

# **Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies**

## **Genesis**

## Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2009.

We will be looking at the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. Please add any comments or questions you have online. Later on, probably in March, we would like to have a face-to-face discussion of the book with all who are doing the study. We'll give more details closer to March.

### I. Genesis 1:1-2:4a – “In the Beginning”

The book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible. It literally means “beginning.” The account of creation is not only a description. It is also a definition of what life is and how it should be lived. Most scholars believe there are two accounts of creation which have been placed at the beginning of the Bible. The first goes from chapter 1:1-2:4a.

The Genesis account is not intended to be a scientific picture of creation since modern science was unknown at the time it was written. Nonetheless, there are some scientists who have commented on the ways it does follow what we know from science. However, as noted above, the purpose of this account is to *define* creation in terms of the activity of God and the role and nature of human beings.

In many ways this opening is part of a prologue to the main story of the book which focuses not on creation but on redemption, the salvation of fallen humanity through God's calling of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the theme of redemption that ultimately defines life for us in the twenty-first century.

#### A. The beginning of life – 1:1-13

- a. The picture given of creation is not of emptiness but rather of “a formless void.” Darkness covers the face of the deep or the waters (sea). There is a strong possibility that this account was written down when Israel was in bondage to the Babylonians. The intention of the author (inspired by the Holy Spirit) would have been to contradict the Babylonian account of creation.

Genesis belongs to the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah (“law” or “teaching”) or Pentateuch (“five books”). These books are identified with Moses. We are told that Moses wrote the sections on the law (Ex. 24:4). However, it is unlikely that Moses wrote of himself in the third person, described his own death and referred to himself as the most humble person on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3)! Most scholars believe that the final form of the Torah or Five Books of Moses came into their present form at a later time, possibly during the captivity in Babylon. The fact the books went through a process of development

in no way lessens the fact that the final written form was inspired by the Holy Spirit (II Tim. 3:16).

- b. According to the Babylonian account, the world began with two sea serpents, Apsu and his wife, Tiamat. They give birth to the first race of gods. Apsu is annoyed by all the noise which the gods make, so he determines to kill them. However, the gods learn of his intention and kill him first. This introduces a classic mythical theme, that a son (or daughter) must kill or defeat their father in order to enter fully into life. Tiamat is actually a more dominant figure than Apsu, and she plots revenge against the first generation of gods. She conjures up a race of “gods and monsters” to destroy the first gods. The gods, however, give birth to a great hero, Marduk (or Bel), who destroys the murderous mother serpent-goddess, Tiamat. Marduk then cuts up the body of Tiamat, and from her carcass, he creates the world. It is interesting that the name “Tiamat” is somewhat similar to the Hebrew word for “deep” which is “tehom.”
- c. The Biblical account is radically different from the Babylonian myth.
  - i. There is one God, not many.
  - ii. There is no conflict which results in creation.
  - iii. God’s creative power is his Word. He speaks the world into existence. Light appears first. At this point, there is no sun nor stars. Some may see in this a type of explosion like the “big bang.” Yet as John retells the account, light has a spiritual reality which overcomes the darkness of evil. The Word, of course, for John is Christ (John 1:1-9). He is the agent of creation (Col. 1:15-17).
  - iv. Prior to God’s Word, the world is a dark, watery chaos. Once God’s Word is revealed, the world not only receives light, but order. There is morning and evening.
- d. There are a number of important spiritual truths in these opening verses:
  - i. God has no rivals. Whereas other cultures believed in many gods, Scripture makes clear there is only one, and he is supreme (When God says, “Let there be light,” no one says “Keep things dark.”).
  - ii. God alone provides order in our lives. Apart from God, the world appears as a “formless void” with darkness in its depths.
  - iii. Conflict and violence are not natural. Peace and order are. This has enormous implications for how we see life. Many ancient cultures believed that violence and war were the normal state of affairs. The Bible shows this is not true.
  - iv. The Bible uses the symbolism of the Babylonian account on several occasions. It speaks of the Leviathan which is another name for the ancient sea serpent (Pss. 74:12-17; 104:24-26; Job 41:1-34). It pictures God symbolically as Marduk destroying the sea serpent with his sword (Isa. 27:1). In other passages, Marduk or Bel is spoken of in mocking terms, Isa. 46:1; Jer. 50:2; 51:44).

- e. God separates the sky and the land from out of the waters of chaos. Again, this is an important spiritual picture. Water in Scripture is a symbol of life but also a symbol of death. Certainly the dark void of Genesis 1 presents water in a threatening light. It is God's intention from the very beginning of creation to separate out the basis of life from the waters. This is a key theme in Scripture. God delivers the children of Israel through the depths of the Red Sea (Exodus 15). The psalmist speaks of being rescued by God "out of mighty waters" (Ps. 18:16). God promises Israel, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa. 43:2). The lesson for us, then, is whatever deep waters we are called to go through in life, we need to remember that God from the beginning has pushed those waters aside. He is always with us to deliver us.

#### B. Light and Life – 1:14-25

- a. On the fourth day, after God has overcome the chaos of the deep and established light and order, he now creates the sun, moon and stars. There is a clear purpose here, "to separate the light from the darkness." This is a fundamental theme of Scripture. There is darkness in the world. Darkness in one sense can represent the mystery of God (Ex. 20:12; I Kings 8:12; Ps. 18:9-11; Joel 2:2). Darkness also represents sin, evil and destruction (I Sa. 2:9; Pss. 82:5; 91:6; Isa. 60:2; Micah 7:8; Matt. 6:22-23; John 1:5; 3:19; Rom. 13:12). The darkness of God (as in the plague in Egypt, Ex. 10:21) may be a sign of judgment. However, the creation story makes clear that darkness is not God's ultimate intent. His intent is to give light.
- b. On the fifth day, God creates the animals, the "living creatures." Life comes out of the sea. The birds are created. As a comment on the Babylonian view, God even creates the "sea monsters" (1:21). This is to show that figures like Tiamat or Leviathan were not the original beings. They were created by the true God. Now the earth, in turn, on the sixth day, brings forth its "living creatures" of every kind. All are created by God.

#### C. God finishes creation – 1:26-2:4a

- a. God's final creative act is creating humanity.
  - i. Human beings, unlike everything else, are created in the image of God.
  - ii. Humanity is both male and female.
  - iii. Human beings are given dominion (not domination) over the whole of the earth.
  - iv. Everything that God made was "very good."
  - v. God rests on the seventh day. There is no morning and evening to this day. God's Sabbath rest is eternal (Heb. 4:1-11).
- b. There are enormous implications to this passage:
  - i. All human beings bear the image of God. All humans are therefore equal and possess an essential dignity. In the Babylonian Creation story, humans were created to be slaves of the gods. The difference is vast. The biblical definition relates strongly to how we view other people,

especially those who differ from us. All humanity shares in the image of God (Ps. 8:3-8).

- ii. Men are not human without women nor are women human without men. Both sexes share God's image equally (I Cor. 11:11-12).
- iii. Everything that God has created is good. This should color our whole view, not only of humanity, but of the world and everything in it. Certainly that which is good can be misused (and we will see that clearly when sin comes into the world). Yet the essential goodness of the world should lead to a much more positive outlook than Christians have sometimes had (I Tim. 4:4-5; Titus 1:15).
- iv. Human beings have been given the care of God's creation. This has implications for anything that would despoil God's world or exploit it for selfish reasons. This is our stewardship and the creation story reminds us that we will be held accountable for our dominion of the earth.
- v. The principle of a Sabbath rest is built into creation. This rest is not simply a time for leisure but also a recognition that God's work is completed. In the context of the New Testament, this refers to God's completed work of salvation in Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:12). God's people have sometimes taken a legalistic approach to the Sabbath. Jesus himself resists this (Matt. 12:1-12; Luke 13:1-16; 14:1-6). Part of the principle of a Sabbath rest is that we are to be free from worry not just on the Sabbath, but always (Matt. 6:25-34).

## Questions for us –

1. How can we apply the principle of God's ordered creation, as opposed to the view that conflict and violence are essential, to the way we live our lives? Do we view conflict as necessary? How does the Genesis creation account challenge that view?
2. What is the significance for all of us of the images of water in this passage? How does water represent both death and life? How does this apply to Jesus' statement that we are to be "born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5)? Does this have implications for our view of baptism?
3. How should the fact that we are made in the image of God affect the way we view ourselves, our world and other people?
4. Do we view creation as "very good?" Why or why not?

## I. Genesis 2:4-3:24 – “Creation and Fall”

We come now to the second scene of creation in Genesis. Here we have the origin of human beings in their relation to God, to the world, to the animals and, ultimately, to the problem of good and evil. This section begins with a word which has the same root as the opening word in the Babylonian creation account. We also have similar motifs from other ancient literature like the Gilgamesh Epic. Yet the world view of the biblical writers could not be more different from the mythical outlook of these earlier sources. It is important to note the differences because they give us an important insight into the essential contrast between the Word of God and the wisdom of the world (I Cor. 1:20-23). This passage answers two essential questions: where did we as human beings come from, and why is there suffering and evil in God’s “very good” world (Gen. 1:31)?

### I. The creation of “Adam” (“Man”) – 2:4-17

- a. This is a different version of the creation than we found in chapter one. As we mentioned in the first study, Genesis is not offering us a description of the origin of life. It is giving us a *definition*, telling us what is the purpose and meaning of life. Also, it is presumably being written down during the Babylonian captivity of the sixth century B.C., against the backdrop of the religious teachings of Babylon and the surrounding world.
- b. In chapter two, the priority is on the creation of human beings, which was presented in just two verses in chapter one (1:26-27). Here, God creates Adam before the creation of any of the plants. Adam is created from the dust of the earth. In the Hebrew, there is a play on words since “Adam” is very similar to the word for soil or ground (“dama”). The mention of the rivers locates the setting near the Persian Gulf, in other words, in an identifiable part of the Babylonian Empire.
- c. Adam is specifically created when God breathes into him “the breath of life” and he becomes a “living being” (2:7). This is important because it underlies the unified nature of humanity. Unlike the Greeks, who saw human beings as immaterial souls imprisoned in physical bodies, the Bible shows that all of humanity – physical, emotional and spiritual – comes from God. This amplifies the idea of chapter one that we are all made in the image of God. The implications of this are important since everything we are in our humanity therefore represents the image of God in us. All our thoughts, feelings, needs, desires and gifts originally come from our creator.
- d. God places Adam in the Garden of Eden. This garden is a special creation. Adam now encounters the first major mystery of creation. God establishes boundaries. All the fruit of the garden is for Adam’s use and enjoyment with the exception of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. While the origin of goodness is presented in the creation story, especially throughout the first chapter (vv. 12, 14, 18, 21, 25, 31), we have no information about the origin of evil. This led Augustine to conclude that evil is not a “thing” in itself. Rather, it is the absence of good (as cold is the absence of heat). This view has not been universally accepted.

## II. The creation of Eve – 2:18-25

- a. God says that “it is not good that the man should be alone.” This underscores the point that humans are social beings. We are created to be in community. This is why loneliness is one of the most painful experiences we can ever encounter. Throughout both these accounts, the importance and dignity of humanity is affirmed. This is very different from the Babylonian Creation view where humans are created for the sole purpose of serving the gods.
- b. God will create “a helper as his partner.” This helper is not to be subservient or a lesser being but rather one who will be a partner for the man. This view is to be distinguished from the later Greek view that women were inherently inferior to men.
- c. We next have the scene of Adam naming all the animals. This establishes Adam’s special status in creation. Yet none of the animals can serve as his partner. In other words, a dog may be “man’s best friend,” but he cannot be his partner.
- d. God now causes a deep sleep to fall on Adam. This signifies that Adam is not able to define, much less create, his partner. God does not consult with Adam regarding a suitable partner. God will create the partner. Adam is completely passive in this process.
- e. God takes one of Adam’s ribs to create Eve who will be “the mother of all living” (3:20). This is a title similar to that of the ancient goddess, Inanna. The point of Genesis, however, is that while Adam and Eve are the first humans, there is nothing divine about them. In fact, the desire to become “like god” will be the origin of sin and evil. God next brings the woman to the man. Now for the first time we have the words for “male” and “female.” “Adam” can be taken to mean humanity in general.
- f. Adam recognizes a counterpart in the partner God has created. She is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. The writer then adds the explanation of why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife. They become one flesh. They are naked and not ashamed. This is to affirm the fundamental goodness of sexuality as God originally designed it. In the Babylonian myths, nakedness symbolizes vulnerability as well as sexuality. Here, the unselfconscious nakedness of Adam and Eve symbolizes their innocence.

## III. The Fall – 3:1-24

- a. In the opening scene of chapter three, we are introduced to the serpent, who is “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.” The serpent clearly then is part of God’s creation. Yet the serpent opposes the Word of God. This is our first introduction to opposition to God’s will. How the serpent comes to be this way we are not told. According to Jesus, Satan was a sinner and a murderer “from the beginning” (1 John 3:8; John 8:44).
- b. The serpent is a personification of evil. He speaks and, at this point, does not crawl on the ground. The figure of a “serpent goddess” was a familiar one throughout the ancient world. This would describe the sea serpent Tiamat in the Babylonian creation myth. The serpent was already seen as a figure who

frustrates humanity's plans. In the Gilgamesh Epic, Gilgamesh finds the magic plant which gives eternal youth only to lose it to a serpent. The idea, however, of a talking animal, so familiar to us in fairy tales, apparently occurs here for the first time. The point needs to be stressed that evil, and in particular, Satan, is often presented in Scripture in mythical or symbolic terms. Satan is described as both a serpent and a dragon (Isa. 27:1; Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

- c. The symbolism of the serpent certainly reveals the character of Satan:
  - i. The serpent begins by asking a question, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" God never said this.
  - ii. Eve correctly states God's terms. They could eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Presumably the reason for this was that by eating the fruit of *that tree* a person participated in evil.
  - iii. The serpent now contradicts the Word of God: "you will not die." The serpent then offers the lie that by eating the fruit Eve and Adam will "be like God."
  - iv. Eve responds to the serpent's lie. She now looks again at the fruit. She sees that the tree
    1. was a delight to the eyes
    2. was desired "to make one wise"
  - v. This is a perfect description of sin. Terence Fisher said that if evil were ugly it wouldn't be a problem (When Fisher filmed *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, he made Hyde dashing and attractive rather than ugly and monstrous).
- d. Eve takes the fruit, eats it and gives it to Adam "who was with her." In many of the ancient myths, women would use sexuality to seduce men to do their will. There is no suggestion of that here. Unfortunately, the myth of women in general being treacherous seductresses does get picked up later in church history. Even when scripture does speak of seductive women, it makes it clear that this is only a very limited kind of woman (the "strange woman" of Proverbs 5). In the Gilgamesh Epic, which would have been widely known in this culture, a prostitute seduces a man who lives only with animals in order to give him wisdom. The Biblical account gives a totally different picture.
- e. It is often assumed that the eating of the forbidden fruit is the fall. Yet part of this rebellion is what follows when Adam and Eve try to hide from God. They see their nakedness now as a cause of shame and sew together fig leaves and loincloths to cover themselves. They cannot, however, cover up their sin.
- f. The rich symbolism of this account continues with the picture of God "walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." God, of course, knows what they have done and confronts them.
- g. In a very illuminating sequence, Adam and Eve (like us) refuse to take responsibility for their actions. Adam blames Eve and, by implication, God ("The woman whom you gave to be with me"). Eve blames the serpent.
- h. God is not fooled (Gal. 6:7). He holds Adam, Eve and the serpent all accountable. The serpent will crawl upon the earth. The woman will experience pain in childbirth and be ruled by her husband. Man's work will

become burdensome and hard. All of this is the curse of sin. The goodness of God's creation has been tarnished, not by God, but by the rebellion of those whom he created.

- i. It is inevitable and fitting that Adam and Eve are driven out of the garden. We now learn of a tree of life which they will be prevented from approaching. Death will be their fate as God had warned (2: 17).
- j. The word of hope in all this is God's promise in 3:15. The seed or offspring (descendent) of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. The serpent will strike his heel. Apparently, if one is bitten by a poisonous snake in the heel, there is a better chance of survival since there are fewer blood vessels in the heel than in other parts of the body. To be struck on the head, however, is fatal. This is the first prophecy of the coming of Christ in the Scriptures. Jesus will drive out the ruler of this world (John 12:31). He will destroy the devil and his works (Heb. 2:14; I John 3:8). It is significant to note that, as important as the theme of Christ being the sacrifice for our sin is, the first mention of the atonement in Scripture focuses on Jesus' victory over Satan.

## Questions for us –

1. What do we learn about the nature of ourselves in this passage? Why is it important to realize that all of us receive the breath of God (the word for breath is the same for "spirit")?
2. What do we learn from this passage about the nature of men and women? How does the theme of "a partner" relate to unmarried persons? What do we learn from this about the nature of human community, especially the community of the church?
3. How do we apply the lessons of sin and temptation in these chapters to ourselves? What are some of the ways that sin offers us the false promise of "delight" and "wisdom?" How can we recognize the voice of the serpent today in our world?

## Book of Genesis – Part III

### I. Genesis 4:1-6:10 – “Chaos, Judgment and Mercy”

Once Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden, the events of human history become dominated by sin. Yet in all these tragic events, God’s mercy shines through, as it did after the fall with God’s promise of the woman’s offspring (3:15) and God’s clothing Adam and Eve (3:21). Nonetheless, as human history continues, we encounter the first murder, cosmic rebellion including both celestial beings (‘sons of God,’ 6:4) and humans, and a degenerating into complete evil (6:5). We reach the depths of a situation where God sees the wickedness of humans everywhere and reaches the point where he decides to destroy not only the humans he had made in his own image (1:27), but the animal kingdom as well (6:7). In the midst of this chaos, we encounter a remarkable exception, Noah, who is “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (6:9).

