



The God of Promise

A Study of Genesis 12-35

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Introduction

A.W. Tozer, beginning his work on the attributes of God, makes this profound statement: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ While I might take issue with the absolute nature of his statement, I take no issue with its importance. Indeed, our understanding of who God is forms the foundation of our worship and, if we rightly understand worship to not be a unique act at a specific moment in time but a way of life, then our understanding of God forms the foundation for our very lives. “The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matter which at the most cannot concern him for very long.”² In other words, the vast majority of our biggest concerns as 21st century humans take one of two forms: (1) They are so large and far-reaching that we have almost no ability to impact the situations, particularly in the face of a sovereign God, or (2) they are so temporal that, though they fill our mind in the immediate, they will be meaningless in weeks, days, or even moments. Our minds are full with meditations on that which is quickly passing, and largely void of any depth of thought on the eternal and transcendent.

What’s even worse is that we have no excuse.

God Himself is so far above us and beyond us that any attempt to imagine Him borders on the idolatrous. Again, Tozer says it well: “Whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God.”³ His being, essence, person, and essential nature are unknowable in human terms—all that we have is but a shadow. However, He is not simply transcendent. He has also condescended through self-revelation, identifying Himself to us through a variety of names and attributes. These names and attributes act like rungs on a ladder, helping us to climb from the bounds of the temporal up into the realm of the eternal. The ultimate self-revelation came through Jesus Himself, who “is the image of the invisible God” and in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” (Colossians 1:15, 19) However, prior to Jesus, God revealed Himself again and again to men and

¹ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 1.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

women. Through His names and attributes, He built a composite image of the God of the universe. This image, viewed through the lens of Jesus Himself, gives us a vision of majesty and beauty that is absolutely worthy of our meditation.

The world we encounter in Genesis 12 is a world largely void of this type of image. When God first calls to Abram, he is most likely a Babylonian moon worshiper. In faith, Abram follows this God, leaving his home, family, and homeland to travel to an unknown place for a largely undisclosed purpose. God's promise to him is both land and lineage—He will give Abram both a homeland and descendants which will outnumber the sand and the stars. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah and from them comes Isaac, the son of the promise and precursor to Jesus Himself. From Isaac comes Jacob, both the deceiver and the chosen one. Throughout the rest of history and to this very day, one of the primary designations of God contains these great names: He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Bound up in this epic story is a deep revelation of the nature and character of God Himself. It's certainly a story of promises and their fulfillment but, more than that, it's a story about the *God* of the promise. We best understand the Bible when we see that it's not a Hollywood story about good guys and bad guys. Rather, it's a story about bad guys and Jesus, the only real hero of the story. Certainly each of the patriarchs, along with many of those who emerged from their line, had moments of greatness. However, through the patriarchs, we learn that these great moments are really products of the grace of God alone.

The story of the patriarchs, if it is to have any value at all, must point us to the God of the patriarchs. It's only when we begin to understand *Him* that we begin to truly understand ourselves. "We do the greatest service to the next generations of Christians by passing onto them, undimmed and undiminished, that noble concept of God which we received from our Hebrew and Christian fathers of generations past."⁴ This is both the heart of our study and the goal of our lives. May each of us be faithful patriarchs and matriarchs, passing a surpassing vision of the grace and glory of God to the generations that follow us.

Soli Deo Gloria,
Brian Kannel
York Alliance Church

⁴ Ibid., pg. 4.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be used as a companion resource to the Fall 2014 sermon series at York Alliance Church. Each Sunday's message will provide the central teaching of the Scripture passage for that week. You will receive most benefit from this study as you utilize it in conjunction with both the Sunday messages and a weekly LIFE group gathering, a small community with whom you are able to discuss and apply these truths. If you are unable to attend one of the Sunday morning gatherings for any reason, the sermon audio can be found at www.yorkalliance.org/resources.

Please be aware that studying the Bible can be a challenging endeavor. Of course, there are very few worthwhile things in life that don't require some effort on our part. But beyond the difficulty of study in general is the fact that we have a very real enemy who is actively opposed to our understanding of the Word of God. Paul tells us that our battle is not "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12) Therefore, if you find yourself feeling discouraged, frustrated, or unable to understand something, I strongly encourage you to stop and pray. Ask God to guide your heart and thoughts and to give you understanding.

