some argument, they make a covenant, agreeing to go their separate ways and not to harm one another.

Genesis 32

Jacob departs from Laban, and he approaches the land of Esau. When he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men, Jacob becomes afraid for his and his family's safety. He sends gifts ahead and spends some time alone, praying that God will save him and reminding God of the promises he has made to Jacob.

Read: Genesis 32:24–28

²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

No longer is Jacob the man who grasps the heel or the one who deceives; he is "Israel," the man who struggles with God.

Question: What significance does this event have in Jacob's life?

Genesis 33

At last, Jacob meets Esau. To Jacob's shock, Esau is glad to see him. Esau has become prosperous in his own right, and he seems to have forgiven Jacob for the transgressions committed two decades prior. Jacob says to Esau, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably" (33:10). Jacob now has everything he has ever wanted; every one of his fears has been laid to rest. God has answered Jacob's prayers.

Genesis 34

But Jacob's story is not over. His daughter Dinah is raped by Shechem, the son of the local ruler, whose father Hamor comes to ask Jacob to allow Dinah to become Shechem's wife. Jacob's sons are outraged at these events, and they are dissatisfied with their father's apparent inaction. Jacob's sons have no intention of letting Dinah stay with these people no matter what they offer in

return, but they tell Shechem and Hamor that if they and all their people will become circumcised, then they will consent to their terms.

Shechem and Hamor agree, and every male in the city is circumcised immediately. But while they are all recovering, Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's full brothers (Leah is their mother), go up and kill every male in the city and rescue Dinah. Then the rest of Jacob's sons come up and loot the city. Jacob rebukes Simeon and Levi, saying, "You have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed" (34:30). But Jacob's sons are unrepentant, saying, "Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?" (34:31).

Genesis 35

Jacob leaves that place and returns safely to Bethel, where he previously had the dream of the stairway to heaven. God appears to him again and blesses him: "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel. I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you" (35:10–12).

Rachel gives birth to her second son—Jacob's twelfth—and then dies in childbirth. Later, Isaac dies at the age of 180, and Esau and Jacob bury him together.

Discussion

Question: Jacob is known—and rightfully so—for his tricks and schemes, and yet God not only never rebuked him for it, he blessed Jacob profoundly. Why?

Follow-Up Question: This doesn't mean, however, that Jacob didn't face any consequences for his actions.

-What consequences did Jacob face for his tricks and deceptions?

Question: As we begin to see here and will see further next week, Jacob's sons are rash, contentious, and vindictive. How might Jacob's treatment of his wives (and concubines) have affected the way his sons turned out?

-What lesson can we learn from this?

Question: Jacob wrestled (or struggled) with God, and it was an event of great significance in his life.

-In what ways (or for what reasons) do we wrestle with God?

-Why is it important to wrestle with God?

Lesson 8
The Sons of Jacob
Genesis 37–50

Genesis 37

Jacob remains in the story almost until the end of the book of Genesis, but here the narrative shifts to focus on his sons, primarily on Joseph, his eleventh son, and first son by Rachel. Jacob had showed obvious favoritism to Rachel, which led to some family trouble; he shows obvious favoritism here to Joseph, which leads to quite a bit more.

Read: Genesis 37:2–11

² Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. ⁴ When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

⁵ Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. ⁶ He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: ⁷ We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

⁸ His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.

⁹ Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

¹⁰ When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Question: What seeds are sown here that will affect the rest of this family's story?

Joseph comes across as the quintessential insufferable teenager here. He's the favorite, he knows it, and he lords it over his brothers with intolerable smugness. He doesn't have the good sense not to tell them that he envisions himself ruling over them, or the awareness to see how badly they hate him.

Eventually, his brothers have had all they can take: some are ready to kill him. Reuben manages to talk them out of it, and they throw Joseph down a cistern instead. But while Reuben is away, the other brothers sell Joseph into slavery. They take Joseph's many-colored robe, cover it with goat's blood, and show it to Jacob, so innocently saying, "Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe" (37:32), as if there could be any doubt. Believing his son dead, Jacob goes into mourning, refusing to be comforted. Meanwhile, Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, the captain of the guard.

Genesis 38

Before the story of Joseph continues, there is an interlude concerning Judah. He leaves his family for a time and marries a Canaanite woman, who bears him three sons. The first, Er, marries Tamar, but the Lord puts him to death because of his wickedness. By custom, the second son, Onan marries her. But because he knows that any child born from this relationship will be credited to Er, he refuses to impregnate Tamar, so the Lord puts him to death as well. Judah is afraid to give her to his third son, so he sends her back to live with her own family.