#### IV. Murder in the Family - 4:1-17

- a. We read of the birth of Cain and Abel. Abel is a shepherd and Cain is essentially a farmer. Both bring offerings to the Lord. We read that the Lord “had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” No explanation is given about the respective offerings, why one was accepted and the other not. This is perhaps our first true encounter with the sovereignty of God in Scripture. In a famous text (Ex. 33:19), God says he will be gracious to whom he will be gracious and merciful to whom he will be merciful. Our initial reaction is to think that this is unfair. Yet God is under no obligation to us. He is free to choose as he desires.
- b. Understandably, Cain takes offense and becomes angry. God makes it clear to Cain that he personally is not being rejected (v. 6). This really is a test for him. God tells him that sin is lurking at his door. He must resist it (the root word for “lurking” here can also be taken as a reference to a demon). The important thing to note here is that Cain has committed no offense. God simply chose not to accept his sacrifice. Cain has to resist the temptation to give in to his anger and resentment.
- c. Cain however does give in to his anger. He takes Abel out into the field and there kills him. In an echo of God’s question to Adam after the fall, he asks Abel, “Where is your brother?” (v. 9; cf. 3:9). Cain answers with a direct lie followed by an evasive comment. He denies knowing where Abel is and then adds, “am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9). Of course, the answer is “Yes,” we are all each other’s brother and sister (Matt. 25:31-46).
- d. God can neither be deceived nor evaded (Gal. 6:7). The phrase that Abel’s blood is crying out to God from the ground (v. 11) supports the idea that God has built a moral order into his creation.

- e. Cain is sent out to be a “fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (v. 14). As the ground resisted his father, Adam, it will resist Cain even more (.4:12; 3:17). The symbolic character of the story is underscored by the fact that Adam and his family aren’t the only people on the earth. Cain is afraid that someone might kill him (vv. 14-15). We then read of Cain’s wife. One possibility here that fits in with our tradition of Reformed Theology is that God chose Adam and Eve as representatives of the human race. They were apparently not the only humans God had created.

#### V. A Chronicle of Human History – 4:18-5:32

- a. This next section, which has challenged interpreters, appears to be a history of the development and decline of human history following the emergence of sin.
- b. We learn of the following:
  - i. Jabel who was the ancestor of those who live in tents and have livestock (5:20). This is important because it describes the kind of life that will later be lived by Abraham.
  - ii. His brother, Jubal, introduces music and musical instruments into history (4:21).
  - iii. Tubal-cain develops tools (4:22)
  - iv. The reference to the speech of Lamech (4:19, 23-24) shows that the violence introduced by Cain continues to affect humanity.
  - v. The birth of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve (4:25).
- c. The creation of human beings is again referred to (5:1-2). The story of the birth of Seth is repeated suggesting that this is an additional account. The main point of this section seems to be the longevity of humans before the flood. The point of this may be that the growing reality of sin shortens the lives of human beings.
  - i. We learn of Enoch “who walked with God” (5:24).
  - ii. Enoch gives birth to Methuselah who becomes the oldest person in history (he lives for 969 years! – 5:27).
  - iii. Methuselah gives birth to Lamech (5:25), who in turn gives birth to the next major figure in Genesis, Noah (5:28-29).
  - iv. Noah will be the first example of a redeemer figure. He will bring “relief from our work and from the toil of our hands” (5:29). This is the first stage of the fulfillment of the prophecy of a savior coming from the “offspring” of the woman (3:15). **This is the beginning of the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation.**

#### VI. The Return to Chaos – 6:1-10

- a. Remember our suggested thesis that the book of Genesis was composed during the Babylonian Captivity (586-538 BC)? I also suggested that these stories could well have been told to Hebrew children to give a very different view of the world than the one they

found in Babylon. As these various figures and accounts are being told, we can imagine a child asking, "But if the world was created by the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, where did the Babylonian heroes like Marduk and Gilgamesh come from?" Here is the answer.

- b. There were celestial beings, obviously created by God, who nonetheless had some human characteristics ("sons of God," 6:2; cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps. 82:6-7). These "sons of God" went after human daughters. The result were giants (Nephilim, 6:4; Num. 13:33; Deut. 2:10-11) and "the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown." This then was the origin of the figures in the Babylonian myths.
- c. However, instead of these "heroes" being positive figures, they quickly are seen as examples of the great wickedness of humankind on the earth (6:5). The great statues in Babylon (Dan. 3:1) then represented beings who were opposed to the true God.
- d. This is a devastating indictment. God sees that "every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (6:5; Ps. 14:3; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:23).
- e. The wickedness of the earth is so great that God plans to destroy all living beings, humans as well as animals.
- f. There is one critical example, Noah, who has "found favor in the sight of the Lord." In the midst of spiritual darkness (Eph. 6:12), God provides a redeemer. The story of salvation moves forward.

## Questions for Us –

1. Are there times when we, like Cain, are angry with God? How can we recognize sin "lurking" at our door on these occasions?
2. God is prepared to destroy all living beings on earth because every inclination of the thoughts of the human hearts was only evil continually (6:5). What do we make of this statement? Does it seem too strong for us? Do we believe that ancient people were worse than we are?
3. What do you think Genesis means when it says that people like Enoch and Noah "walked with God" (5:24; 6:9)? What does it mean for us to "walk with God" in the midst of the evil that we encounter in the world?

## Book of Genesis – Part IV

### I. Genesis 6:11-9:28 – “Judgment and New Life”

The story of Noah continues with the utter corruption and violence of the earth. God carries out his threat to destroy the creation he has made (6:7). A cosmic flood is sent as God’s judgment upon the earth (the flood actually begins with the “fountains of the great deep” bursting open, 7:11). We learn that Noah, having found favor with the Lord (6:8), obeys God continually. Noah and his family are gathered safely into the ark and saved from the earth’s destruction. The account of Noah is referred to throughout the Scriptures as an example of both God’s judgment and gracious salvation (Isa. 54:9; Matt. 24:36-39; Heb. 11:7; I Peter 3:18-22). Noah is a symbol of God’s salvation but he himself is not that salvation nor is he ultimately a savior. Even after the flood, the human condition is not improved. Noah becomes drunk. One of his sons defiles him. God nonetheless has established an everlasting covenant that never again shall a flood destroy the world (9:11). Noah is the guarantee that human history will continue. More importantly, God’s plan of salvation will continue to unfold.

#### I. The Coming of the Flood – 6:11-7:16

- a. God sees that the world is corrupt and full of violence. God then gives instructions to Noah, “a righteous man” who had “found favor with the Lord.”
- b. God will destroy everything on earth (6:17). Obviously the sea and water animals will survive. It is interesting but not clear why the distinction is drawn between animals that have the “breath of life” and those that do not. Noah is to take his family with him into the ark. There is no suggestion that Noah should warn the inhabitants of the earth of their impending judgment. This was also the case with Sodom and Gomorrah. Contrast their fate with that of Ninevah, to whom God sent Jonah with a call for repentance. This strongly suggests that there is a level of corruption beyond which there is no longer an offer of repentance and redemption, or that calls for repentance have been ignored for so long that God becomes silent as he moves to judgment (Isa. 1:15; Amos 8:11-12; Rev. 8:1).
- c. The critical statement about Noah is that “he did all that God commanded him.” Noah is presented as an example of faith in Hebrews 11:7. We are never told that Noah understands what God is doing. He is obedient to God’s Word even if it doesn’t make sense to him (as Bill Cosby so effectively notes in his famous routine).
- d. Noah is commanded to take “seven pairs” of the various kinds of animals. God adds that in “seven days” he will send rain on the earth for forty days and nights and every living thing will be destroyed. The number seven signifies perfection.
- e. We’re told that Noah was six hundred years old at the time of the flood. These numbers may also be symbolic. Noah and his family along with the animals go into the ark. The flood actually begins with “all the fountains of the

great deep” bursting open. This suggests a return to the watery chaos at the opening of Genesis. The windows of the heavens are opened. There is some thought that the flood was the result of a major eruption on the floor of the Mediterranean Sea which then caused the clouds to send rain. Not surprisingly, such a major event was remembered throughout the ancient world. In *The Gilgamesh Epic*, the gods decide to destroy the earth because humans are too noisy. They send a flood and only Utnapishtim and his household are saved by being told to build a large boat. The Greek version has Zeus angered at the behavior of humans and sending a flood, but the son of Prometheus, Deucalion, is warned and builds an ark. These other accounts are mythical variations of the Noah story. The striking thing is that there are many versions of the story which supports the idea that the flood really happened.

- f. At the conclusion of all Noah’s preparations, God shuts the door of the ark (7:17). All the preparations in the world are fruitless unless God intervenes. God alone has the power (Num. 11:23).

## II. The End of the Judgment – 7:17-8:32

- a. We read that the flood continued for forty days covering “all the high mountains” (7:19). It is not necessary to think in terms of the flood covering what we know of the whole earth. The idea here may be a flood covering the known world. Only Noah is left. This is a pattern of God’s extreme judgment. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, only Lot and his family survive (and even then, Lot’s wife looks back).
- b. There is the great statement that “God remembered Noah” (8:1). To remember in this sense is more than just to recall. God remembers always in the context of his promises. Judgment will end but the promises of God are forever (Ex. 2:24; 6:5; Pss. 25:7; 30:5; Luke 23:42; I Cor. 15:26). Others may forget us, but God will always remember (Ps. 27:10).
- c. As in the original creation, God sends a wind (the same word as spirit) over the earth and the waters subside. After forty days, Noah sends out a raven. Then he sends out a dove which returns because the trees have not yet appeared. Noah sends the dove a second time and it does not come back. God then tells Noah that he and his family can leave the ark (8:15-16). The important thing to note here is that it is not the ark which delivers Noah. He and his family are in the hands of God throughout all this. Noah and his family receive the same instruction that God gave to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28; 8:17). Creation is beginning again.
- d. Noah then offers sacrifices to God (8:20). God accepts the sacrifice and promises never again to “destroy every living creature.” Yet human nature has not changed. It is still the case that the “inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (8:21; cf. Jer. 17:9).
- e. There are many lessons in the story of Noah:
  - i. God is righteous and he will not tolerate sin. The pattern of God’s judgment will recur again before the return of Jesus Christ (Matt. 24:38-39).

- ii. The ark symbolizes God's salvation and the waters of chaos also symbolize the waters of baptism through which we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ (I Peter 3:18-21; II Peter 2:4-10).
- iii. Noah's willingness to obey God's Word is a model for us of faith (Heb. 11:7). We are never told that Noah understands all that is happening. Throughout the entire event he remains obedient to God.

### III. God's Promise and Human Brokenness – 9:1-28

- a. God blesses Noah and his sons (9:1). God reiterates several themes from the original creation. Noah and his family now inherit the mandate given to Adam and Eve to have dominion over the earth and to be fruitful and multiply.
- b. This new creation still has continuity with the previous fallen creation. Since violence began with Cain and Abel and spread throughout the world, God now adds a commandment against the shedding of human blood (9:6). Noah and his family are reminded that they are made in the image of God.
- c. God then establishes his first covenant with humanity. This is a critical moment in the plan of salvation. God will later make a covenant with Abraham and with Moses. These will all lead to the "new covenant" in Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20). Each individual covenant is a form of the one ultimate covenant which is God's promise of a Savior (Gen. 3:15). The covenant with Noah is a guarantee that God will never again send "a flood to destroy the earth," (9:11). The sign of this covenant will be the rainbow (9:12-17).
- d. God remains faithful. Humanity, though, remains broken. Noah is "a man of the soil" (9:20). He grows a vineyard and then becomes drunk on the wine. His son, Ham, the father of Canaan "sees his nakedness." This phrase and the similar one of "uncovering the nakedness" (Lev. 18:6-18) mean more than just looking at a person's nakedness. The phrase is a parallel of having "sexual relations" (Lev. 18:19-20). Some form of perverted incest is clearly implied since Noah, upon waking, sees "what his youngest son had done to him" (9:24). This also explains the very careful reaction of Shem and Japheth (9:23).
- e. Noah lives nine hundred and fifty years (9:28). Humanity has been saved from extinction. They have not yet been saved from sin.

## Questions for Us –

1. What do you think God means when he says that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (8:21)? Do we understand the truth of this statement? Does it seem too harsh? Why?
2. Scripture says repeatedly that Noah alone was righteous before God (6:9; 7:1). What lessons can we learn from the example of Noah choosing to serve God when everyone else around him was corrupt?
3. Peter speaks of the flood being a symbol of baptism (I Peter 3:20-21). How is the flood both a symbol of judgment and of salvation?

## Book of Genesis – Part V - Genesis 10-11 – “God’s Continuing Plan”

Chapters ten and eleven of Genesis conclude what is referred to as the prehistory of the Bible. These eleven chapters give an explanation of who God is, who humans are and what sin is. It is important, I believe, to see these passages in the context of the Babylonian Captivity of Israel which took place during the sixth century B.C. As we’ve seen, the writing down of the inspired Word of God regarding the origin of all things is also a commentary on the false beliefs of the Babylonians. The children of Israel had to teach and pass on the truth of God in the midst of a culture that was very alien to them.

- I. The Table of the Nations – 10:1-32
  - a. This is an attempt to list the known nations of the world that are descended from Noah and his family. One of the points is that, in spite of the differences in geography and language, the whole human race is descended from the same source. Humans then are essentially equal.
  - b. The figure of Nimrod has been much discussed (10:8-9). He is called “the first on earth to become a mighty warrior.” He may have been a pagan deity or hero. It’s hard to know how he relates to what were seemingly earlier heroes mentioned in Gen. 6:4. The most important point is that he was probably a figure known in the Babylon in which this was first written down. There are no gods or heroes outside of the one true God who made heaven and earth.
  - c. All of this represents a new beginning after the flood.
  
- II. The Tower of Babel – 11:1-9
  - a. This is a different story from the Table of Nations. It is a direct commentary on one of the Babylonians’ most cherished beliefs.
  - b. This is a reinterpretation of the story of Marduk who creates the world out of the carcass of the giant sea serpent, Tiamat (cf. Ps. 74:12-17; Isa. 27:1). *In this story* everyone only spoke one language because Marduk had just created human beings and the world (In the Table of Nations it is acknowledged that there already were different languages, 10:5, 20).
  - c. Marduk in *The Babylonian Creation* establishes his rule over the entire cosmos (which he has created) and all gods and goddesses. The suggestion is made to honor Marduk with the building of a great temple. They then proceed to build “Tall Babel Tower.” The lesser gods spend a year in its construction. It was built so high it was called “the symbol of infinite heaven.” Marduk and the other gods have their special lodging within it. A great banquet follows in the tower. Babylon is proclaimed “dear city of god.” The other gods then proclaim Marduk, “King of Kings, Lord of the Lords.”
  - d. Everyone living in Babylon in this period knew this story. It was inscribed and told in all the central gathering places of the city. While up to this point

Genesis has commented on key themes of the Babylonians such as the deceitful serpent (Gen. 3:1), the woman who is “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20), the birth of the great heroes (Gen. 6:1-4) and the story of the universal flood (Gen. 7-8), this last story is a direct contradiction of one of their most sacred beliefs, the building of the Tower of Babel to the glory of the great god, Marduk.

- e. There are several important emphases in the Genesis retelling of this story.
  - i. The Biblical story accepts the premise (for the sake of the narrative) that there was only one language at this time, Babylonian (this is clearly not the case from the Table of Nations).
  - ii. It is not “gods” who build the temple but human beings.
  - iii. The tower rather than rising to “infinite heaven” is a pathetic attempt. The Lord, the true God, has to come down to see it. Nevertheless, these mortals are extending themselves to accomplish the impossible (11:6).
  - iv. God judges them by confusing their language. The attempt of Babylon to be the one world power with one culture and one language fails (cf. Isaiah 13:19; 14:13-15). The people are scattered throughout “the face of all the earth” (11:9).
  - v. Babylon will remain for all time as the symbol of false belief and false gods opposed to the one true God (Isa. 47:1-15; Jer. 50:1-3, “Bel” = Baal; “Merodach” is Hebrew for Marduk; I Peter 5:13; Revelation 17-18). The goddess Ishtar is called “the great whore” (Rev. 17:1), nor will the goddess Inanna, who removes her clothes at the gateway to hell, be spared (Isa. 47:2-4; cf. Mark 6:22 which may refer to the dance of the seven veils in honor of Inanna).

### III. The Birth of Abram

- a. The story of humanity continues picking up apparently from 10:31-32 with the descendents of Shem (11:10). The story of the Tower of Babel than has apparently been inserted into the narrative.
- b. All of this prepares us for the birth of Abram and the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. If Noah is the first savior figure in Scripture, Abraham is the father of faith (Rom. 4:16).
- c. We learn several critical themes about Abram and his family.
  - i. They initially live in Ur of the Chaldeans (11:28). This was a major city in the south of Mesopotamia. It was a center for false gods and included the ritual of human sacrifice.
  - ii. Abram marries Sarai but she is barren (11:29-30).
  - iii. They leave Ur of the Chaldeans and settle in Haran. This sets the stage for the call of Abraham and God’s full plan of salvation.

### IV. A Summary of the Prologue (Genesis 1-11)

- a. There is one God who made the world through his Word. The creation was “very good” (1:31).

- b. Humanity is made in the image of God (1:27). Eve is created to be a partner for the man (“Adam”). It is not good for the man to be alone (2:18-25). Nakedness is neither a symbol of vulnerability nor sexuality as in the Babylonian myths. Here it symbolizes innocence (2:25).
- c. Humanity rebels against God. The sin of Adam and Eve is intensified by Cain’s killing of Abel (4:8) and the entire creation sinking into corruption and violence (6:1-13).
- d. God sends a flood as a sign of judgment. One righteous man, Noah and his family are spared. God gives the rainbow as a pledge that he will not destroy the earth again (8:21; 9:11-13).
- e. However, human nature has not changed. Every inclination of the human heart is evil from youth (8:21). Noah becomes drunk and is violated by his son Ham (9:20-27).
- f. Humanity expands and spreads over the whole earth, each group with its boundaries and language (10:31).
- g. Humanity’s biggest rebellion is the attempt to build the Tower of Babel (11:1-9).
- h. God prepares Abram (who will become Abraham) to begin the plan for the salvation of the world first announced to Adam and Eve after their sin (3:15).
- i. Throughout this entire account the beliefs and values of Babylon are exposed as false. Marduk, Baal, Inanna, Ishtar and the rest are false gods. There is only one true God. Babylon symbolizes the culture of the fallen world. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords will not be Marduk or Caesar, but the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:16).