Also, don't do this study in isolation. While most will complete the actual studies individually, I would encourage you to get connected to someone else who is doing this study and to connect with that person each week to talk about what you're learning. Along the way, if you have frustrations or are confused about something you're studying, they can provide encouragement and guidance as you journey through the study together. If you get stuck along the way, you should feel free to skip a section and move to the next one.

This particular study guide has a few unique features to help you grow as a student of the Word as well as a disciple of Jesus. Therefore, a few notes may be helpful as you begin your study using this guide:

- Each week's study will consist of three main sections: personal study, guided study, and a meditation on the character of God.

- The personal study component will utilize the “Inductive Bible Study” method, designed to help each person engage and apply the text from their specific perspective. (See the “Inductive Bible Study” section for details)
- The guided study component will consist of two studies, each focusing on a specific aspect of the passage. Each study will then conclude with application questions, challenging you to intentionally apply to your life the principles that you’ve learned throughout the study.
- Finally, at the end of each week’s study, there will be a meditation on a specific name or attribute of God that is highlighted in the text. You are encouraged to slowly read the passage and to meditate on how that reality applies to your life at this particular moment. I am greatly indebted to A.W. Tozer’s great work The Knowledge of the Holy as a source for many of these thoughts, as you will see heavily footnoted throughout. I would encourage everyone to read that classic work for themselves as a follow-up to this study.
- Included with each study are blank sermon note sheets (for use on Sunday mornings and/or with the sermon audio available online) as well as a “Facilitation/Application” sheet. While the primary intent of this page is that it be used within York Alliance Church LIFE groups, this resource can actually be used in a variety of other settings.
- Although the English Standard Version is utilized throughout this study, feel free to use any English translation with which you are comfortable. In fact, you are encouraged to read from multiple translations, particularly with passages that you are struggling to fully understand.

If you have questions about how to best utilize the book or have comments on what you’re finding in it and/or on your experiences with it, they are welcomed! Email me at bkannel@yorkalliance.org.

“Lord Jesus, as we study this ancient text with it’s odd stories, help us to find ourselves in the midst of the characters that come to life before us. Reveal Yourself to us through Your Word, even as we read of You revealing Yourself to our forefathers. May this study give us a fuller understanding of the incredible grace that You’ve given to us, Your exceeding patience with us, and the plan that You have—not only for our lives, but for the whole world. As we grow in our understanding of who You are, may we also grow in our ability and desire to trust and pursue You. Just as Abraham taught us an overcoming faith, may we also be bolstered in our faith. May we each live as though You are who You reveal Yourself to be, and may that reality drive us with passion into the world around us. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Inductive Bible Study

Throughout this study, you'll be asked to engage a method of study known as the "Inductive Bible Study" method (IBS). The goal of IBS is to do as thorough a study as possible (or desired), simply using the text itself. While outside tools such as Bible dictionaries, word studies and lexicons, handbooks and commentaries can be helpful, they aren't necessary using this method. The only thing you need is a Bible or, ideally, two different translations of the Bible.

As you approach the Bible, understand you are approaching the Word of God given to us through the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. However, you are also reading a modern English translation of an ancient document, written by specific people, directed to specific audiences, for a specific purpose. In fact, in the case of Genesis, you are reading a book translated into English from the Hebrew text first written nearly 3500 years ago. Therefore, English translations vary in how they present the specifics of the stories, although the heart is almost always consistent regardless of translation.

Two different translations can be helpful because translators are constantly working on a continuum between accuracy and readability. Because Hebrew language structure is so dramatically different than English, a level of interpretation is necessary in order to develop a readable English text. It's often the case that the most readable translations have taken the most liberties with the original text, and that the most accurate translations are often the most difficult to read. Therefore, reading each passage from a translation at each side of the spectrum can often give the fullest understanding of the text. See the following table for a few recommended translations in each category:

More Accurate

English Standard Version
New American Standard Version
New King James Version
Holman Christian Standard Version

More Readable

New Living Translation
New International Version
The Message
New Century Version

With IBS, you will typically read each passage several times, so it's ideal to read it in several different translations in order to get the fullest meaning.