After Judah's wife dies, as he goes up to check on his flocks, he solicits a prostitute—but she turns out to be Tamar in disguise: she has taken matters into her own hands. She becomes pregnant by Judah and gives birth to twins. Not only does one, Perez, become an ancestor of Jesus, but the participants in this embarrassing incident are included in Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:3).

Genesis 39

We return to Joseph, who excels in everything he does and quickly rises through the ranks of Potiphar's house, eventually becoming Potiphar's steward. God blesses everything Joseph does, and he blesses Potiphar's household on account of Joseph.

Everything seems to be going as well for Joseph as being sold into slavery could—until Potiphar's wife takes a fancy to him. Day after day, she tries to seduce him, but he refuses, saying, "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (39:9). One day, she grabs hold of him and demands that

he sleep with her, but he flees, leaving her with his cloak in her hand. She realizes that she will never have him, and if she cannot, she will destroy him instead. She shows his cloak to Potiphar and accuses Joseph of trying to rape her.

Potiphar has Joseph put in prison: in a single day, everything that Joseph has accomplished for himself in Egypt has been taken away. But God continues to bless everything Joseph does, and in a short time, he is running the prison.

Genesis 40

It comes to pass that the royal cupbearer and baker offend Pharaoh, and he puts them in prison. One night, each of them has a peculiar dream. Joseph correctly interprets these dreams: the cupbearer will soon be restored to his position, but the baker will be executed. Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh, to help him get out of prison. Everything comes to pass as Joseph has interpreted: the cupbearer is freed, but he forgets Joseph.

Genesis 41

Joseph remains in prison for two years, until Pharaoh has two troubling dreams: seven thin cows eating up seven fat cows and seven scorched heads of grain swallowing up seven healthy heads. None of Pharaoh's advisers can interpret the dreams, but at last the cupbearer remembers Joseph.

Joseph is sent for, cleaned up, and brought to Pharaoh. Giving the credit to God, he correctly interprets the dreams: Egypt will experience seven bountiful years and then seven years of famine. Joseph then takes the liberty of advising Pharaoh to store up a fifth of the harvest for the next seven years so that the country can survive the famine.

Pharaoh decides that Joseph is just the man to take charge of this project, and he makes him vizier of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. Joseph marries an Egyptian woman and has two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Joseph excels in his duties, storing up "huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure" (41:49). Then, when the famine strikes, Joseph sells the Egyptians' surplus grain back to them. People from the surrounding countries come to buy food as well because of the extent of the famine.

Genesis 42

Meanwhile, in Canaan, the famine has afflicted Jacob and his family, and Jacob sends all his sons except Benjamin to Egypt to buy grain. When they arrive, Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. Pretending to be a stranger, Joseph treats his brothers harshly, accusing them of being spies.

Read: Genesis 42:14–24

¹⁴ Joseph said to them, “It is just as I told you: You are spies! ¹⁵ And this is how you will be tested: As surely as Pharaoh lives, you will not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. ¹⁶ Send one of your number to get your brother; the rest of you will be kept in prison, so that your words may be tested to see if you are telling the truth. If you are not, then as surely as Pharaoh lives, you are spies!” ¹⁷ And he put them all in custody for three days.

¹⁸ On the third day, Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. ²⁰ But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die.” This they proceeded to do.

²¹ They said to one another, “Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come on us.”

²² Reuben replied, “Didn’t I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood.” ²³ They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter.

²⁴ He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.

Question: Why does Joseph treat his brothers this way?

Joseph remembers the dreams he had as a teenager (42:9), dreams of his ruling over his family. Now they have come to pass, and he is acutely aware of their purpose. No doubt he wishes to see Benjamin—his only full brother—again. Maybe he wants to punish his brothers to some extent for what they did to him. Likely he wishes to see whether there has been any change in their character—perhaps this is why he weeps when Reuben expresses remorse in v. 22.

Joseph sends them on their way, minus Simeon, secretly putting their money back into their luggage along with the grain. The brothers interpret this act of kindness as a terrible mistake, and they expect to have nothing but trouble should they go back to Egypt. Jacob says to them, “You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me! My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left” (42:36, 38).