## Questions for Us –

1. What lessons can we learn living in our modern day Babylon from the way Genesis 1-11 encounters and exposes the myths of Babylon? What are the prominent myths of our time?
2. Even though God often judges human beings, he never abandons us. What hope can we take from that fact?
3. Abram and his family leave Ur and begin the journey to Canaan. This is the journey from the land of false belief to the land of God’s promise. Yet they stop in Haran and settle there before coming to the land of promise. What does this account say about our own spiritual journeys? What encouragement can we take from the fact that leaving the land of false belief does not bring us immediately into the promised land (cf. Moses’ forty years in the wilderness)?

# Book of Genesis – Part VI

## Genesis 12-14 – “The Coming of Abraham”

### V. The Call of Abraham

a. God’s call of Abraham is one of the most pivotal events in Scripture. After the prologue of the first eleven chapters, we now enter into the historical unfolding of God’s plan of salvation. There are several notable features of this call.

1. No reason is given why God calls this man specifically. Unlike Noah, we are not told that Abraham is blameless in his generation or righteous. In fact, we are later told that Abraham and his family worshipped false gods (Joshua 24:2).
2. Abraham is told by God to “go.” Yet he is not told what his destination is to be. He is to go to a country which God will show him (12:1; Acts 7:1-3; Heb. 11:8-10).
3. Through Abraham and his descendents, the nations will be blessed (12:2). God’s blessings and curses will be given through Abraham and his descendents (12:3).
4. Abraham takes his family with him on his pilgrimage. We are not told what reaction they have to being uprooted and sent off to an unknown destination.

### b. The human threat to God’s call – 12:10-20

- i. This is one of the most puzzling but also most provocative accounts in Genesis. There are two very similar accounts in the same book (Gen. 20:1-18; 26:6-11).
- ii. To understand the irony of this story, we need to understand the wife/sister relationship of this period. A man could in effect adopt the same woman as a sister into his family as well as marry her. A wife/sister had a stronger status in the family than a wife alone had. Sarah then was a wife/sister of Abraham.
- iii. Immediately following the account of Abraham’s call, we read that he and Sarah go into Egypt. This prefigures Israel and Jesus’ later journeys to Egypt which are essential to their role in God’s plan of salvation (Ex. 1:1-8; Matt. 2:14-15).
- iv. We read that Sarah was a very beautiful woman (12:11). Nothing is said here of her being of advanced age, although we have already been told that she was barren (11:30).
- v. Fearing for his own safety, Abraham persuades Sarah to say only that she is his “sister.” He is afraid that if he identifies himself as her husband, the Pharaoh will kill him so he can take Sarah as his wife (12:12-13). Given Sarah’s wife/sister status this is a “half truth” which nonetheless is a complete deception.

- vi. Thinking that Abraham is only her brother, the Pharaoh takes Sarah into his palace and rewards Abraham (12:15-16).
- vii. The critical point here is that the promise that Abraham and Sarah will have a great number of descendants (which will also include Jesus Christ- Matt. 1:1) is already in jeopardy through Abraham's actions.
- viii. God intervenes to keep Sarah from being the permanent wife of the Pharaoh, who is understandably upset with Abraham for having deceived him (12:17-19).
- ix. At this early point, we see that God's plan of salvation does not depend on human action. In fact, God carries out his plan in spite of human frailty and failure (Isa. 59:14-17). **This is the first clear demonstration in Scripture of God's grace overriding human activity, cf. I Rom. 5:8; Tim. 1:12-14.**
- x. The irony of this early account continues with the discussion between Abraham and his nephew, Lot, regarding the land they will choose (13:1-7).
- xi. Abraham gives Lot the first choice (13:8-9). Lot chooses the land that appears more fertile and appealing. Unknown to him, he is choosing the future location of Sodom and Gomorrah, names which will live forever as symbols of depravity and the object of God's judgment (13:10-11; cf. Deut. 29:32; Isa. 13:19; Matt. 10:15; II Peter 2:6). Abraham's more rocky choice will be a future land of promise. The lesson here, of course, is that appearances are deceiving. Lot's choice has echoes of Eve's choosing the forbidden fruit because it was "a delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6).

## VI. Abraham the Warrior –Genesis chapter 14

- a. We come now to an important but unfamiliar story of Abraham's role in a local war.
  - i. There is a war taking place between four local kings and five other kings (14:1-9).
  - ii. Abraham, with a little more than three hundred men, enters the war on the side of the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, leading them to victory (14:13-16). Abraham gets involved so he can rescue Lot and his family. This is in spite of the depravity of Sodom and Gomorrah (13:13).
- b. The real importance of the account emerges in the aftermath of the war- 14:17-24.
  - i. Abraham meets Melchizedek who is both a king and a priest. He is the King of Salem, a name which means peace and foreshadows the future Jerusalem (14:18).
  - ii. Melchizedek brings offerings to Abraham including bread and wine. He also praises "God Most High" and blesses Abraham (14:19-20).
  - iii. The somewhat mysterious Melchizedek is one of the most important figures in the Old Testament. He is clearly a type of Christ. We read

later that he is a priest “forever.” Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5:6; 6:19-7:3. His gift of bread and wine is also a foretelling of communion (14:18; Mark 14:22-24).

#### VII. Key Lessons in This Passage

- a. God takes the initiative in the salvation of the human race (12:1-2).
- b. God’s choice is based on himself not on any human accomplishment or achievement.
- c. Obedience to God’s call is essential. Yet this obedience must often be carried out without knowing the specific goal or destination to which God is calling us (12:4).
- d. God intervenes in our lives in surprising ways (12:1, 17).
- e. God’s promises are clear but God may not reveal how those promises will be carried out (13:14-18).
- f. God’s plan cannot be frustrated by human failure or weakness (12:10-20).
- g. God remains faithful to God’s own promises. Yet we need to realize that God’s agenda may be different from our own.

### Questions for Us -

4. How does God call us and intervene in our lives in ways that surprise us? How do we sense that God may be calling us to something that is unfamiliar and new to us?
5. How are we like Abraham and Lot in making choices which lead us into situations which are contrary to God’s will (Gen. 12:11-13; 13:10-13)? What are some of the ways we may have seen God intervening in our lives to protect us from the consequences of our own choices?
6. Abraham for Paul is a great example of someone who lives by the promises of God (Rom. 4:16-20). Abraham does not live to see the fulfillment of these promises (Gen. 12:7; 13:16). What can we learn from his example of living by faith in promises not yet seen?

## Book of Genesis – Part VII - Genesis 15-17 – “God’s Covenant with Abraham”

In these next chapters, God establishes his covenant with Abraham. These chapters refer to prevailing patterns of the ancient world which are understandably foreign to us. What is most crucial is that God makes a promise to Abraham that is everlasting. Abraham’s only response is to believe, trusting in God’s promise. In this extremely crucial section, we have the definition of humanity’s right relationship to God, trusting in God’s promises. However, human impatience cannot wait for God’s fulfillment. Sarah and Abraham try to fulfill the promise on their own with tragic results. God’s promises may seem unbelievable but they are nonetheless certain.

### VIII. God’s Promise – chapter 15

- a. God appears to Abraham in a vision (15:1). An encounter with the living God is terrifying. God’s word to Abraham repeated throughout the Scriptures is “Do not be afraid” (15:1; Ex. 14:13; Joshua 11:6; Isa. 44:8; Matt. 14:27; Luke 1:30; 12:32; Acts 27:23-24).
- b. God identifies himself as a “shield” for Abraham (15:1; Ps. 119:114; Eph. 6:16). He speaks of a “great reward” for Abraham.
- c. Abraham raises the issue that he does not have any children. God then takes him outside and shows him the stars in the heavens and tells him that this is what his descendents will be like (15:5).
- d. In one of the most important verses in the Bible, we read of Abraham’s response. He believes, literally trusts, God and it is “reckoned” or regarded as righteousness (Isa. 28:16). The Hebrew word for “believed” is the root of our word, “Amen.” The apostle Paul emphasizes two essential truths about this statement (Romans 4, Galatians 3):
  - i. Our relationship to God is not based on the law or any religious, much less spiritual or moral, practice. It is based on faith which is trusting in God’s promise. Faith precedes the law by hundreds of years. It precedes even the practice of circumcision.
  - ii. The descendents of Abraham are those who share the faith of Abraham. This includes Gentiles as well as Jews (Gal. 3:8-9).
- e. God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham as a guarantee of his covenant (15:7; 17:8).
- f. God then enacts a ritual with Abraham which was familiar in that period. A number of dead animals are cut in two. The practice of solidifying a covenant or treaty in this time was to have both parties walk between the two rows of cut animals. The idea was that the parties were saying that the same fate should befall them if they failed to keep the terms of the treaty. Given this fact two things are very notable:
  - i. Abraham is placed in a “deep sleep.” Only God presumably carries out the ritual and passes between the cut pieces. In this act God is making a covenant with himself. Abraham is not the partner but

rather the beneficiary (along with his spiritual descendents, Rom. 9:6-8) of God's covenant. This underscores the fact that our promised salvation is dependent on God alone and not on us (John 1:12-13; Rom. 9:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Heb. 6:13-14).

- ii. The reference to a "smoking fire pot" and a "flaming torch" as well as the "terrifying darkness" which descends upon Abraham refer to ancient magical practices designed to protect the participant from witches or evil spirits. In this action, where God places himself both under the terms of the covenant and the ritual expulsion of witches, we see a foreshadowing of the crucifixion in which Christ will himself be broken because of humanity's breaking the covenant (not trusting in God) and will also destroy Satan and his followers (I Peter 2:24; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 12:1-8).

#### IX. The Struggle of Living in the Promise – chapter 16

- a. Even though Abraham has received the great promise of having descendents like the stars of heaven, he and his wife, Sarah, remain childless.
- b. Sarah invokes an established practice of selecting a slave girl to bear her husband's child. According to the law of that time, the child would legally belong to the wife and the slave girl must not seek to take the position of her mistress (Prov. 30:21-23).
- c. Not surprisingly, this practice is far from effective. Hagar, the slave-girl views Sarah "with contempt." Sarah looks to Abraham for support (16:5). Abraham basically opts out (15:6). According to the law of the period, the slave-girl could not be sent away. However, there was nothing to prevent her from being abused. The phrase "dealt harshly" includes the idea of violence.
- d. Hagar flees. An angel of the Lord appears to her and gives her also a promise about her descendents. She is then told to return to her mistress and that the name of her child will be Ishmael, "God who sees" (16:9-11).
- e. The point of this story is that Abraham and Sarah become impatient waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise. They take matters into their own hands. What they do is legal according to the customs of their culture but it is a far cry from God's will. Not surprisingly, as has been the case with human sexual standards throughout history, things turn out poorly. Nevertheless, God's grace is extended to everyone concerned.

#### X. God Seals His Covenant – chapter 17

- a. God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham. Abraham is to walk before God and be blameless. This is a result, not a cause, of his having entered into God's covenant (chapt. 15).
- b. God's covenant with Abraham will be an "everlasting covenant." Therefore the "new covenant" which Jesus speaks about is not completely new but a new form of this eternal covenant (Mark 14:24). Some of the oldest New Testament manuscripts do not have the word, "new." The

point is that relative to the covenant of the law (given to Moses, Rom. 4:13-16), the gospel is a “new” covenant (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8). However, relative to the covenant made with Abraham, it is an eternal covenant which continues and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:6-9). In this sense, Abraham believed in the Gospel (John 8:56).

- c. Ages in this passage are no doubt symbolic. To say that Abraham was ninety-nine when he was given the promise of a son means he was an even one hundred when Isaac was born. Ten symbolizes completeness so one hundred is an intensive (10x10) statement of completeness. Sarah had been barren all along (Gen. 11:30). She and Abraham are clearly past the age of child bearing at this point.
- d. The signs of the eternal covenant here have inspired much debate. They are the promise of the land and the rite of circumcision. The church, beginning with the New Testament, has regarded both as symbolic. Circumcision is not a requirement in the New Testament and its sign is taken over by baptism (Col. 2:11-12). In the same way, the promise of the land is often seen as being fulfilled in the historical reality of the people of God or the church. There is really nothing in this passage to support the present secular state of Israel. On the other hand, there is nothing in Scripture to prohibit the idea of a continuing state of Israel. Paul views Israel in both literal and symbolic terms (Rom. 9:1-8) so we are not necessarily confronted with an either-or here.
- e. When Abraham hears about God’s promise of a son, he laughs (17:17). The promises of God can appear ridiculous to us, especially when we view them in terms of human possibilities (Matt. 19:26).
- f. The chapter ends with a form of christening with the sign of circumcision. Abraham and Sarah are given their official names (17:5, 15).
- g. All the males of Abraham’s household, including Ishmael, are circumcised (17:23). God’s promise is extended broadly. Yet the true son of the promise, Isaac, who will be the ancestor of Christ, has not yet been born.

## Questions for Us –

1. How do we experience faith as trust in the promises of God? What are some of the ways we become impatient with God?
2. How do you relate the description of the covenant in chapt. 15:1-6 with the one in chapt. 17:1-8? Do you see them as the same or different? What do these passages say about the relationship between faith and works (cf. Rom. 4:5; James 2:21-24)?
3. Abraham is our father in faith (Rom. 4:16) yet he laughs at God’s promise (Gen. 17:17). Do you find this fact comforting or disturbing, or both? Why?

## Book of Genesis – Part VIII - Genesis 18-20

### “What Were You Thinking Of?”

This next section of Genesis focuses on a sharp contrast between God's promises and human depravity. God reiterates his promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son. Sarah follows Abraham's example in laughing at the idea. These chapters also include God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah as well as human attempts at solutions to pressing problems. The human attempts fail, often disastrously. God, however, continues to intervene to carry out his plan and purpose.

- I. Promise and Judgment – Chapter 18
  - a. Abraham encounters three visitors, one of whom is clearly God and the other two probably angels (there really is no support for the idea that the three men represent the Trinity).
  - b. Abraham shows both respect in bowing down (18:2) and hospitality in inviting them to a meal (18:3-8).
  - c. Abraham now receives the promise again that he will have a son. When he first heard the idea, he laughed (17:17). This time, Sarah is listening outside the tent and she laughs (18:12). The irony is that their son will be named Isaac, which means “one laughs.”
  - d. The Lord, of course, knows that Sarah laughed. God himself makes the comment. “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (18:14). This refigures the statement of the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary, “For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). Confronted with having laughed, Sarah does what most of us would do. She denies it. She is afraid (18:15). God is not fooled, of course. However, Sarah's lack of faith does not annul the promise, since the promise is not based on her. This is a fundamental lesson in Scripture. God's promises are based on God alone (Heb. 6:13-14). As Paul says in his Epistle to the Romans, “Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!” (Rom. 3:3-4). Paul later states, “for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).
  - e. Abraham's special visitors now set out for Sodom (18:22). The Lord, taking on a human perspective, asks himself whether or not he should tell Abraham of his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In a telling phrase, God says he has chosen Abraham and his descendents to do “righteousness and justice” (18:19). This phrase is repeated throughout the Old Testament referring to God's standard of human conduct. It includes personal faithfulness as well as the care of the oppressed and the poor (II Sam. 8:15; Prov. 21:3; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 22:15-16; Ezek. 18:19). The theme is certainly continued in the New Testament (Matt. 5:6; Gal. 2:10; James 1:27).
  - f. Abraham responds to God's standard with the critical question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (18:25). Abraham's point is that the innocent should not perish with the guilty. God goes even further. He says that he will forgive the “whole place” for the sake of fifty righteous

persons. Abraham evidently realizes that fifty is too unrealistic a number. He works God down to ten (18:28-32). Yet without Abraham being told explicitly, the obvious point is that there is not even ten. There is only Lot and his family. This brings up the familiar point, is there such a thing as an innocent bystander? If you're innocent and there is corruption and evil around you, you will not simply "stand by." If you're standing by in the face of evil or abuse, you're not innocent. We are told later in Scripture that Lot was very distressed by the inhabitants of Sodom (II Peter 2:7).