Before you study, it's vitally important to begin with prayer. Since this is not simply an intellectual activity, but a spiritual one as well, ask God to speak to you through His Word as you study. This doesn't need to be a long, involved prayer time, but it is vital that it happens, and that it precedes your study.

After prayer, read through the passage at least once, giving special attention to *observation*: Who are the characters in the passage? When is this happening? What are the details the author is emphasizing? You'll be able to use the space given to write down brief observations that you make as you read through the text.

The next step is *interpretation*: Why is this happening? What are the characters learning about God? About each other? How do the characters change during the passage? Is there a specific message the author is trying to communicate to the original audiences? As you read through the passage again, try to interpret the facts that you've observed and to understand the "why" behind the text, jotting down thoughts and impressions as you do.

Finally, read the passage a final time focusing on *application*: What does this mean for me today? What can I learn about human nature, about the nature and character of God, and so forth, that can inform my daily life? With which character (or characters) do I relate? During the application step, it's vital to translate the theoretical application to a concrete action step: What should I do or do differently because of the reality that I've just read? Take time to write all of the concepts that you feel apply to your life, but be sure to note at least one specific action step that comes out of the passage you're studying.

Simply by reading slowly, paying attention to details, and then asking good questions, we can gain a deep and thorough understanding of the text without using any additional study tools. When we take the time to not just read the text, but to observe, interpret, and apply, it often makes the ancient words of God come alive in our minds and hearts.

The Promise

Genesis 12:1-9

Genesis is a book of beginnings, starting with the poetic account of creation. However, we see men and women responding to the grace of God with rebellion and sin, seeking in a variety of ways to dethrone God and become their own lords. Into this mess of sin, God calls Abram. The promise is that God Himself will step in to rescue His people, blessing Abram that he might be a blessing to all the world. However, in order to engage God's promise, a bold step of faith is required. The same is often true for us.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 12:1-9, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Setting the Stage

Genesis is a book of beginnings. One way to divide the book is into three “acts” or movements: Creation (Genesis 1-2), Curse (Genesis 3-11), and Covenant (Genesis 12-50). In order to appreciate the value and weight of covenant, it’s vital for us to first understand the initial two acts.

Read Genesis 1-2.

What does God determine in Genesis 1:31?

As you read Genesis 2, what are the general impressions you note? (*Look at vs. 6, 15, and 25, as well as 3:8.*)

The account of Creation seems to give the sense of utter perfection: harmony, rhythm, and contentment. However, that didn’t last long. Read Genesis 3:1-13.

Based on Genesis 2:16-17, what is the core issue in Genesis 3?

The second portion of Genesis 3 (vs. 14-19) produces a threefold curse—on the serpent (Satan), and on man and woman. Satan’s curse is a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus, which we’ll see by the end of this study. What is the heart of the curse for man and woman?

- Woman (vs. 16)

- Man (vs. 17-19)

Once the perfection of creation was broken and the curse was pronounced, Genesis records a series of attempts to recreate some level of perfection. As you read these passages, what is the vehicle being used to gain contentment, joy, and fulfillment?

- Genesis 4:8, 23-24

- Genesis 8:18, 9:18-27

- Genesis 11:3-4

These are just a few of the attempted solutions to the problem of sin which had entered the world. However, nothing seemed to work—the primitive world of Genesis 3-11 was a dark, difficult place, constantly spiraling into greater sin. The Word of the Lord was missing from this dark world until, in Genesis 12, God finally speaks to Abram.

Read Ephesians 1:9-10. When does Paul reveal that God conceived the plan of redemption, a plan that began with the call of Abram and culminated in the coming of Jesus to the earth?

Application:

- In what ways do you attempt to deal with the brokenness of the world within your own life? Does God’s solution seem feasible to you? Why or why not?

Calling Like Jesus

There are some choices that are absolute. By choosing one option, all other options are left behind and forsaken forever. Marriage is one such choice. One of the statements, made in most marriage ceremonies, says “Do you give yourself completely, forsaking all others as long as God gives you life?” After a deep breath, the “I do” is spoken and the choice is joyfully made. That covenant promise is intended to be binding, when both spouses feel like it (as they do at that moment of newly wedded bliss) and when they don’t feel like it, which certainly happens sporadically over the course of two lifetimes.