Genesis 43

Jacob seems to have given Simeon up as lost—he is unwilling to trade Benjamin for him, to put his sons again in the hands of the capricious vizier of Egypt. But finally all the grain they’ve brought back has been eaten, and they must return.

Jacob takes some convincing before he is willing to allow the brothers to take Benjamin, as the vizier had insisted. Jacob finally relents. He insists that they take double the money to correct the “mistake,” plus gifts. He sends all his sons on their way, saying resignedly, “If I am bereaved, I am bereaved” (43:14).

When they arrive again in Egypt, Joseph takes his brothers to his own house for a meal. The brothers are still frightened and confused, fearing that Joseph is going to make them into slaves. But Joseph tells them not to be afraid, saying, “Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver” (43:23). Then he returns Simeon to them. Still hiding his identity, Joseph asks about his father, and when he sees Benjamin, he is overcome with emotion. At dinner, he continues to prank his brothers by seating all eleven of them in order by age.

Genesis 44

Joseph makes more trouble for them when they leave by having his silver cup hidden in Benjamin’s sack. Then he has them all arrested for theft and brought back to the city. Joseph says he will keep Benjamin as a slave; the rest are free to go. Best guess, Joseph does this to see whether his brothers will sacrifice their brother for their own well-being, just as they had with the teenaged Joseph. But Judah, who has personally guaranteed Benjamin’s safety to Jacob (43:8–9), presents an eloquent case, explaining that Benjamin is the most beloved of their father’s remaining sons and that his loss will destroy Jacob. Judah offers to remain as Joseph’s slave in place of Benjamin.

Genesis 45

Joseph can take no more. Overcome with emotion again, he finally reveals himself to his brothers, who cannot believe it until he explains everything to them. Joseph holds no grudge against them; he recognizes that everything that has happened has been according to God's plan—to save many lives by preparing for the famine, including those of his own family.

After this happy reunion, Joseph tells his brothers to go back and bring Jacob and the whole family down, that he will look after all of them. Pharaoh hears about it and goes a step further, promising to give Joseph's family "the best of the land of Egypt" (45:18). When the brothers return, Jacob doesn't believe them, and who can blame him? He isn't convinced until he sees all the provisions Joseph has sent back with them.

Genesis 46–47

God appears to Jacob in a dream, reassuring him about moving the entire household to Egypt. Joseph goes out to meet Jacob, and the two have an emotional reunion. The family is permitted to settle in Goshen, where they pasture their flocks.

Meanwhile, the famine continues, and Joseph is making a killing on it for Pharaoh. He sells grain to the people until they are out of money. Then he sells it to them in exchange for their livestock. Finally, he sells it to them in exchange for ownership of their fields—but still the people must work the fields and give twenty percent of their produce to Pharaoh.

Genesis 48–50

Jacob grows old and is near death. He calls Joseph and his sons to him to bless them. In a scene reminiscent of previous goings-on with Jacob and Esau, he blesses the younger to become greater than the older. Then Jacob blesses all twelve of his own sons, with the longest blessing reserved for Joseph. As his last request, Jacob asks to be buried in Canaan instead of Egypt. He dies, and his sons return to Canaan to fulfill his request—along with a procession of Egyptian dignitaries.

When they return to Egypt, however, Joseph's brothers worry that he will now take revenge on them. They throw themselves at his feet. But Joseph has dealt with them sincerely. He says, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:19–20).

Joseph lives to a ripe old age, and his deathbed request foreshadows the events of Exodus all the way through the book of Joshua. To his family, he says, “God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place” (50:24–25). This wish will be fulfilled some 400 years later, when Moses will take Joseph’s remains when he leads the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 13:19), and he will later be buried in Shechem—where God affirmed his covenant with Abraham—after Joshua completes Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 24:32).

Discussion

Question: What qualities made Joseph popular and successful? How do we cultivate these qualities in ourselves?

Question: Joseph went from being the favorite son of a wealthy man to being a slave, and later from being a well-regarded steward to an imprisoned slave.

-What effects did these hardships have on Joseph’s character?

-What effects can hardship have on our character?

Question: Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, and yet he was able to forgive them.

-What does it take to get past that sort of hurt and forgive?

Question: Looking back, Joseph was easily able to see how and why God had led him to where he was. However, it is often difficult (if not impossible) to find God’s purpose in the midst of our difficulties.

-How do we trust God during times of hardship and delay?