## II. God's Grace and Human Perversion – Chapter 19

- a. The scene now shifts to within Sodom itself and the situation of Lot and his family. The angelic visitors come to Lot (19:1). He implores them to come to his house, but they say they will spend the night in the town square. Lot realizes how dangerous this is and prevails upon them to come and stay in his house (19:2-3). However, the men of Sodom, learning of the presence of the visitors, surround the house and demand that the two "men" be brought out so that they may "know" them. This reference is clearly sexual (cf. Gen. 4:1). Lot opposes the idea with horror and even offers to sacrifice his virgin daughters to the mob. This underscores the great priority of hospitality in the ancient world.
- b. The men have no interest in the women. They want the angels whom they think are men. This text has been understood as a definition of homosexuality throughout history. However it bears little upon contemporary discussions of the issue since it is really a picture of an attempted gang rape (other texts such as Rom. 1:26-27 are more general). What is striking is that the men of Sodom clearly prefer males as their sexual victims.
- c. Note to reader: don't mess with angels. The crowd is totally unaware of who their intended victims are. They learn quickly as the angels strike them with blindness (19:9-11).
- d. The angels then inform Lot to take his family and get out of Sodom before the impending destruction. Lot's future sons-in-law do not take him seriously. They therefore perish with everyone else in the city. Lot himself lingers and has to be forcibly removed. The family is told not even to look back (19:17). Lot's wife does look back and is turned to salt (19:26).
- e. Sodom and Gomorrah throughout history have been the symbols of human sin and degradation. Their faults include:
  - i. False religion
  - ii. Violence
  - iii. Injustice (Isa. 1:10-17; 3:9)
  - iv. Adultery
  - v. Deceit (Jer. 23:14)
  - vi. Pride
  - vii. Excess food and indulgence
  - viii. Neglect of the poor and needy (Ezek. 16:49)
  - ix. Sexual immorality and perversion (Jude 1:7)

- f. What is striking is that, despite these enormous faults and the fact that Lot knew how perverted the people were, nonetheless, Lot and his whole family had difficulty leaving Sodom. Somehow they had accommodated themselves to the perversions around them. Did Lot's wife look back because she was still attached to the city?
  - g. The irony here is that Lot had chosen to live in the plain of Sodom and Gomorrah because the land had looked appealing to him (13:10-13).
  - h. The perversion continues in the sequel. Lot and his two daughters make their way to a cave in the hills. The daughters think the world has been destroyed and that they are the lone survivors. To continue the cycle of life, the older devises a plan to get their father drunk and then each of them will have sex with him so they can conceive. This is, in fact, what they do. Lot is unaware of the actions of his daughters at the time, but he certainly must have figured out what happened after they became pregnant (you probably didn't hear this story in Sunday School).
  - i. There is a certain perverted logic to their plan. It is a clear indication of human reasoning apart from God. They give birth to the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites, respectively. These two groups will later cause great problems for Israel (Num. 25:1-3; Judges 3:12-14).
  - j. This story has echoes of the situation of Noah who, after being delivered from judgment on a sinful people, fell into drunkenness and sexual perversion at the hand of one of his sons.
- III. "Some People Never Learn" – Chapter 20
- a. We now have another account of Sarah and Abraham. Abraham continues to pass Sarah off as his sister, which in some sense she is (20:12). However, she is also his wife.
  - b. The first account of this took place in Egypt. The second occurs in Gerar with King Abimelech.
  - c. God intervenes to keep Abimelech from unintentionally taking a married woman.
  - d. Abimelech is actually presented in this story as more a person of integrity than Abraham. He confronts Abraham with the statement, "You have done things to me which ought not to be done" (20:10).
  - e. Abraham has devised this scheme, as he did the last time, to protect himself (12:10-13). Sarah does not seem to have been consulted on these arrangements.
  - f. This account is strikingly similar to a situation with Isaac and Rebekah with apparently the same King Abimelech (Gen. 26:6-11). Some commentators therefore think these are just two versions of the same story. Yet they are not identical. If Isaac in fact had followed the example of his father years later, King Abimelech must have thought these patriarchs to be very strange. In a variation of his complaint to Abraham, Abimelech says to Isaac, "What is this you have done to us?" (Gen. 26:10). In other words, "What were you thinking of?" (Gen. 20:10).

- g. We cannot be sure of all the details of these events. Was it really the case that the older Sarah was so attractive that Abimelech took her into his (presumed) harem? Surely the spiritual point is the main emphasis. Human decisions apart from God's Word lead one into bizarre and indeed very sinful situations. This is true of Abraham, Sarah, Lot and his family. People laugh at God and then go their own way with tragic results. This reality is as true today as it was in the days of Genesis (Proverbs 14:12).

## Questions for Us –

1. Sarah laughs at God's promise. The fiancés of Lot's daughters laugh at the impending judgment of Sodom. What are ways that people in our world laugh at God? How do we laugh at God? Why do you think Sarah is spared and the fiancés are destroyed?
2. Many people associate Sodom and Gomorrah only with homosexuality. What does the full story of these doomed cities say to us about our own society and way of life in the twenty-first century?
3. Throughout these chapters, people make their own decisions apart from God with tragic results. How do we do the same thing? What lessons can we learn from their negative example (cf. I Cor. 10:6)?

# Book of Genesis – Part VIII - Genesis 21-22

## “God’s Impossible Command”

These next two chapters continue the story of Abraham. We have the birth of Isaac, the child of promise. We get a picture of Abraham’s life in “the land of the Philistines” (21:34). More than this, however, we have the single most dramatic episode in the entire Book of Genesis when Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his own son. This appears to contradict every thing God has said up to this point.

### IV. The Birth of Isaac – 21:1-21

- a. This account begins with the basic statement that God is faithful to his promise. In the light of what is to follow, this is far more than a passing reference (21:1).
- b. The child is given the name of “Isaac” which means “he laughs.” Sarah comments that “God has brought laughter for me” (21:6). This is the laughter of joy and celebration. When Abraham and Sarah had first heard God’s promise their laughter was one of mocking (17:17; 18:12). God’s promises can provoke the response, “You’ve got to be kidding?” Yet one of the key themes of Genesis (and indeed the whole Bible) is that nothing is too wonderful (or too hard) for God (18:14; Matt. 19:26).
- c. Abraham circumcises Isaac on the eighth day which establishes the beginning of a ritual of community. It is no longer Abraham and Sarah by themselves. They are to be the parents of innumerable descendents including all of us who have faith in Christ (Galatians 3).
- d. Difficulties, however, are not ended. There is a great feast when Isaac is weaned (somewhere between eighteen and twenty four months of age). Sarah sees Ishmael, the son she had arranged for Abraham to have with her servant girl, Hagar, playing with Isaac. There is no suggestion that anything improper is happening here. In her eyes, however, she sees Ishmael as a threat to Isaac’s inheritance since he is actually Abraham’s first born son.
- e. Sarah wants Hagar and Ishmael cast out. What is notable here is that Sarah herself is responsible for this situation. She wasn’t content to wait for God’s promise to be fulfilled. She acted on her own, following a social custom of her time, rather than God’s Word. Now she plays the position of the person who is hurt when in reality it was all her idea in the first place. This is in fact the second time this has happened (16:4-16). Sarah hasn’t learned her lesson. Can we recognize this behavior in ourselves?
- f. Abraham is distressed at this because Ishmael is his son. We have here the conflict which continues throughout history with God’s will and human decisions. God intervenes. He will provide for Hagar and Ishmael (21:15-21). Ishmael will, in fact, himself be the father of a great nation (21:18). Yet Hagar and Ishmael must go because God has chosen Isaac and nothing can interfere with God’s plan.

- g. Some commentators believe this is another version of the incident in chapter 16. Whether or not that is the case (as in the similar question of whether John 2:13-22 is another version of the cleansing of the temple from Palm Sunday) the lesson of the story remains the same. God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8) but God redeems what we have broken (21:17; Isa. 61:1).
  - h. Abraham's age of one hundred here might well be symbolic as is the case with other numbers in Scripture (21:5).
- V. Abraham and Abimelech – 21:22-34
- a. This is not a very familiar story but it is an important one. The first point to note is that a pagan king testifies to the fact that God is with Abraham in all that he does (21:22).
  - b. Abimelech asks Abraham to swear that he "will not deal falsely" with the king. Given the fact that Abimelech would have remembered Abraham's attempt to pass off Sarah as his sister (chapter 20) this is not an idle request. Two things are especially important here:
    - i. Abimelech, who is not a believer in the God of Abraham, nonetheless acknowledges Abraham's God and, understandably, expects Abraham to behave as one with whom the Lord is present. The same expectation applies to us from the unbelievers we know.
    - ii. This is the first instance of Abraham's call serving as a "blessing to the nations." Abimelech represents the nations.
  - c. The second part of the story shows Abraham and Abimelech making a covenant together. Abraham appears to have a legitimate complaint about his well being seized (21:25). Abimelech is unaware of the situation (21:26).
  - d. The theme of this event seems to be the covenant the two men make with each other, swearing an oath to respect each other's property (21:28-32). The point of this may well be to show that Abraham continues to live in the world of his time and place. His calling from God does not exempt him from everyday life. Abraham has to be careful also to demonstrate the fact that God is with him in all his dealings and, again, that he acts accordingly.
  - e. Abraham plants a tree and calls on the name of the Lord, "the Everlasting God." This was apparently an ancient name for God which Abraham now applies to the revealed God whom he now serves (cf. Isa. 40:28).
  - f. Abraham is living in the land which actually will become the land of the Philistines. This is very important for what follows. Abraham is living in a foreign land (just as we do). In the ancient world, people sacrificed their first born sons to gain favor with the gods (II Kings 3:26-27; Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10).

- VI. Abraham's Test – 22:1-24
- a. We now come to the most disturbing story perhaps in the whole Book of Genesis. The opening line is unforgettable: "After these things God tested Abraham" (22:1).
  - b. In this section, Abraham is being asked to do the unthinkable, to take his only son, Isaac, and offer him as a burnt sacrifice.
  - c. The outline of the story is familiar. Abraham and Isaac go meticulously to the place of sacrifice. Isaac asks, "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" (22:7). Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering" (22:8).
  - d. "So the two of them walked on together." (22:8).
  - e. Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, taking his knife (22:9-10).
  - f. God calls to Abraham saying to spare his son. God now knows that Abraham fears him. Abraham sees a ram caught in the thicket. He sacrifices the ram and spares his son. Abraham calls the place, "The Lord will provide" (22:11-14).
  - g. This is the basic narrative. There are numerous themes introduced in this amazing story.
    - i. God seems to contradict himself completely. How can Abraham be the father of a great nation if his only son and heir is to be killed?
    - ii. The story of Abraham has focused on all the trials involved in him and Sarah having a son. Is this now all a cruel joke?
    - iii. The question being presented to Abraham and to all of us as his spiritual descendants is, can we live by the promises of God when nothing, including God himself, makes any sense to us?
  - h. This is a story that prepares us for the death of Christ. Abraham's son is rescued but no one rescues God's Son on Calvary. We can imagine the disciples reacting as if everything they had experienced in Christ was pointless and incomprehensible. Yet consider the following:
    - i. Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place "on the third day." The third day as a decisive day in which God acts is a theme which runs through all of Scripture (Gen. 42:18; Ex. 19:11; Esther 5:1; Hosea 6:2; Matt. 16:21).
    - ii. Abraham does not lose faith in God when confronted with an impossible situation. He says, "God himself will provide the lamb" (John 1:29). Isaac who is hardly an unaware child at this point (he's carrying the wood, 22:6) goes along with this. He does not resist.
    - iii. So what's the point? Isn't this still all a cruel joke at Abraham's expense? No, the test is real. The first question has to do with establishing that Abraham is fearing God (22:12). To fear God does not mean to be afraid of God (hence the frequent admonition, "fear not"). The fear of God in the Old Testament refers to being obedient to God (Gen. 42:18; II Kings 4:1; Isa. 11:2; Prov. 1:7; Job 1:1, 8). The second is, does Abraham have the same dedication to his God as his pagan neighbors had to their gods? Abraham's faith

in fact is greater since this command seems to contradict what his God had told him previously.

- i. The real test here is, can Abraham live by the promises of God when nothing in his life bears out those promises? Will he still trust God when his life experience contradicts God, when God even seems to be an enemy? This test will be faced by Moses, Job, David, Esther, Jeremiah, Mary and ultimately by Jesus himself. The cry echoes throughout history, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest (Ps. 22:1-1).*
- j. God has already chosen Abraham yet this test confirms the choice. God swears only by himself (22:16; Heb. 6:13). This means that there is no outside source to corroborate what God promises. All Abraham (and Isaac) have is the Word of God. Often that is all we have, but that is enough. Abraham’s obedience confirms the promise already given. His descendents will be like the stars of the heavens and the sand of the seashore (22:17; cf. 15:5). In him, all the nations of the earth will gain blessing (22:18; cf. 12:3).
- k. The text ends with a brief genealogy of Abraham’s family (22:20-24). It is perhaps significant that there are twelve names listed, possibly foreshadowing the twelve sons of Jacob.

## Questions for us –

1. What can we learn from the conflicts in Abraham’s own household? How are the relationships among Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael typical of family conflicts in our world today? How do we see God’s grace overriding human failure and sin?
2. What do Abraham’s dealings with Abimelech teach us about how we deal with people, especially non-believers, in our world?
3. Why is the account of Abraham’s testing so important to our understanding of faith? How do we respond when events in our lives make no sense, when even God seems to make no sense? What can we learn about living solely by the Word of God, the promises of God?

## Book of Genesis – Part X - Genesis 23-24

### “Divine Promises in Ordinary Life”

In these chapters, God's promises continue to unfold. We are now no longer looking only at Abraham, but at his descendents who continue the journey which Abraham began (12:1-4). This journey includes life, death, love and marriage.

#### VII. The Death of Sarah – 23:1-20

- a. The important point of this narrative is that Abraham is living in the promised land, “the land of Canaan,” but he has no actual claim or status in that land.
- b. Sarah dies at the age of one hundred and twenty seven (23:1). Abraham mourns and weeps for her (23:2). However, he has no place to bury her since he owns nothing in this foreign land (which nonetheless God had promised to him – Gen. 17).
- c. Abraham goes to the Hittites, “the people of the land” (23:7) and asks if he can buy “the cave of Machpelah” so he can bury his wife. Abraham points out that he is “a stranger and an alien” (23:4).
- d. Abraham obviously has a favorable standing among the Hittites. Rather than sell it, they are willing to give him the land for a burial place (23:11).
- e. Abraham however insists on buying the land (23:12-16). Ephron, the leader of the Hittites, is prepared to simply give it to Abraham. However, by paying for the land, it becomes Abraham’s possession (23:18). This means then that Abraham had a legal claim to it.
- f. The importance of this story is that for the first time, Abraham actually has possession of a piece of the promised land. He has a legal and public claim to it beyond the spiritual promise of God. The land - the cave where Abraham buries Sarah and the field surrounding it - is a gift, but Abraham still pays for it. Abraham is no longer an alien and a stranger. He is a land owner. He now has a legitimate, earthly claim to what God had promised him.

#### VIII. The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah – 24:1-67

- a. This is one of the longest as well as one of the most appealing stories in Genesis. Following the death of Sarah, Abraham has to prepare for Isaac’s marriage according to the customs of the time in which parents arranged marriages for their children (a custom of course that still exists in parts of the world).
- b. This account opens with the statement that “the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things” (24:1). We already saw in the previous chapter that Abraham was wealthy in a monetary sense. This goes further in affirming that God had blessed him “in all things.”
- c. Abraham now speaks to his servant and makes him swear that he will get a wife for Isaac, not from among “the daughters of the Canaanites,” but that he will go to Abraham’s original country and kindred. This suggests

that Abraham wanted a wife for his son from among his extended family or tribe (or clan).

- d. In a detailed account, the servant sets out “taking all kinds of choice gifts” (24:10). He comes to the city. He speaks to no one. Instead, he comes to a well (which would have been a center of activity in an ancient city) and prays.
- e. There is some humor here. He begins by telling God where he is (God wouldn’t know?). The young women of the town are coming to draw water. He asks for a sign that doesn’t really seem to be all that unusual or significant. Nothing miraculous is involved here. He simply asks God to point out a young woman who would give him a drink and offer to water his camels (24:14). His request is “let her be the one.”
- f. What is notable is how ordinary this is. Wouldn’t any young woman trained in the ancient custom of hospitality be willing to offer drink to a stranger in the town square? What the servant seems to be asking is that the first woman he meets be “the one.”
- g. Before he finishes praying, Rebekah appears. The author tells us that she “was very fair to look upon” (24:16). She readily gives the servant a drink at his request and then proceeds to draw water for his camels. We then read that the servant gazes at her in silence, wondering whether or not this was the one. He may be wondering, “this is too easy,” or “how can I be sure?” The woman fulfills all the things he had asked for in his prayer. Yet, like all of us, he’s not quite sure if God has really answered his prayer, so he goes a step further. He gives the woman gifts of a gold nose-ring and two bracelets (Does she try on the nose-ring?). He asks if there is room in her father’s house for him and his caravan to spend the night (we don’t know how many other servants had come along on this trip).
- h. Rebekah assures him that this is the case. There’s plenty of room. The servant immediately praises God for his steadfast love and faithfulness. This is confirming God’s answer to his prayer. The spiritual example that is so important in this story is that the servant prays for a very specific request. Before his prayer is ended, God answers it. The servant, however, is not sure. He asks for more confirmation before he realizes that God really has answered his prayer. We do the same thing. We pray for things and even when God answers our prayer directly, we’re still not sure that he has. We somehow need additional confirmation.
- i. The fact that the servant thanks God for leading him “to the house of my master’s kin” underscores the idea that Rebekah and her family were distant relatives of Abraham.
- j. The girl runs to her mother’s household. Apparently her father is dead, so her brother is responsible for her. Her brother, Laban, runs out to see the servant. He sees the gifts his sister has received (the nose ring is mentioned first). Laban urges the servant to come into their home. He calls him, “O blessed of the Lord” (24:31). Again we wonder how he knows that. Nothing miraculous has occurred. His sister has met a

stranger who has given her some gifts. Laban's actions all connote urgency. Was Laban perhaps also praying that his sister would find a suitable husband?

- k. Before he is prepared to eat, the servant insists that he state his business. Laban responds with the simple statement, "Speak on." He identifies himself as Abraham's servant without further explanation of who Abraham is, so perhaps they already knew about Abraham. If they are relatives, this would not be surprising. He tells them about Abraham's blessings and gives the reason for his mission. He describes in detail all the events leading up to his encounter with Rebekah at the well.
- l. After telling the whole story, he asks Laban (who probably represents the father Bethuel) if he accepts the commission from Abraham. Laban responds with the affirmation, "The thing comes from the Lord" (24:50). He sees all this as a fulfillment of God's will, "as the Lord has spoken," and gives the servant permission to take his sister back to be Isaac's wife.
- m. Abraham's servant bows before the Lord in gratitude at these words (24:52). The servant gives gifts to Rebekah and her family. They then have a big dinner. In the morning, the servant is ready to return to Abraham. However, Rebekah's brother and mother ask if she can stay for at least ten days before leaving. This is certainly not an unreasonable request given that her family may never see her again (24:54-55).
- n. The servant however does not want to delay. He sees that the Lord's will has been fulfilled so he wants to complete his mission as soon as possible (24:56). They effect a compromise by letting Rebekah make the final decision. In response to the question of whether she will go with the servant, she answers simply, "I will" (24:58). The family does not seek to oppose her. Rather they give her their blessing and she leaves with Abraham's servant (24:60-61).
- o. The scene now shifts to Isaac. He goes out for a walk in the evening. He sees the camels approaching. Rebekah sees him and apparently concludes who he is because she gets off her camel before she asks the servant about his identity. The servant replies that it is his master, in other words, Isaac. Rebekah covers her face with her veil (I must confess I still wonder, is she wearing the nose ring?). The servant tells Isaac all that has happened on his journey (24:62-66).
- p. In a simple but moving passage, we read that Isaac takes Rebekah to his mother's tent. He marries her, loves her and she comforts him after his mother's death (24:67).
- q. There are a number of key themes in these chapters:
  - i. Abraham believes in God and is indeed called "a friend of God" (Isa. 41:8). God's promises to him are unconditional. They include the land and the fact that his descendents will be as the stars in the sky. Yet in both cases, we see Abraham in these chapters as being proactive with regard to the fulfillment of those promises. He buys a piece of the land of Canaan and arranges for a wife for his son which of course is essential to the promise of having great

descendants. This points out that God's promises and human activity go together. We are never told that Abraham's actions are necessary to fulfill God's promises (God guaranteed them by swearing by himself, Heb. 6:13). Yet human action is involved. Faith is not static. It calls for action (James 2:17).