When God speaks to Abram, He speaks using this kind of absolute, covenant language. Read Genesis 12:1.

- What three things does God ask Abram to leave behind?

- Where does God say the land is to which He will lead Abram?

A journey of several hundred miles, by foot, was certainly sufficient to separate Abram from his past. His decision to follow God was a decisive, permanent, absolute choice of faith—he would forsake the limited security and blessing of the known for the unlimited blessing and joy of following God into the unknown. At this stage, Abram doesn’t know anything about the destination other than the promise and the One who will be guiding him. In order to get any more information, Abram must first obey. “Without the separation, there will be no further revelation.”⁵

Read the following passages, noting Jesus’ call to those He’s speaking with:

- Mark 1:17-18

⁵ Joyce Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50, BST*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL, 1986.), pg. 30.

- Matthew 8:21-22
- Luke 5:27-28
- Luke 18:18-23

What do these passages have in common with God's call to Abram in Genesis 12?

Now, read Genesis 12:2-3. Look back at what God has asked Abram to leave. Then, look at what He's promised him. How do they relate to one another?

Read the conclusion of the story from Luke 18, focusing on vs. 29-30. What does Jesus promise to those who will leave everything behind and follow Him?

Application:

- What do you struggle with leaving behind for the sake of the call of Jesus? What does it look like for you to "forsake all others," even though you're not taking a literal journey?

Yahweh

Exodus 3 records Moses' incredible encounter with God at the burning bush. It was during this encounter that God spoke His Name to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM." He then said to Moses: "Say this to the people of Israel, 'Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" I AM. "Yahweh", often rendered "Jehovah". The eternal, self-existent God.

It's no surprise, then, when Moses records the call of Abram, he uses that great name, *Yahweh*, six times in nine verses (Genesis 12:1-9). The name *Yahweh* tells us that God is eternal—He has had no beginning, no source, no author or developer. He's always been. The corresponding fact is also true: He will never have an end, a completion, or a successor. He always will be.

In our humanity, we can only conceive of one category of object or being: that which has been created. Our natural inclination is to think in terms of source—Where did that come from? When did that begin? How old is that?—which we do naturally because we cannot conceive of something other than that which has a source and origin. Therefore, our minds are understandably uncomfortable meditating on the eternal. We don't have a category in which to place a being that always is and always will be. However, this is who God reveals Himself to be: The Great I AM.

So, what does this great reality mean for us as the created, particularly as those created in the image of the eternal? (Genesis 1:27) The sad reality is that most of us have absolutely no idea. "It is not a cheerful thought that millions of us who live in a land of Bibles, who belong to churches and labor to promote the Christian religion, may yet pass our whole life on this earth without once having thought or tried to think seriously about the being of God."⁶ While the implications are likely as limitless as God Himself, I would simply like to propose two: the essence of sin and the reality of covenant.

First, if God eternally is, in all places and at all times, then He should absolutely reign in all places and all times. In our natural state, we can accept His rule and

⁶ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 27.

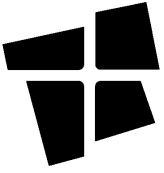
reign in just about every time and place—the notable exception is our own lives. Though the Great I AM, *Yahweh*, is obviously superior to each of us as created beings, we still maintain our right to rule and reign over our own lives. “Sin has many manifestations, but its essence is one. A moral being, created to worship before the throne of God, sits on the throne of his own selfhood and from that elevated position declares, ‘I AM.’ . . . Sins are because sin is.”⁷

The only answer to this problem of sin is found in the reality of covenant. The Great I AM comes to you and I in relationship, promising through His eternal faithfulness to give us all we need and could possibly want *in Him*. We leave behind our former land, our former lineage, and our former inheritance but, in doing so, we gain a better land, a greater lineage, and a secure inheritance. The transaction is guaranteed to be worthwhile because of the eternity of *Yahweh*. “The foundation of God is the foundation of the stability of the covenant . . . that is the foundation of all comfort we can take from his immortality: if he had a beginning, he might have an end, and so all our happiness, hope and being would expire with him.”⁸ Because He is the Great I AM, we are able to rest in Him fully with confidence, knowing that His promises have no expiration date.