- ii. What is remarkable about these stories is that they describe events which seem very ordinary (planning a funeral, looking for a wife) yet at the same time are very much part of God's chosen plan. It is striking that the servant's prayer is answered immediately, exactly as he requested, but then he is not sure (24:21). This is a very human trait.
- iii. What is refreshing in these stories is that after grim accounts of sin and judgment (Cain and Abel, the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot and his daughters), we have a series of events where everyone wants to do God's will. As a result everyone receives some kind of blessing.
- iv. It is alien to our way of thinking that we read that Isaac marries Rebekah and then we have the comment that "he loved her" (24:67). Love in Scripture is more than an emotion or a desire. It is an act of the will. God wills to love us even when we are very unlovable.

## Questions for Us –

1. What do you think is the significance of Abraham having to pay for the land that has already been promised to him? In what sense does God have to pay to bring us to himself when we already belong to him?
2. Abraham is an alien and a stranger in the land which God has promised to give him. What does that say about our role as aliens in a world which has already been claimed by Jesus Christ (Rev. 11:15)?
3. What can we learn from the examples of Abraham's servant and Laban regarding prayer and following God's will?
4. Why do you think Rebekah is so eager to go with Abraham's servant?

## Book of Genesis – Part XI - Genesis 25-26

### “Deception and Promise”

The story of the community of faith continues now with Isaac following the death of Abraham. Isaac and Rebekah give birth to Jacob and Esau whose conflict foreshadows future struggles among God’s chosen people.

- IX. The descendents of Abraham – 25:1-18
  - a. After the death of Sarah, Abraham takes another wife, Keturah. In spite of his advanced age, his wife gives birth to six sons.
  - b. There remains a key difference between Isaac and these later children as there was between Isaac and Ishmael earlier. Isaac alone is the son of promise. Abraham gives him everything he has (25:5). However, Abraham does not neglect his other children to whom he gives gifts (25:6). Nonetheless, he has to send them away. Isaac alone must remain as the heir (25:6).
  - c. Abraham dies at the stated age of one hundred and seventy-five years. This is a hundred years after God first appeared to him and told him to go to the promised land (Gen. 12:4). Again, numbers here may well be symbolic.
  - d. Isaac and Ishmael bury their father with his wife, Sarah (25:9-10). After the death, God blesses Isaac. The blessing God graciously gave to Abraham now is passed on to the son of promise (25:11).
  - e. We next have an extensive list of the descendents of Ishmael. His sons are twelve princes (25:16). This suggests a parallel with the later twelve sons (or twelve tribes) of Jacob.
  - f. Ishmael dies at the age of one hundred and thirty-seven (25:17).
  
- X. God’s Plan of Election: Jacob and Esau – 25:19-34
  - a. The unfolding of God’s promise never seems to be easy. Rebekah is barren, as was Sarah (25:21; cf. Gen. 11:30).
  - b. Isaac prays and the Lord grants his request. Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. However, her pregnancy is very difficult to the point where her life seems to be at stake (25:22). This underscores the basic truth that having our prayers answered may not make our lives easier. For that matter, as Abraham experienced with the call to sacrifice Isaac, faithfulness to God doesn’t necessarily make our lives easier (Matt. 10:37-39).
  - c. The situation of Jacob and Esau underscores the basic truth of God’s election. They represent two nations. More to the point, God says, “the elder shall serve the younger.” This is symbolized by the baby Jacob gripping Esau’s heel (“Jacob” in Hebrew is similar to the word for “heel”).
  - d. The reality here is summarized by God’s statement later in Scripture: “Yet I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau” (Mal. 1:3). Esau actually will

be the ancestor of the Edomites who will later be adversaries for Israel. Paul dramatizes this picture in Romans when he writes,

*“Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God’s purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) she was told, ‘The elder shall serve the younger’”*  
(Romans 9:11-12).

Paul defends God’s action by stating that we are in no position to argue with God (Rom. 9:14-21). In fact, Paul operates from the fundamental conviction that all of us are guilty before God. None of us deserves any favor from God. God is then free, and indeed just, to have mercy on whom he chooses to have mercy” (Rom. 9:15).

- e. The truth is that neither Jacob nor Esau is all that admirable. On top of that, their parents’ attitude toward them is clearly dysfunctional. Isaac favors Esau, presumably because he is a hunter, while Rebekah favors Jacob, who chooses to live quietly at home (25:27-28). Needless to say, this could not be a contented household.
- f. The first critical encounter between the sons occurs when they are adults. Esau comes in from hunting very hungry. Jacob is cooking a stew. Esau, understandably, asks for something to eat (25:30). Jacob, outrageously, asks Esau to sell him his birthright as payment for food. Just as outrageously, Esau agrees to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew and some bread (25:32-34). We read that Esau thereby “despised his birthright” (25:34). Though he would seriously regret his rash act, it could not be undone. This doesn’t excuse Rebekah and Jacob’s later deception but, at the same time, that deception is an outworking of Esau’s decision here. The later verdict on Esau is a harsh one (Heb. 12:16).

### III. Déjà vu All Over Again

- a. The events of chapter 26 are more than a little familiar. Isaac, during a time of famine, goes with Rebekah to Gerar where they encounter King Abimelech of the Philistines. We read that Rebekah was attractive (We already knew that, chapter 24:16, and I will refrain from speculating whether she still wears a nose ring). Isaac therefore tells the men in Gerar that she is his sister.
- b. After “a long time,” Abimelech, looking out a window, sees Isaac fondling Rebekah. Actually, “fondling” may be a euphemism since the same Hebrew word is used later for more explicit sexual contact (Gen. 39:14-17).
- c. Abimelech confronts Isaac with his deception (26:10).
- d. Subsequently, there is a dispute over a well. Isaac is able to reconcile this with Abimelech and his general, Phicol (26:26-31). The place of the well is named Beer-sheba (26:32-33).
- e. With a number of variations, this is remarkably similar to Abraham’s encounter with the same people in chapters 20:1-18; 21:22-34 (not to

mention chapter 12:10-20). It's hard to imagine these are two separate events since, among other things, we have not only the same king but the same commander of the army as well as the oath they all swear (21:22, 31; 26:26, 31). It seems more likely to see these as two versions of the same event. The critical theme in both stories is God's unwavering promise to Abraham *and* Isaac (20:7; 21:22; 26:3-5, 12, 23-25).

- f. It is not unusual in Scripture to have differing versions of the same events. We see this in a story as basic as Jesus calling the first disciples (cf. Matt. 4:18-20 with John 1:35-42). Needless to say, Scripture is not interested in a literal recounting of historical events (although historical events are clearly alluded to). It is hard to harmonize the specifics of the various Resurrection accounts (one angel or two, before or after sunrise, etc.). The community of faith, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, clearly saw a benefit in retaining the different accounts without trying to reconcile all their details.
- g. The final comment in this chapter refers to Esau's two wives who make life bitter for his mother Rebekah (26:34-35). This may explain why Rebekah later schemes against Esau.

## Questions for us –

1. A key theme in this section is God's election. God chooses Isaac, not Ishmael or any of Abraham's other sons. God chooses Jacob over Esau. This is often a difficult concept for some people. Yet God chooses Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world (I Peter 1:18-20). God also chooses us and that choice is not based on anything we have done. How does this truth both comfort and convict us?
2. Esau makes a rash decision and cuts himself off from his birthright. What other examples in Scripture do we see of people making similar kinds of rash decisions? What are examples of this in our own lives? What can we learn from these examples?
3. Why do you think we have three versions of the "she's my sister" story? What lessons can we take from the various versions as well as looking at them as a group (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11)?

## Book of Genesis – Part XII - Genesis 27-28

### “The Covenant Recalled: God’s Faithfulness and Human Deceit”

These next two chapters record one of the most pivotal events in Old Testament history. Jacob, encouraged by his mother, deceives his father and cheats his brother out of his inheritance. Yet, in spite of this, God’s covenant is reaffirmed for Jacob. God’s promises both contradict and overpower human failings. Jacob in this passage receives the special promise, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go . . . (Gen 28:15).”

- I. Jacob’s Great Deception – 27:1-46
  - a. At first glance this is a story of outright deceit and lying on the part of both Rebekah and Jacob. Without excusing their actions, there are however some previous happenings which form an important background to these events.
  - b. Earlier we read how Esau had traded away his birthright for some lentil stew. It was certainly not appropriate for Jacob to ask for the birthright but, at the same time, no one forced Esau to give it up. In a sense then Jacob, in claiming the blessing that was Esau’s birthright, is only seeking to gain something that had already been given to him. Even this, though, hardly justifies the lying and deceit that he and his mother carry out.
  - c. Another important point comes from the end of the previous chapter. We read in 26:34 that Esau had married two Hittite women. The first problem here is that God had established marriage as between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:21-24). The fact that polygamy was widely practiced in the ancient world hardly justifies it. Invariably problems arose with the practice as in the case of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (Gen. 16:1-6). The first recorded account we have of a man with two wives is Lamach. He boasts to his wives that he killed a young man for striking him (Gen. 4:19-24). Whatever else lies behind this story, Lamach doesn’t exactly seem to be a role model. Later both David and Solomon suffered as a result of their multiple wives (II Sam. 6:20-23; I Kings 11:1-8).
  - d. The second problem arises from the fact that Esau has married two women outside the covenant. Abraham had taken great pains to see that Isaac married a woman of his “kindred,” that is, from within his family (24:1-4). Apparently Isaac had not taken the same initiative with his own sons. There is a serious fallout from Esau’s actions. His Hittite wives “made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (26:35). The Hittite (or Canaanite) women also represent the worship of false gods (Num. 25:1-3; I Kings 11:1-2). Again, without justifying the action, this may explain some of Rebekah’s negative feelings for Esau.

- e. The story in chapter 27 moves rapidly. Isaac has asked Esau, his hunter son, to prepare some “savory food” for him, after which he will give him his blessing. It is important to understand that in this context “blessing” was believed to be a great deal more than good wishes. Blessing was thought to bestow power as well as a legal right to the major part of the family inheritance.
  - f. Rebekah overhears what Isaac says and devises her own plan. She has Jacob disguise himself as his brother. Initially Isaac is suspicious. Isaac asks him point blank, “Are you really my son, Esau?” (v. 24). Jacob lies, “I am.” And so Jacob receives the blessing intended for his brother (vv. 27-29).
  - g. The story grows more suspenseful. As soon as Jacob’s deception has achieved its goal, Esau himself returns. The reality of the deception becomes apparent to both Esau and Isaac. However the blessing once given cannot be rescinded. Isaac trembles violently (v. 33) once understanding what has happened. Esau reflects on the meaning of Jacob’s name, “he supplants,” or more literally, “he takes the heel.” Isaac, unable to give the same blessing, instead gives a prophecy (vv. 39-30). Esau will be the father of the nation, Edom, which will be in conflict with Israel and will betray Israel centuries later when Israel goes into captivity into Babylon. God’s judgment of Edom will be harsh (Isa. 34).
  - h. Understandably, Esau is furious. He hates Jacob and intends to kill him. Rebekah warns Jacob and sends him away to his uncle Laban. She promises to send for him once his brother’s “fury turns away” (vv. 41-45). The account ends with a second mention of the great difficulty Esau’s Hittite wives have caused (v. 46). This appears to be the critical backdrop to the whole story.
- II. Jacob’s Dream and God’s Promise – 28:1-22
- a. Isaac calls Jacob to himself and, in spite of the deception, reaffirms his blessing on him. Isaac also sends him to his uncle but for a different reason than Esau’s anger. He states that Jacob should not marry one of the Canaanite woman (Esau had married *two*). He is to marry a woman from within his own family circle. Isaac now invokes God’s blessing on Jacob (vv. 3-4). Two implications seem to emerge at this point.
    - 1. Esau’s marriage to the Canaanite women has caused great pain for his parents. This action has placed him outside of God’s promise. The loss of his birthright is perhaps justified. However the deception of Jacob and Rebekah is not condoned. Yet behind this stands the mystery of God’s election: “Jacob I have loved and Esau I have hated” (Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:10-12). In the face of this mystery Paul maintains that God is not unjust but has the freedom to have mercy on whom he will have mercy (Rom. 9:14).
    - 2. Jacob needs to leave his home if he is to encounter God’s promise for him. Jacob will become the namesake for Israel (Gen. 32:28). Yet like Abraham before him he must undertake an

uncertain and at times difficult journey to find God's plan for his life.

- b. Esau observes this and realizes how disruptive his Canaanite wives have been for the whole family. He then marries one of Ishmael's daughters. However he still retains his Hittite wives (28:6-9). This is a pattern we see throughout Israel's history. Israel practices spiritual adultery time and again (since many of the false gods they serve were fertility goddess the sexual imagery is both literal and figurative). This is a running theme throughout the history of Israel (Num. 25:1-5; Jer. 3:9; Ezek. 23:37; Hosea 2:2). In a deluded way Israel often tried to worship the true God at the same time that they were sacrificing to idols (Isa. 42:5-8; Jer. 7:1-10).
- c. One of the most familiar stories of the Old Testament follows. This is the account of Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven while he is on his journey. In the context of this dream he receives a great promise from God (28:15). God assures Jacob that he will be with him "wherever you go." This promise is reaffirmed again and again (Ex. 3:12; Joshua 1:5; Judges 6:16; Matt. 1:23). There is clearly no question of human merit or achievement here. Jacob and Rebekah tried to gain God's promise by their own efforts as Abraham and Sarah had done before them. The results are always tragic (cf. Gen. 16:1-6).
- d. Jacob awakes and realizes he has been in the presence of God. He sets up a pillar for God. Then, showing he still has a lot to learn, he proposes his own "promise" to God. Unlike God's unconditional promise Jacob's is full of conditions. He wants God to provide him with
  1. bread to eat
  2. clothes to wear
  3. a safe return to his father's house (28:20-22).

For this, Jacob promises God a tenth of whatever he has (the origin of the tithe). Big deal. Jacob's prayer however is disturbingly similar to ones we often pray. We are willing to serve God on the condition that God prospers us and gives what we want. As we will see in the succeeding chapters, Jacob has a lot to learn. And so do we.

## Questions for Us –

1. What lessons can we learn from Esau's marrying wives outside of the community of faith? What are some of the ways we can be swayed into worshipping false gods?
2. What challenge and comfort can we take from God's plan of election, "Esau I have hated (or regarded less) but Jacob I have loved?" (Mal. 1:2-3)?"
3. Do we, like Jacob, want to place our own conditions on God's promises? What hope can we gain from God's assurance that he will be with us and keep us wherever we go?

# Book of Genesis – Part XIII - Genesis 29-30

## “Jacob Meets His Match”

We continue now with the story of Jacob and of his two wives, Leah and Rachel. Even more significantly we have the birth of his twelve sons who will represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Like the previous story of Jacob and Esau, this one is full of human deception and intrigue. Yet we are moving closer to the promise of the Messiah (Genesis 3:15). It is out of human brokenness, not human righteousness, that Christ will come.

### III. Jacob’s Two Wives– 29:1-35

- a. Having received God’s promise, Jacob continues on his journey. He comes to the home of his ancestors where he will look for his uncle, Laban (29:1).
- b. He finds himself beside a well which is covered with a large stone (29:2). He speaks with the shepherds and they confirm for him that he is in the country of Laban (29:5). The discussion about the stone probably refers to several established practices:
  1. In an arid country a well was especially valuable and important. It was covered probably to keep impurities from getting into the water.
  2. The shepherds are not ready to open the well because all the flocks have not arrived. Apparently they would wait until all the flocks had come so that the well would not have to be opened more than once a day. Jacob seems aware of the practice that the well would not be opened too often. This suggests that a common practice was being followed.
- c. We have the first mention of Rachel. The writer does not record Jacob’s reaction but it seems clear he wants the other shepherds to finish watering their flocks and then go. They protest that all the other shepherds have not yet arrived with their flocks (29:8).
- d. Rachel arrives on the scene. Upon her arrival, Jacob rolls the stone from the well’s mouth (29:10). Several things are apparent here.
  1. Jacob, in spite of his domestic talents, clearly was strong since we know that this was a large stone. There is the suggestion that the shepherds as a group probably moved it together once they had all gathered.
  2. From the perspective of the New Testament, this is a prefiguring of the resurrection of Jesus when another large stone is rolled away. Jacob is Israel and Israel’s hope and ultimate descendent is Jesus. The water in the well is also richly symbolic since Jesus will reveal himself to the woman at the well at this very same spot (John 4:12). Jesus will identify himself as “living water” (John 4:14, 7:38, 19:34).
  3. The lesson for us here is that God often accomplishes his purpose through very ordinary and indeed mundane events. This is more the case than in the miraculous examples of burning bushes, crossing of

seas and special healings. We need to be sensitive to the fact that God is constantly working around us and through us.

- e. Jacob greets Rachel with a kiss and weeps. This may have been an appropriate greeting between long lost cousins (which they are). However, we will soon learn that Jacob is in love with Rachel.
- f. Jacob is brought to his uncle Laban who greets him warmly (29:13-14). After a month, during which time Jacob has apparently been working for his uncle, Laban says that Jacob should be paid. He asks him, "What shall your wages be?"
- g. The narrator inserts the fact that Laban has two daughters. The older is Leah who has "lovely eyes" while the younger, Rachel, "was graceful and beautiful." To put it simply, Leah was very attractive but Rachel was apparently a knockout.
- h. Jacob wants to marry Rachel. Jacob offers to work for Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel. Laban agrees, noting that Jacob is part of their family (Jacob and Rachel are first cousins) (29:18-20).
- i. The seven years pass quickly for Jacob (29:20). At the end of the period, the wedding is arranged. There is a feast which celebrates the union. Jacob wakes up the morning after the wedding, looks at his bride and discovers it's Leah, not Rachel! The suggestion is that Rachel accompanied Jacob during the wedding feast (There may not have been a ceremony. None is mentioned). It is only in the bed chamber that the switch is made ("But in the evening. . . , v. 23). It is therefore likely that both Leah and Rachel were in on the deception, otherwise how would it have worked?
- j. Jacob protests. Laban replies that since Leah is the older sister she should be married first (apparently he neglected to mention this during the previous seven years). However, if Jacob is willing to work another seven years he can marry Rachel as well (29:28-30). Jacob then has married both sisters but he loves Rachel instead of Leah (29:30).
- k. Because Leah is unloved, God gives her children while Rachel remains barren (29:31). Leah gives birth to four sons, all of whom are given symbolic names. The fourth son is Judah (29:31-35).
- l. There are several major themes in this story:
  - 1. There is a poetic justice since Jacob is basically made the victim of a similar deception to the one he and his mother carried out on his brother, Esau. However in this case the priority of the firstborn is established rather than set aside (29:26).
  - 2. God's standard of marriage is once again being set aside (one man, one wife, Gen. 2:22-24). We learn later that a man marrying two sisters is absolutely prohibited by God (Lev. 18:18).
  - 3. If in fact Leah and Rachel aided their father in his deception (which to me seems to have to be the case) then we have an account with multiple layers of deception going all the way back to Jacob himself.  
**Yet in terms of God's plan of salvation, it is necessary for Jacob**

**to marry Leah.** Leah gives birth to Judah and it is through the line of Judah that Christ is born (Matt. 1:1-2).

#### IV. Continuing Conflict and Deception – 30:1-43

- a. This marital threesome is no more effective than the one involving Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. Rachel becomes bitterly jealous of her sister. She resorts to the ancient custom of presenting her female servants to her husband so she can have “legal” children. When Leah is no longer bearing children, she resorts to the same practice.
- b. The sons in particular (there is only one daughter, Dinah, 20:21) all have symbolic names which are basically plays on words in the Hebrew, “Naphtali” for “wrestling,” “Asher” for “happy” (there is fortunately no Dopey).
- c. What we have is the emergence of the twelve brothers who will represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Yet the family structure becomes more and more dysfunctional. We basically have twelve sons, one daughter, four mothers, two wives and one father (What were family dinners like?).
- d. The sibling rivalry continues between Leah and Rachel. This is seen in the account of Rachel bartering for Leah’s mandrakes. Mandrakes were believed to be in effect a love potion or a source of fertility. In a bizarre arrangement, Rachel gives Jacob to Leah in exchange for the mandrakes and Leah bears two more sons. Obviously more than one encounter was involved (30:14-20).
- e. Eventually Jacob wants to move on. Laban makes the rather odd statement that he has learned by “divination” that the Lord has blessed him because of Jacob. The word suggests the interpretation of omens or signs.
- f. Laban tries one more deception but it backfires on him. Jacob is willing to take only the spotted or colored lambs from the flock for himself. Laban agrees to this but then removes all the lambs fitting that description. However, by a strange practice of exposing the white lambs to spotted rods while they are breeding, even the white sheep give birth to spotted lambs. The theme of magic runs in the background throughout these stories. Without getting into the somewhat magical practice, the point of the story is that Laban’s attempt to cheat his nephew fails (30:37-43).
- g. Jacob, in spite of the family turmoil, is blessed by God (30:43).
- h. The critical lesson in all this is that in the midst of jealousy and deceit, God’s purpose overrides human failings in his intention to bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:3). We therefore should be both encouraged and careful. We are encouraged when we realize that in the midst of human brokenness, God is ultimately bringing about blessing and indeed salvation (the complete blessing of the nations is Jesus Christ coming as the Savior of the world (John 4:42)). Second, we need to be careful about judging human situations. On the face of it, the story of Jacob is all about human beings who are less than admirable to say the least. Yet God’s promise is being carried about in and by these people. At best we only see the surface of events. We must be careful to look past appearances (John 7:24).

## Questions for Us –

1. What are the practical lessons for us in this set of stories? Why do you think God is hardly mentioned in this account? How do these stories affect our daily walk as Christians?
2. What do you find encouraging or discouraging in these stories? What do you see as hopeful in these chapters?
3. Is there any character in particular with whom you identify? Who and why?

## Book of Genesis – Part XIV - Genesis 31-33 - “God and the gods”

Jacob now faces a major new direction in his life. God commands him to return to his homeland with, again, the promise that God will be with him (31:3). Jacob leaves with his family without Laban’s blessing. Rachel steals the “household gods.” This leads to a major conflict with Laban which is then only the precursor to a much greater conflict in which Jacob learns that Esau, the brother he betrayed, is coming to meet him. The biggest challenge however is a night in which Jacob wrestles with an unknown divine being. He later learns that this figure is God. His name is changed to Israel. Indeed his whole life is changed.

### I. Escape and the Missing Gods – 31:1-35

- a. Jacob has now served Laban for twenty years. He has two wives, two concubines (“servant girls”), eleven sons and one daughter. Laban’s sons have become jealous of Jacob. God speaks to Jacob and tell him to return to his own country and reiterates his promise, “I will be with you” (31:3; cf. 28:15).
- b. Jacob tells his wives of his plans to leave. He points out that Laban has tried to deceive him not once but several times (31:7). Jacob shares a dream in which God provides the spotted goats at mating time for the flock which Laban agreed to give Jacob (30:31-34). In the first mention of the breeding (30:37-43) God is not mentioned. The key emphasis here is that God is telling Jacob to leave Laban (31:13).
- c. However, Rachel and Leah have the very human response of worrying that by leaving they will forfeit their inheritance (31:14). Jacob decides to deceive Laban by taking all of his family and possessions and going back to his father Isaac without telling Laban (31:20-21). Jacob no doubt feels justified in doing this since Laban deceived him, or attempted to deceive him, on several occasions.
- d. However, before they leave, Rachel steals her father’s household gods (31:19). We need to remember that these people are living in an idolatrous world. They have no list of commandments, no written word of God, so it is not surprising that they follow the customs of their society which include polygamy, surrogate mothers and idols. Our world has no such excuse. The household gods may have had more than a religious significance. They probably had some monetary value. More importantly, possession of them may have given the holder certain legal rights to the family property.
- e. When Laban learns what has happened (which of course he must. Did Jacob really think he could just disappear?) he overtakes Jacob. Jacob at this point is traveling with an extended caravan. Laban is clearly angry. He demands to know why he could not have given them a farewell party (31:26-28). The answer is unstated but quite simple. Jacob doesn’t trust his father-in-law.
- f. In a statement that reflects contrasting worldviews, Laban first acknowledges that God has spoken to him, warning him against interfering with Jacob (31:29). The next minute, he’s demanding to know who stole his household

- gods (31:30). Jacob points out that he was afraid that Laban would try to take his daughters back (31:31). Jacob knows nothing of the stolen gods. He makes the strong statement that anyone who took the gods will be put to death (31:32). He is completely unaware of the fact that in this statement he is pronouncing a death sentence upon his favorite wife.
- g. Rachel hides the gods under her saddle (they were obviously small). She says she cannot get up because she is menstruating (31:35). Rachel here is deceiving everyone.

## II. Reconciliation and the Night Wrestler – 31:36-32:32

- a. Jacob becomes angry with Laban (31:36) and the two get into an argument.
- b. They resolve their differences by setting up a pillar of stones to act as a literal boundary between them. Laban does not want his daughters to be ill treated by Jacob (31:50).
- c. The boundary line is to be a witness between them. Laban will not come over to Jacob's side and Jacob will not trespass on Laban's side (31:51-52). Laban's statement, "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other" (31:49) has been used as a benediction. In its original context, Laban is really saying, "The Lord keep an eye on you because I don't trust you."
- d. They swear by two Gods. Jacob refers to the God of Abraham, the true God. Laban swears by the God of Nahor. Nahor was a brother of Abraham who remained in Ur of the Chaldeans presumably worshipping the false gods there. These household gods may have been images or even idols of those false gods (cf. Gen. 11:27-31; Isa. 44:9-20).
- e. Jacob goes on his way and is met by some angels of the Lord. No dialogue is recorded between them (32:1-2).
- f. Returning to his homeland means returning to his brother Esau. Jacob sends messengers to Esau and then is informed that his brother is coming to meet him with four hundred men (32:3-6).
- g. Not surprisingly, Jacob is "greatly afraid and distressed" (32:7). This leads to a change of heart on Jacob's part. He cries out to God and confesses his unworthiness. He prays for God's deliverance according to God's promise to do good to him (32:9-12; 28:15).
- h. Jacob however is not ready simply to trust in the Lord (Prov. 3:5-6). He hopes to appease Esau by sending him elaborate gifts (32:13-21).
- i. Jacob sends his family on ahead of him, crossing a river. He remains alone behind. We read then that he wrestles with a man until daybreak. He realizes that the man is God in some way (is this Jesus?). The result of this struggle is a major transformation. Jacob becomes Israel. He will be a different person. He is not unscathed in the struggle. He will forever limp thereafter. There is a crucial spiritual lesson here. If we are to be in God's service we have to wrestle with him. This is true not only of Jacob but of Moses, Ruth, Job, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Esther and many others. It was crucial for Jesus to be tempted in the wilderness before he could begin his ministry. Even though he is being tempted by Satan, Jesus is wrestling with God because God sent

him into the wilderness for that purpose (Matt. 4:1). Paul's conflict with God takes the form of a thorn in his flesh (II Cor. 12:1-10). God brings us into conflict, even conflict with himself. There are times when God does not seem clear to us, when God can even seem to be an antagonist. To wrestle with God is to confront our own weakness and vulnerability. Apart from this there can be no change in us, no spiritual growth. The paradox is that we find rest through the conflict (Matt. 4:11). Jacob's encounter with Esau will not be what he thinks it will be.

### Questions for Us –

1. What would be examples of "household gods" for us? What are the subtle idols that we depend on in our lives?
2. What do you think of the covenant that Jacob and Laban make? Is this family broken or can trust somehow be restored? What would be necessary for that to happen?
3. How have we experienced wrestling with God in our lives? What lessons have we learned from these struggles?

## Book of Genesis – Part XV - Genesis 33-35 “Reconciliation and Revenge”

In these chapters, we come to the end of a major section of the Jacob story. We see how Jacob comes back to his homeland with his extended family. Before that can happen, Jacob has to face his brother, Esau, with surprising results. We also continue to see the darker side of life reflected in the revenge exacted by Jacob's sons. Finally, we witness both the death of Rachel and the birth of the Jacob's twelfth son, Benjamin, who will be the ancestor of the apostle Paul.

- I. Jacob and Esau meet
  - a. Jacob sees his brother, Esau, coming toward him with “four hundred men.” He remains apprehensive (chapt. 32:7). This is not surprising given the fact he cheated his brother out of his inheritance. Jacob has a definite order in coming out to meet Esau. He has the less favored part of his family go first, the maids and their children, followed by Leah with her children. He's willing to sacrifice them to save his preferred wife, Rachel and her son, Joseph (33:2). Jacob, however, goes first in line so he will face Esau's vengeance if that's what's to follow (33:3). He bows to the ground seven times (the number of perfection) to demonstrate his humility and presumably his repentance.
  - b. Jacob is not prepared for what follows (neither are we). Esau runs out to meet his brother, embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him (v. 4). This is the exact same language that Jesus uses in describing the father greeting the prodigal son (Luke 15:20, although the NRSV for some reason doesn't have “fall on his neck” in its translation of the Luke passage).
  - c. Esau not only receives Jacob, he welcomes him. This is a prophetic scene of the gospel which is based on the theme of forgiveness (Matt. 6:12; 18:21-22; Luke 23:34; Eph. 4:3). Esau not only forgives and accepts Jacob but he refuses all of Jacob's elaborate gifts (v. 8-9).
  - d. In a telling statement, Jacob says to Esau, “for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (v. 10). This essentially quotes Jacob's statement in the previous chapter after wrestling with God where he says, “For I have seen God face to face” (32:30). It is hard to overstate the importance of this scene. Jacob's experience of being forgiven by his brother is, for him, a direct encounter with God.
  - e. Esau had every right to not only be angry with Jacob, but to seek to act out vengeance on him. He does the opposite. This is a picture of grace which forgives those who need to be forgiven, not those who deserve forgiveness (Eph. 1:7). Jacob can only ask, “Why should my lord be so kind to me?” (33:15). The irony here is that the chosen brother is the offender and the rejected brother, Esau, is the model of Christ. Esau here is an example for us all. Karl Barth in his exegesis of Romans 9 raises the

possibility that the vessels of wrath (“I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau,” Rom. 9:13) may be endured with patience so that they become the vessels of mercy (Rom. 9:22-24; 11:32).

## II. No Forgiveness – chapt. 34

- a. We know little of Jacob’s only daughter, Dinah. The principal story is found in this chapter. Jacob and his family are nomads. They are wanderers with their flocks always looking for new grazing land. Jacob and his family have settled for the time being in Shechem in the land of Canaan (33:18).
- b. Dinah goes out to visit the women in the country. However, Shechem (same name as the city), the son of Prince Hamor, proceeds to rape her. The account is very brief and doesn’t give us much information regarding what happens. The information we do have is clear. It is “by force” (34:2). Canaanite sexual practices were abhorrent to Israel (Lev. 18; 20:10-21).
- c. Shechem actually is in love with Dinah (he had an odd way of showing it). He pleads with his father to get Dinah to be his wife (34:4).
- d. Jacob gets the news but doesn’t say anything right away. However, the brothers are outraged when they hear what happened (34:5-7).
- e. Prince Hamor offers in effect to establish a treaty with Jacob and his sons. He offers them land which is a crucial commodity for livestock owners. He adds that he will give whatever additional price they may request. He proposes that they intermarry and, in effect, create a single community (34:8-12).
- f. The brothers, following the example of their father rather than their uncle Esau, act deceitfully. They pretend to agree to the terms of the proposal, provided that all the men of Shechem become circumcised. On that condition they agree to become “one people” (34:16).
- g. Prince Hamor and his men agree to the terms in good faith (34:18-24). However, the third day following, when the men were sore, the sons of Jacob, apparently led by Simeon and Levi, massacre the men. The brothers take everything including the young children and wives of the men (34:27-29).
- h. Jacob doesn’t so much object to what they’ve done as to the consequences that may result. The brothers justify their actions (34:30-31). The narrator offers no moral, much less spiritual comment, on the violent actions of the brothers. Later on, in Israel’s history, Judith will celebrate the vengeance of the brothers as she herself will carry out vengeance against the Babylonian general Holofernes by beheading him (Book of Judith in the Apocrypha).

## III. Jacob returns home – chapt. 35

- a. Jacob returns to Bethel where he had the vision of the ladder leading up to heaven (28:10-17).
- b. Jacob begins the faith of Israel by telling everyone in his household to ‘put away the foreign gods that are among you’ (35:2-4).

- c. God protects Jacob by placing a terror on all the surrounding cities so no one pursues them apparently as a consequence of their massacre of Shechem (35:5).
- d. Jacob returns to Bethel and builds a temple there to the one true God, Jehovah (Yahweh). God speaks to him there. Again his new name of Israel is confirmed (35:10; 32:28). Israel will be the name for the people of God, a pledge of their salvation (Rom. 11:26). The promises made to Abraham are repeated (35:11-12; 17:1-8). Also the name of Bethel (“house of God”) is confirmed (35:14-15; 28:19).
- e. Rachel is pregnant again. She dies in childbirth on the road to Bethlehem. Her son, Benjamin, will be the ancestor of the apostle Paul (Phil. 3:4-5). Jacob sets up a pillar as a marker of her grave (35:20). This story is richly symbolic. The whole story of the Old Testament is a journey to Bethlehem from which the Messiah will come (Micah 5:2). The apostle Paul will be the greatest proclaimer of the Messiah (Christ) of the apostolic church.
- f. Sexual brokenness continues in Jacob’s family when Ruben has sex with his father’s concubine. All of this is a far cry from God’s original plan for marriage (Matt. 19:1-6). These same issues will affect the early church (I Cor. 5:1-2; I Thess. 4:3-8).
- g. We now are given a formal list of the twelve sons of Jacob who will be the namesakes of the twelve tribes of Israel (35:23-26).
- h. Jacob finally returns home. His father Isaac dies and he and his brother Esau bury him (35:29).
- i. In all of the deceit and brokenness of Jacob and his family, God’s purposes continue to be followed out. We continue on the road to Bethlehem.

## Questions for Us –

1. What lessons about forgiveness can we learn from Esau’s example? Why do you think Esau welcomed his brother back?
2. Why is sexual brokenness such a part of the history of God’s people (of people in general)?
3. The picture of Rachel’s death is both one of tragedy and hope. Her death mirrors the promise of both Jesus and Paul. What encouragement can we find in the midst of tragedy and loss?

## Book of Genesis – Part XVI - Genesis 36-38

### “Dreams and Nightmares”

These next three chapters all deal with different groups and situations. We read about the descendents of Esau, Joseph and his brothers and then learn of Judah's family. The three accounts seem hardly connected. However in different ways they are all part of the developing history of Israel. The story of Joseph will become the dominant story of the remainder of Genesis.