God is revealed to Abram, and to us, as *Yahweh*, the God who eternally is. As you think on that reality, what impact does it make on your life?

⁷ Ibid., pgs. 29-30.

⁸ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, (Robert Carter & Brothers, 1874.), Kindle location 5917.



The Promise Genesis 12:1-9

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Who's the oldest person in your immediate family, including grandparents and great-grandparents?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 12:1-9

- How have you seen Jesus at work recently?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- In what ways do you attempt to deal with the brokenness of the world in your own life?
- What do you struggle with leaving behind for the sake of the calling of Jesus?
- What does it look like to "forsake all others" even though God is not calling you on a literal journey as He did Abram?
- What are some of the specific ways that God has blessed you?
- How have you been a conduit of blessing to others, not simply a repository for that blessing?
- What are some specific ways that this LIFE group can be a blessing to the world around us? What might we need to leave behind in order to do that?

World: The gospel is never intended to terminate on us, but to flow through us into the world around us. How can we be a part of God's plan in that way? Pray intentionally about ways that you can be God's hands and feet in the world around you and, particularly, those people in your life that need to experience the love, grace, and blessing of God. Pray very intentionally for opportunities to use the blessing of God to be a blessing to others, in partnership with other LIFE group members this week as you reach out to those in the world around you!

Disobedience and Grace

Genesis 12:10 – 13:18

Abram has received God's two-fold promise: God will give him land and a people. However, at the first sign of hardship, Abram fails to consult God and acts according to his own wisdom, jeopardizing the fulfillment of both promises. God's grace is greater than Abram's sin, however, and Abram's repentance brings transformation. Transformation leads into further obedience, finally placing Abram in the position to receive the full promise of God.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 12:10 – 13:18, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

The Results of Fear

Abram has taken the initial steps that will ultimately enshrine him as one of the great heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11) and a great example of bold faith (Romans 4): He has left Ur and then Haran, and has followed God's call by faith alone. However, he finds himself in Canaan, having persevered through the trials of a barren wife, an unknown destination, and leaving family and people, and he still doesn't have a permanent home.

Re-read Genesis 12:4-9. How many times does Abram stop along the way? Where does he stop? Does he settle in any of those places?

Now, he's faced with another dilemma: Not only does he not yet have a true home, but there's a famine in the land. It seemed that this last trial was one too many; Abram doesn't seek the Lord but, rather, leaves for Egypt. When he arrives, his lack of faith gives way to fear. Concerned that he might be killed in order for someone to marry his beautiful wife, Sarai, he lies and says that she is his sister. Sarai lies for Abram as well, compounding his sin. Pharaoh's sin is nearly added as well because, without Divine intervention, he would have unknowingly committed adultery with Sarai once she was taken into his harem..

Fear is a tricky thing. We are temporal beings, so fear is a natural part of our lives. However, the Bible will clearly show us that the object of our fear makes all the difference.

Read Psalm 112:1, Proverbs 1:7, and Isaiah 33:6. What are the results of the fear of the Lord?

Now, read Proverbs 29:25. What does Solomon call the fear of man?

In Abram's case, the fear of man caused him to be disobedient, but due to God's intervention, his disobedience appears to be quite profitable. Although he receives a rebuke from Pharaoh, what else does he take with him when he's sent out of Egypt, according to Genesis 12:16-20?

However, as is often the case, what appears to be blessing in disobedience is not what it initially seems to be.

- Read Genesis 13:2-7. What did the possessions gained in Egypt cost Abram?
- Now, read Genesis 16:1-2 (which we'll look at in greater detail in the coming weeks). Where did Hagar most likely come from?

Read 1 John 4:18-19. What is produced through the covenant love of Jesus?

Fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom, but His covenant love makes that wisdom perfect, driving out our fear and giving us confidence in His presence.

Application:

- Are there people and situations that you fear more than God? What are the practical results of that fear?

Seen and Unseen

Having been deported from Egypt after a firm tongue-lashing from Pharaoh, Abram and Lot return to Bethel, where they had originally camped. It was there that a new problem emerged—this one not from famine, but from plenty!