- IV. The Descendents of Esau – chapter 36:1-43
  - a. Needless to say the sections on genealogies in Scripture are probably perceived by the modern reader as the least interesting (suitable for reading if you're having trouble sleeping).
  - b. Nevertheless they were perceived as important by Israel and it is no accident that the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, begins with a genealogy. This chapter lists the descendents of Esau which become the nation of Edom. Edom existed south of Israel and played a prominent role in Israel's history. For much of that history they were rivals to Israel. When Israel was under attack in the eighth century BC, Edom took advantage of the situation and invaded the southern kingdom of Judah (II Chron. 28:17). Later when Judah was conquered by the Babylonians, Edom rejoiced (Ps. 137:7). As a consequence, God placed a severe judgment on Edom (Isa. 34:5-10).
  - c. The reference in v. 31 to the fact that Edom had kings before Israel is a clear indication that Genesis in its present form was written well after the events it records. While Moses may have supplied some of the material, clearly later writers were involved (Moses would hardly have written the account of his own death (Deut. 34:5-6)).
  
- V. Joseph – the favored son – chapter 37:1-36
  - a. This next section identifies itself as being “the story of the family of Jacob” (37:2). Actually it is the story of Joseph, the firstborn son of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved.
  - b. Jacob is given a special robe. It has been translated as “a robe of many colors” or “a long robe with sleeves” (v. 3). The same expression is used for a royal robe (II Sam. 13:18). The fact that Joseph is clearly favored by his father not only leads to resentment on the part of his brothers (who are really half brothers) but to outright hatred (37:4).
  - c. Joseph has special dreams. Throughout the Scriptures, as well as much of the ancient world, dreams were regarded as having prophetic insight. They were believed to predict the future or serve as communications from God. They play a significant role, for example, in the Christmas story (Matt. 1:20; 2:13). These dreams make it abundantly clear that Joseph will be superior to his older brothers. They will bow down to him (37:7, 9). These dreams obviously foretell Joseph's destiny in Egypt. However the

brothers see this only as unbearable pride on Joseph's part. Even his father rebukes him (37:10). In the ancient world, both within the Bible and outside it, pride is the worst sin. Adam and Eve succumb to the prideful temptation to want to be like God (Gen. 3:4). Joseph however is being judged falsely here. He is not being proud. If anything he is simply naïve in telling the contents of his dream to his family who don't comprehend or accept what he is saying at all.

- d. The narrative now moves to a decisive point. The brothers have taken the sheep away to some distance. This is an obvious need since grazing flocks would have to be constantly moving. Jacob sends Joseph to find his brothers to see how they are doing (37:14). It takes Joseph a while to find the brothers. He has to ask directions to locate them (37:17). Apparently the brothers see Joseph first "from a distance" (37:18). We read then that "they conspired to kill him" (37:18). They have gone well beyond resentment and even hatred now to the point of planning to commit murder. They are following the example of Cain who murdered his brother Abel (Gen. 4:8). We see how far removed the creation is from the "very good" world which God had originally created (Gen. 1:31).
- e. The brothers have an immediate idea. They will give the impression that Joseph was attacked and killed by a wild animal. The fact that they come up with this idea so quickly suggests that they had already discussed the possibility (37:19). Reuben, the eldest, plans to save Joseph and offers an alternative idea of throwing him into a pit. His intention is to come back and rescue Joseph (37:22). What is striking about this is that Reuben doesn't oppose his brothers directly. As the firstborn we might think he would have the authority to do so. Apparently the other brothers' hatred is so intense that he sees no way of talking them out of some plan to get rid of Joseph. This foretells the scene of Jesus' trial where Pilate is trying to deliver Jesus out of the hands of the mob. As the Roman ruler he should have had the authority to overrule the crowd. Yet, like Reuben, he cannot overturn the murderous intent he faces (Luke 23:20-21).
- f. Reuben does persuade the brothers to put Joseph into a pit. They take off his special coat (37:23-24). We are not told of Joseph's reaction to this violence and betrayal. Like Jesus, he is silent before his enemies. Apparently Reuben has left the scene. The rest of the brothers sit down to eat (their consciences don't seem to bother them in the least). While eating they see some Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt (37:25-27). This accomplishes the task of getting rid of their hated brother (they think) without having to murder him directly. As Jesus was sold for silver, they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver (37:28; Matt. 26:15).
- g. The scene changes to Reuben's return. To his shock he finds the pit empty. His plan to rescue Joseph has failed (37:29). The brothers dip Joseph's coat in the blood of a goat and bring it back to their father claiming that Joseph was killed by a wild beast.

- h. There are many dark features to this story. Reuben, in spite of his concern for Joseph, apparently goes along with the plot and doesn't tell his father what happened. He therefore becomes an accessory. The fact that the animal they kill is a goat may have other significance. The goat was associated with occult practices and "goat demons" are mentioned throughout the Old Testament and other ancient literature. The goat was also identified with the demon Azazel (Lev. 16:8-10; Lev. 17:7; Isa. 34:14). The brothers, in some sense, may be descending into the demonic with their evil actions. This becomes more evident given the tremendous sorrow which Jacob expresses once told that his son is dead. Of course this is a lie. Jacob's sorrow is so intense that no one in the family can comfort him. His sorrow will last the rest of his life (37:34-35). The brothers then can only be seen here in the most negative light. Not only have they planned to murder their own brother, then sold him into slavery, they have also brought immense sorrow on their father. They can only be described as heartless and cruel. The completely unbelievable thing is that they will, as the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, represent God's chosen people!
  - i. This part of the story ends with Joseph being sold to Potiphar in Egypt, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard (37:36). The story ends with a "to be continued" sense.
- VI. Judah and his family – chapter 38
- a. The narrative shifts gears considerably as we are told now of Judah's family apparently years later. His children are fully grown. Judah has married a Canaanite woman (38:2), the very thing that Isaac and Jacob avoided doing. He proceeds to have several children by her.
  - b. He takes a wife named Tamar for his eldest son named Er (38:6). The clear indication is that Tamar herself is a Canaanite. We read however that Er "was wicked in the sight of the Lord" and God put him to death. The impression that is inescapable in these stories is that the world, like the world before the flood, was full of wickedness (Gen. 6:5).
  - c. According to ancient custom which was later incorporated into God's law, a widow was to be given to her brother in law. Their children would legally belong to the deceased brother (cf. Deut. 25: 5-6). Tamar is therefore given to the next brother, Onan (38:8). Onan, however, realizing that any children Tamar bears would legally inherit the property of his dead brother (and thereby diminish his inheritance), lets his seed fall to the ground every time he sleeps with Tamar (38:9). Tamar therefore is being abused since a woman counted on being cared for later in life by her children. This is why widows and orphans are singled out in Scripture as being especially vulnerable (Ex. 22:22). God is displeased with Onan and puts him to death as he had Onan's older brother (38:10).
  - d. This meant that Tamar then should be given to the next brother, Shelah. Yet apparently Shelah is too young to marry at this point. Judah then takes the unusual step of sending her back to her father's house (38:11).

This would not have been the normal practice. As a daughter in law Tamar was now a part of Judah's household. However at this point Judah basically is afraid that Tamar is bad luck and that his third son will die if he gets involved with her (38:11).

- e. With the passage of time it seems that Judah conveniently forgets about Tamar. Judah's wife dies. Shelah has grown up and it is clear that Judah is not going to give Tamar to him. After a time of mourning Judah goes to shear his sheep. Tamar hears about Judah's intended journey and puts a veil on and positions herself beside the road. Judah does not recognize her and thinks she is a temple prostitute. Temple prostitutes were not ordinary prostitutes (described by the demeaning word, "whore"). They were often even married women in the service of one of the ancient goddesses, Astarte or Ishtar.
- f. Judah approaches her and Tamar shrewdly asks for a pledge. According to the terms of the transaction Judah sends her a kid from his flock. However when Judah's friend comes with the promised kid he cannot find her since Tamar has returned to her home. None of the townspeople know of a temple prostitute (38:21-22). This would be strange since temple prostitutes would have had some social standing and significance related to the temple practices of one of the gods. This practice was of course condemned later in Israel (Deut. 23:17-18).
- g. In due time it is learned that Tamar is pregnant. She is accused of being a whore and threatened with burning (38: 24). She produces the pledges that Judah had given her and he confesses that she was more in the right than he was since he did not give his son Shelah to her (38:26).
- h. Tamar gives birth to twins one of whom is given a crimson thread (38:27-28). The crimson thread also shows up in the story of Rahab in the Book of Joshua (Joshua 2:18). It is perhaps not too much of a leap to think of the crimson stream of blood at Jesus' crucifixion (John 19:34). Jesus is descended from Judah through Tamar (Matt. 1:3).
- i. Once again we see that in the midst of human brokenness God continues to act to fulfill his purpose of salvation. God is clearly in no way dependent upon human beings who continue to fail again and again.

## Questions for Us –

1. The story of Joseph and his brothers is unfortunately one of hatred within a family. What lessons can we learn from this story?
2. What do you think of Reuben? Does he negate his earlier good intentions by going along with the brothers' deception later? Do you see him as a tragic figure? What can we learn from his example?
3. The story of Judah and Tamar is one of many sordid ones in Scripture. Why do you think Matthew singles out Tamar as one of the ancestors of Jesus?



## Book of Genesis – Part XVII - Genesis 39-41

### “Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt”

When we last left Joseph, he had barely escaped death at the hands of his treacherous brothers and was sold into slavery to Potiphar, a captain of Pharaoh’s guard. The critical thing we are told is that, “the Lord was with Joseph and he became a successful man (39:2).” This hardly happens overnight. Joseph first has to fend off the seductive advances of Potiphar’s wife and be sent into prison. Yet, astoundingly, God, in ways we could never imagine, not only delivers Joseph but places him in the highest rank of Egypt’s society. This only sets the stage for many amazing things to follow.

- VII. Joseph in Potiphar’s House – chapter 39
  - a. Potiphar, as an Egyptian, is able to recognize God’s presence with Joseph (39:3). The only thing that Potiphar would know about Joseph’s God is what he observed in Joseph’s life. The same applies to us today. People know less and less about the God of the Bible. If they don’t see God in our lives they may not see him at all.
  - b. Potiphar, understandably, is impressed with Joseph. In response to his good work, Potiphar makes Joseph the overseer of his whole house. The promise that God made to Jacob, that he would be with him and keep him wherever he went (28:15), is now being applied to his son, Joseph. This is all the more remarkable since Joseph’s older brothers were doing everything they could think of to harm him. In spite of their efforts, Joseph continues to receive God’s favors.
  - c. However, God’s favor does not come without Satan’s counter attack (1 Peter 5:8). Yet everything still is in God’s hands (Isaiah. 45:7). Potiphar’s wife sees how attractive young Joseph is and propositions him in very direct terms (39:6b-8). Genesis makes abundantly clear that one of the most vivid consequences of the fall is the breakdown of sexual relations. We have already seen Judah and Tamar, Reuben and his father’s concubine, Bilhah (also the mother of two of his brothers), the rape of Dinah, Lot and his daughters, the sons of god and the daughters of men, not to mention Abraham and Isaac asking their wives to pose as their “sisters.” In addition, we now have Potiphar’s wife. She pursues Joseph “day after day” (39:10).
  - d. Joseph responds in a twofold way. He resists Potiphar’s wife, pointing out how good Potiphar has been to him (39:9). The response to this could be the standard, “He’ll never know.” Joseph however adds that he cannot sin against God. God, of course, would always know.
  - e. Finally, Potiphar’s wife finds Joseph alone in the house. (The fact that she is not named is already a judgment on her on the part of the writer. She doesn’t deserve to have her name mentioned.). She again tries to seduce him, even grabbing hold of his garment. Joseph, wisely, does not try to confront her. He does not stand his ground. He runs outside. Sometimes

the best thing to do with temptation is to run away from it. There are temptations that we simply cannot resist. Rather than try to face the temptation, we do better simply to run away (I Corinthians 10:13).

- f. Potiphar's wife, however, is determined to save face. She holds up his garment as "proof" that Joseph tried to rape her (39:13-16). Potiphar comes home and, upon hearing her story, becomes enraged. The narrator tactfully does not say which person is the object of Potiphar's rage.
- g. Under normal circumstances, a slave attempting to rape his mistress would immediately be put to death. Potiphar instead places Joseph in prison. This suggests that Potiphar does not completely believe his wife. This is probably not the first time she has engaged in this kind of behavior. Yet he too must keep up appearances, so Joseph is sent to prison.
- h. God continues to be with Joseph. God shows him his steadfast love (39:21). Joseph could well wonder what was the benefit of this steadfast love since he has had nothing but negative experiences up to this point. We need to remember that God's love is not a guarantee of success in this world, though eventually this will be the case for Joseph. This is not the case with other Biblical characters such as Job, Jeremiah and Paul, for example.
- i. Right away, again we read that Joseph finds favor in adverse circumstances. The Lord makes him prosper even in prison (39:23).

#### VIII. Two Dreams – chapter 40

- a. In prison, Joseph encounters two former officers of Pharaoh. One was the chief cupbearer and the other the chief baker (40:2). Joseph, because of his favored status in the prison, is given charge over them (40:4).
- b. Both servants have dreams. They believe the dreams have significance but they cannot understand them. Therefore, they are troubled (40:6). Joseph asks that the two men tell him their dreams, stating that interpretations belong to God (40:8). The cupbearer tells of a dream with three branches of a vine. He dreams that he presses the grapes of the three branches into a cup and serves it to Pharaoh. Joseph interprets the dream to mean that in three days Pharaoh will lift up the cupbearer's head and restore him to his office (40:9-13). Joseph then pleads with the cupbearer to tell Pharaoh of his plight in prison and of his innocence (40:14-15).
- c. The narrator now engages in some very black humor. The chief baker, hearing of the good fortune of the cupbearer, is anxious to tell of his dream. He dreamed he had three cake baskets on his head and birds were eating out of them. Joseph uses the exact same phrase that he had for the cupbearer. Pharaoh will "lift up" the baker's head but in this case it means literally that he will have his head cut off! (40:16-19). Both interpretations come true. The phrase, the baker was hanged, probably refers to his body being hung up for the birds after he was decapitated (40:22).

- d. The cupbearer is restored, but, having been set free, he forgets all about Joseph (40:23). This is an all too human trait. We conveniently forget to be grateful (Luke 17:11-19).

IX. Foretelling the Future – chapt. 41

- a. Two years go by. They would have gone by very slowly for Joseph. Pharaoh has a dream. He is convinced there is an important message in the dream. He dreams of seven fat cows followed by seven lean and ugly ones. The dream is repeated with seven ears of good grain followed by seven withered ears. He calls together all the magicians of Egypt but no one is able to interpret his dream (41:1-8).
- b. It is at this point that the cupbearer finally remembers Joseph. He tells Pharaoh about how Joseph interpreted his dream and the baker's dream correctly.
- c. Pharaoh of course sends for Joseph who naturally has to be cleaned up before he can approach Pharaoh (41:14). Joseph interprets the dream to mean that there will be seven years of abundant crops followed by seven years of famine. Joseph points out that the famine will be "very grievous." The fact that Pharaoh had two dreams means that God will shortly bring this about (41:25-32).
- d. Joseph then adds that Pharaoh is to select a man who is "discerning and wise" to oversee the project of conserving food from the seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine (41:33-36). Joseph must know that he is setting himself up as the prime candidate.
- e. Pharaoh not surprisingly chooses Joseph to oversee all of this. What is more amazing is that Pharaoh recognizes the spirit of God on Joseph. Joseph's God would not have matched any of the gods of Egypt (40:37-39).
- f. Joseph is made second in command in Egypt. Interestingly enough, Joseph is given the daughter of a priest of the sun god "Re" whose temple was in On, as a wife (41:37-45). Joseph cannot be swayed by the gods of Egypt. He has seen too much of the steadfast love of the true God (41:37-45).
- g. It has been thirteen years since Joseph was sold into slavery. He is now prime minister of Egypt. To call this astounding is to put it mildly. Joseph carries out the plans for the famine (Famine was a terrifying prospect for the ancient world and helps explain the fertility cults whose worship was believed to promote continually growing crops).
- h. After the seven years of plenty (Joseph is now thirty seven), the famine begins. All the world comes to buy grain in Egypt. The scene is now set for an incredible reunion (41:46-57).

## Questions for Us –

1. Our concept of God's steadfast love does not usually accord with the kind of treatment which Joseph suffers. How do we understand God's continuing love when we often find ourselves to be treated unfairly and even abused?
2. Why do you think that we see so many examples of sexual brokenness in Genesis? What does this tell us about sin in general?
3. What do you think it was like for Joseph to spend two years in prison after having asked the cupbearer to tell his story to Pharaoh? What does this say about how we should endure adversity?
4. What can we learn from Joseph's model of faithful service to God in a land of unbelievers?

## Book of Genesis – Part XVII - Genesis 42-44

### “The Fateful Reunion”

A dramatic chain of events is set in motion with the spread of the famine which ends chapter 41. The famine has penetrated to Canaan. Judah sends his sons to Egypt to buy food. Here they encounter their long lost brother, Joseph. It has been twenty years since the ten brothers have seen him. While he recognizes them, they have no idea who he is. Joseph sees the fulfillment of his dream that his brothers would bow down before him. More than this, he puts them to a test to see if they will do to his full brother, Benjamin, what they did to him. It is in this context that Judah steps forward, and in a scene which foreshadows Jesus sacrificing himself for us, offers to sacrifice himself for Benjamin.

#### i. The brothers meet Joseph – twenty years later – chapter 42

1. The famine has penetrated into Canaan. Word has no doubt spread that there is food in Egypt due to Joseph's conservation of food during the seven prosperous years as Pharaoh's dream had warned him (41:25-49).
2. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food. As far as any of them knows, this will be a fairly routine endeavor. Nonetheless, Jacob fears for his youngest son, Benjamin, who, like Joseph, was the son of his only beloved wife, Rachel. He keeps Benjamin home for fear that harm might come to him (42:4).
3. The story proceeds with suspense and irony. The ten brothers come and bow before their unrecognized brother Joseph, thereby fulfilling Joseph's adolescent dream (37:5-11). Joseph recognizes them but says nothing. Several things can be noted here.
  1. It is not absolutely certain that the brothers knew that Joseph would be taken to Egypt. They had sold him to Ishmaelite traders with the aid of some Midianites. They did not necessarily know where Joseph would be taken.
  2. The seventeen year old boy who had pled unsuccessfully with his brothers is now at least a thirty seven year old man and a royal Egyptian in appearance. It is not surprising that the brothers have no idea who he is. He speaks Egyptian in their presence even while knowing their language (42:23).
  3. Joseph here illustrates the classic theme of the “secret identity.” His identity remains unknown even to people who would otherwise know him. He is therefore able to interact with the brothers having a distinct advantage over them. What is striking however in this Biblical account is that usually the disguise of the secret identity is one of weakness (Superman posing as Clark Kent). However Joseph's disguise is one of strength and power.
4. In spite of Joseph's great fortune because of God being with him, he still remembers the ill treatment he received from the brothers (42:21). Joseph is going to enact a measure of revenge and also test his brothers.

5. He begins by speaking harshly to them (42:7). He accuses them of being spies (42:9). This has the double irony of the fact that not only are the brothers not spies, they would probably be incapable of being effective spies.
6. Using these accusations, Joseph learns about both his father and his brother, Benjamin (42:11-17). He proceeds to lock them up in prison for three days (42:17) (three days being a major motif in scripture leading up to Christ's resurrection).
7. Joseph then demands that they bring Benjamin to him. To guarantee this he insists that one of them remain with him as a hostage.
8. The brothers somehow realize that they are enduring all this because of the evil they did to Joseph (42:21). They however have no idea that Joseph stands before them.
9. The brothers keep protesting that they are "honest men" (42:11, 31). Joseph will put this claim to the test. It is significant that Joseph says that he fears God (42:18). The brothers would not think that he knew their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
10. Joseph picks Simeon as the hostage (42:24). Simeon is bound before them and then they are sent on their way. On their journey home they open their sacks and find that the money they had paid for the grain has been returned to them (42:27-28). Totally mystified, they cry out, "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28).
11. Returning to their father, they explain the necessity of taking Benjamin back with them. Jacob however will not hear of it (42:38). For the time being then Simeon is left in Egypt.

## X. Judah's Guarantee – chapters 43-44

- a. The famine persists (43:1). Jacob can no longer refuse to send Benjamin because he knows that his sons will have to return to Egypt because they all need food (we are not told if they really miss Simeon all that much).
- b. Jacob/Israel laments what he can only see as a dire situation. He asks them why they had to tell "the Egyptian" about the family (43:5). The brothers answer somewhat helplessly that "the man" kept questioning them (43:7).
- c. It is at this decisive moment that Judah steps forward and says that he will be the surety or the guarantee for Benjamin's welfare (43:9-10). Jacob reluctantly agrees to let Benjamin go with them (43:11).
- d. When they return to Egypt Joseph starts playing with their heads. He invites them into the palace for a banquet (43:16). The brothers are then confused and suspicious. They wonder if it is some kind of trap (43:18).
- e. They offer to give the money back that was in their sacks to Joseph's steward. The steward, clearly in on the plan, says that he had received their money and the money in their sacks must have come from God! (43:23).
- f. Joseph arrives at noon and is overwhelmed at the sight of Benjamin. He has to leave temporarily to compose himself (43:26-31).
- g. They proceed to the banquet and everything seems to be going well. The brothers, at the very least, have to be confused by what is going on. They

also see that Benjamin receives five times as much as they do.

Nevertheless this is better than being put in prison (43:34). "So they drank and were merry with him" (43:34).

- h. The brothers leave in the morning thinking all is well. Joseph however is far from being done with them. He sends his steward to plant a special cup in Benjamin's sack. The steward begins by accusing the brothers of having stolen a magic cup (We are never told that Joseph actually practiced magic or "divination" in Egypt. This is all part of his pose).
- i. The brothers profess their innocence. They go so far as to say that if any of their company took the cup he should be put to death and the brothers would agree to become slaves. The steward however adds that this is too severe a penalty. Only the guilty party would have to remain as a slave.
- j. To the brothers' unabashed horror, the missing cup is found in Benjamin's sack (44:12-13).
- k. The brothers return to Joseph. Joseph has set a perfect trap for them. He has in effect recreated the same situation as had happened to him twenty years earlier. Will the brothers again sell one of Rachel's sons into slavery and return to their father with the devastating news (but with themselves safe)?
- l. The climax of the story now comes into view. Judah acknowledges the brothers' guilt (44:16). He recounts the whole story of his father's loss of Joseph. He then steps forward and tells Joseph to take him in place of Benjamin. This will overwhelm Joseph because he will realize that his brothers are not the same as they were twenty years earlier (45:1). Judah here though is prefiguring the greatest descendent of the tribe of Judah, Jesus Christ. Jesus volunteers to take our place so that we can be freed from the slavery of sin (Rom. 4:22-25; 8:2; II Cor. 5:15; Gal. 1:3-4; Titus 2:14; Heb. 2:9). In Judah's speech we see the message of the gospel clearly being set forth. Judah is prepared to ransom himself for his brother just as Jesus will ransom himself for us (Mark 10:45). This section of Joseph's story ends with Judah illustrating Jesus' words, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

## Questions for Us –

1. Do you see Joseph's actions toward his brother as motivated by revenge? Why or why not? If you were Joseph would you be able to forgive your brothers? Why is forgiveness so difficult for us? What does this say about our need for a savior?  
Do you think the brothers are showing repentance in chapter 42:21? Is there a difference between repentance and remorse (simply being sorry that you did something wrong)? Which response best describes the brothers? Do we often confuse repentance and remorse?
2. Why do you think it is important that Jesus is born of the tribe of Judah rather than being a descendent of the favored sons, Joseph or Benjamin (Judah's mother is Leah, the "hated" wife (Gen. 29:33))?



## Book of Genesis – Part XVIII

### Genesis 45-47 “Israel in Egypt”

We come now to the climax of the Joseph story. Joseph can no longer contain himself (45:1) and reveals his true identity to his brothers. This is a prefiguring of the Gospel. Joseph to all intent and purpose has been raised from the dead in the sense that the brothers and father assumed he was dead. Throughout this section we have language which prefigures the response to the resurrection in the New Testament. Just as Jesus brings us into the Kingdom of God Joseph brings his family into the kingdom of Egypt. Joseph emerges in the crisis of the famine as the savior of the world. Genesis then takes us from creation to resurrection, both introducing and summarizing the theme of the whole Bible.

#### m. “I am your brother, Joseph”– chapter 45

1. Judah’s speech breaks Joseph’s heart. Judah has expressed the theme of vicarious sacrifice, giving one’s life for the sake of another (44:33). Joseph now foretells the reality of the resurrection.
2. The reactions to Joseph’s revelation of his identity are shock and astonishment, very similar to the later reaction to the news that Jesus is alive after his death (45:3, 25-26; Mark 16:8; Luke 24:12, 36-37; John 20:24-27).
3. Joseph proceeds to tell his brothers that what they had done to him actually was part of a greater plan of God “to preserve life” (45:4-5; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11). He actually says that it was not they who had sent him to Egypt but God (45:8; Amos 3:6; Isa. 46:8-11). The same reality applies to Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus’ enemies were unintentionally fulfilling God’s larger plan (Acts 2:23).
4. He immediately tells them to go and bring their father to him, “do not delay” (45:9)
5. Foretelling Jesus’ promises (Matt. 6:25-30), Joseph tells his brothers that he will provide for them. They are to come to Egypt to find safety. Joseph then kisses and weeps over Benjamin and then does the same with all the brothers (45:14-15; cf. Luke 23:34).
6. Pharaoh hears of the family reunion and echoes the invitation of Joseph to the brothers. They will find peace and security in Egypt (45:16-20). Joseph sends the brothers off to bring back Jacob with gifts and provisions. Once again Benjamin is signaled out for special favor (45:21-23). Knowing the brothers and their history, Joseph adds the instruction, “Do not quarrel along the way” (45:24).
7. Jacob is astonished at the news, again prefiguring the response to Jesus’ resurrection. Joseph’s reaction is essentially that of the father in the

parable of the prodigal son, “for this son of mine was dead and is alive again” (Luke 15:24). Jacob is eager to go to Egypt to see his son (45:28).

#### XI. Joseph sees his father – chapter 46

1. As Jacob and the brothers begin their trip to Egypt, God again appears to him and tells him:
  1. not to be afraid to go down to Egypt (46:3). The phrase “do not be afraid” recurs throughout the resurrection accounts (Matt. 28:5, 10; Luke 24:38).
  2. he will make a great nation of them in Egypt (46:3)
  3. God will go with them and will bring them up again (46:4; cf. Matt. 28:20).
2. Jacob and all his household comes to Egypt. We have a detailed list of all the children and descendents. It is interesting that only Rachel is referred to as “Jacob’s wife” (46:19). Perez, the son of Judah by Tamar, is mentioned. He will be the ancestor of David and Jesus (46:12). The total entourage numbers seventy (46:27).
3. It is interesting that Judah is sent ahead of the group to greet Joseph in the land of Goshen (46:28). Judah and Joseph both prefigure Jesus in different ways. When Joseph sees his father he falls on his neck and weeps (46:29). This is the same language as the father welcoming the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). It is also the language of Esau welcoming Jacob whom he had wanted dead (Gen. 33:4).
4. Joseph informs his father and brothers that he will next bring them before Pharaoh. They are to say that they are shepherds, a very unpopular role in Egypt. Therefore they are in effect asking for an indulgence to settle in the nearby land of Goshen (46:33-34).

#### XII. Joseph the Savior – chapter 47

- a. Pharaoh not only welcomes Joseph’s relatives but gives them the land of Goshen which is “the best part of the land” (47:6). Pharaoh also puts them in charge of Pharaoh’s livestock.
- b. Pharaoh now actually meets Joseph’s father who is a hundred and thirty years old (again we’re not sure exactly how ages were reckoned in this period) (47:7-9)
- c. In a striking scene Jacob blesses Pharaoh (47:10). This is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 18:18).
- d. We next read of the severity of the famine (47:13). People both in Egypt and Canaan continue to run out of their resources (47:15, 18). Without going into all the details, Joseph exemplifies both wisdom and judgment in dealing with the crisis. While the people in effect give everything over to Pharaoh, as Joseph arranges the situation they are not made slaves in the

conventional sense (47:21). Joseph's plan is that they should till the land they have, giving one fifth to Pharaoh at the harvest and keeping four fifths for themselves. In so doing he provides not only for their livelihood but also for their prosperity.

- e. The people gratefully respond by saying to Joseph, "You have saved our lives" (47:25). Joseph then has saved not only his own people but the people of Egypt as well. He is their savior. This prefigures the role of Jesus both as the savior of Israel (Acts 13:23) and the savior of the world (John 4:42). Joseph going into the pit symbolizes death. However his going into prison symbolizes Jesus' saving ministry of the dead between his death and resurrection (I Peter 3:18-19; Eph. 4:7-9).
- f. Jacob lives seventeen years in Egypt. He dies at the age of one hundred and forty seven (47:28). Before he dies he makes Joseph promise that he will not be buried in Egypt but with his ancestors. Joseph agrees.
- g. Jacob (or Israel)'s bowing himself on the head of his bed is a sign of gratitude and reverence (cf. I Kings 1:47).

## Questions for us –

1. What kind of grace does it take for Joseph to welcome and forgive his brothers? How are we able to see God's hand even in tragedies?
2. What lessons can we take from Jacob's reaction to the news of his son being alive? Why do we assume situations are hopeless (or "dead") when in God's plan they may not be?
3. What lessons can we learn from Joseph's actions in the famine for dealing with crisis situations in our own time such as Haiti?

## Book of Genesis – Part XIX

### Genesis 48-50 “Blessing and Prophecy”

We come now to the conclusion of Genesis. We will see that the whole book is in fact a foretelling of the entire Bible. We have seen the great themes of creation, the fall, the calling of an elect people (in ways that mystify us as sinful human beings), the continuing conflict between righteous and sinful behavior even on the part of God's chosen people and the themes of redemption and reconciliation. In the last chapter we are reminded of God's overarching providence. While we are free to make our own choices, God determines the final outcome of all things.

#### **h. The blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim (or, here we go again)– Chapter 48**

1. Jacob has come to the end of his life. In spite of all the earlier tragedies and disappointments he has faced (many of which were due to his own actions) he is ending his life in happiness and security.
2. Knowing that his father is about to die Joseph brings his two sons to be blessed by their grandfather. As we noted earlier, “blessing” bestowed a special, favored status on the recipient, not unlike our view of baptism.
3. Jacob repeats the promise of God that was made originally to Abraham (48:3; 17:1-8). The whole theme of the Bible can be summarized as the story of God's promise to a sinful and rebellious people (II Corinthians 1:19-20).
4. Jacob's eyes are weak (48:10) so he asks Joseph to bring the boys to him.
5. Joseph presents the boys so that Manasseh, the older will receive the favored blessing of the right hand. However Jacob intentionally crosses his hands so that the younger, Ephraim receives the favored blessing. Joseph, displeased at what his father is doing and perhaps assuming that Jacob is mistaken due to his poor eyesight, tries to correct the situation (48:17-18). Jacob reaffirms that he knows what he is doing (48:19). This of course is a repeat of Jacob himself receiving the blessing of his father Isaac over that of his older brother, Esau. However where Jacob (and his mother's) action was deceitful Jacob is very up front about what he is doing. This is a critical scene because it reminds us that God's ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). God loves Jacob rather than Esau (Mal. 1:2-3). The first shall be last (Matt. 10:31). If we could grasp this spiritual lesson spelled out here explicitly in the first book of the Bible we would face less distress and questioning in our spiritual lives. God's pattern is not our pattern. We never have the whole picture.

#### **XIII. The Destiny of the Twelve Sons – Chapter 49**

- a. Jacob now summons all his sons and gives basically a prophecy of their future destinies.

1. Reuben is the firstborn but rather than enjoying the fruits of this status his father pronounces him as “unstable as water.” His sexual involvement with his father’s concubine (35:22) is ultimately a disgrace against his father. The ancient world both within and outside the Bible regarded such actions as abhorrent (I Cor. 5:1-2). The Greek dramatist Euripides in his play *Hippolytus* speaks to this and this may well be what Paul is referring to when he cites the “pagans.”
  2. Simeon and Levi are cursed because of their violence. This goes back to their murder of Shechem and all his people because of the rape of their sister (34:25-30). This is a condemnation of the spiral of violence which Jesus invokes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38-42).
  3. The most significant prophecy has to do with Judah.
    1. Judah will be powerful (49:8).
    2. He will be like a lion – 49:9; Rev. 5:5
    3. He will be a king – 49:10; Ps. 89:18-37
    4. references to a donkey’s colt refers to his humility – 49:11; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:1-5
    5. wine is a symbol of the coming Kingdom of God – 49:11-12; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13; John 2:1-11
    6. The ultimate descendent of Judah of course is Jesus Christ – Matt. 1:3-16
  4. Zebulun will be in favored location – Joshua 19:10-16; Matt. 4:12-16
  5. Issachar will capitulate to slavery in order to find his “resting place” – 49:14-15
  6. Dan will be a judge and sneak up on his enemies – 49:16-17; Joshua 19:40-48
  7. Gad’s tribe will distinguish themselves in battle – 49:19; Num. 26:15-18
  8. Asher will settle in a fertile land – 49:20; Deut. 33:24-25
  9. Naphtali’s land will be blest – 49:21; Deut. 33:23; Matt. 4:13
  10. Joseph’s line, not surprisingly, is full of promise and blessing. Yet the Messiah will come through Judah (49:22-26).
  11. Benjamin, in spite of the rather passive role he has in Genesis will be a forceful tribe like a wolf (49:27). Benjamin’s most famous descendent is the apostle Paul (Phil. 3:4-5)
- II. After pronouncing these blessings (and curses) Jacob expresses his desire to be buried with his ancestors. He then breathes his last – 49:29-33

#### **XIV. The Final Word – chapter 50**

- a. Joseph complies with his father's request. First, Jacob is embalmed according to the custom of the Egyptians (50:2-3). Then he is taken to Canaan to be buried with his family (50:4-14). What is striking here is that elements of both Egyptian culture and Hebrew practice are combined. Already we have the idea that God's promise and his chosen people will indeed include a blessing for the nations (12:3).
  - b. Joseph's brothers then worry about possible retaliation at the hands of Joseph now that their father is dead (50:15).
  - c. In this final scene of the Book of Genesis two great themes are emphasized.
    1. The last word on human sin is forgiveness. (50:17). The brothers here ask for forgiveness. This is the essence of repentance (Matt. 4:17). Yet Joseph has already forgiven them (50:17-19). God's forgiveness precedes even our repentance (Luke 23:34; Acts 13:38; Eph. 1:7). Joseph's forgiveness is absolute and complete. They have nothing to fear. He speaks kindly to them. Indeed he will provide for them (50:21).
    2. All this is God's plan (Rom. 8:28). God's good purpose does not negate the harm that the brothers intended. Yet in God's sovereign purpose that harm is overruled "for good" (50:20; Acts 2:23; Luke 22:22).
- XV. Joseph dies at the age of one hundred and ten. He repeats the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He asks them when they leave Egypt to bring his body back to his homeland. He therefore prophesies the Exodus (50:24-26; Ex. 13:19).
- XVI. This concludes the story of the patriarchs.

#### **Questions for us –**

1. Why do you think the theme of reversal is so prominent in Scripture? What lessons can we take from God choosing Jacob over Esau or Jacob favoring Ephraim over Manasseh? Is this fair (cf. Matt. 20:1-16)?
2. What are we to make of the promise to Judah (49:8-12)? Judah is far from guiltless (37:26-27; 38:1-26). Why do you think the plan of salvation is carried out through Judah's line rather than through Joseph or Benjamin?
3. What does it mean to say that God can bring good out of harm (50:20)? Have we experienced this in our own lives? What do we say to the person in distress who questions God's goodness?