Read Genesis 13:2-7. What is the issue that Abram and Lot are having?

Abram's response to this dilemma is "a study in magnanimity."⁹ He had every right to demand first choice "as the older man and the leader of the faith expedition, the one to whom the promises were made,"¹⁰ but instead, he generously gave the choice to his nephew. And how did Lot make the choice?

Read Genesis 13:8-11.

- How does vs. 10 record Lot made his choice?

- What do we find out about the land that Lot chose?

Of course, in our hindsight, we can see clearly that Lot made a bad decision. Given the fruitfulness of the land before him and gracious freedom to choose, most of us would have made the same decision. However, there was a significant element missing from Lot's decision making process—indeed, from his entire life.

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2004.), pg. 199.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Go back and re-read Genesis 13:1-4.

- Who is recorded as having left Egypt in vs. 1-2?
- Who is the “they” that travelled toward Bethel in vs. 3?
- Who worshiped the Lord in vs. 4?

Suddenly, the plural has become singular—it seems that Lot was traveling with Abram, but not necessarily worshiping with Abram. Choosing what seemed to be the best based on what was *seen* makes perfect sense, unless you have the option of “seeing” past what’s seen—an option that Lot never seemed to take.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:18. What does Paul remind us about regarding that which can be seen versus those things that are unseen?

Sometimes the things which look the best to us actually *are* the best. Other times, something is happening under the surface that can’t be seen. However, as followers of Jesus, we’re not left to our own devices, but we are freely given the gift of His Spirit to lead and guide us—but we do need to ask!

Application:

- Has there been a time in your life that you’ve settled for what looked the best without taking time to see the situation as God sees it?

Divine Grace

From the very beginning of Abram's story, grace is apparent. Certainly his calling is purely by grace. Noah is noted for his righteousness as distinct from the rest of his generation (Genesis 6:9), although this too is due to the grace of God (Genesis 6:8). Abram's behavior, however, as best we can tell, wasn't in any way distinct from the rest of those around him. In fact, Joshua 24:2-3 seems to strongly infer that Abram, like his father Terah, was an idol worshiper prior to God's call.

Once called, however, Abram was a model of faith, right? Not at all! In fact, at the first sign of difficulty—a famine in Canaan—he didn't consult with God at all, but just took off for Egypt. Out of fear, he passed Sarai off as his sister instead of his wife. She was taken into Pharaoh's harem while Abram collected a variety of gifts outside of the city, alone in his tent. What a model of faith!

In the midst of this situation, the grace of God inserts itself. As Pharaoh's household is struck with a plague, he recognizes that Sarai might be a bit more than a sister to Abram, and tragedy is averted. Interestingly, apart from Pharaoh's stern words to Abram, the story is recorded with very little moralizing or judgment—simply a story of a broken man making bad choices with little to no regard for God in the midst of his situation. In short, his story is our story.

Ephesians 2 gives us a clear overview of the reality of our story:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom *we all once lived* in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1-3, italics added)

Paul goes on to say that we were “dead in our trespasses” (Ephesians 2:5). One of the consistent traits of dead people is that they have absolutely no ability to help themselves. If we are to be rescued from this state of death, our rescue must come from outside us. And, as Paul states, that is just what happened: “But God, being rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4-5) Someone, pondering this reality,

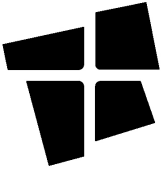
once quipped: “The only thing we bring to our salvation is the sin that made it necessary.”

Tozer defines grace this way: “Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving. It is a self-existent principle inherent in the divine nature and appears to us as a self-caused propensity to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, [and] welcome the outcast.”¹¹ There was nothing in Abram that was calling for God to choose him. Once chosen, there was nothing in his behavior that would call for God to intervene in his sinful, disobedient behavior. But God did. Why? Grace.

There’s nothing in us that calls for God to choose us. Once chosen, there’s nothing in us that calls for God to intervene in the midst of our sinful, disobedient behavior. However, we take heart in the mercy and grace of God—that, in the midst of our sin and rebellion, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8) His position toward us is never based on us, but wholly based on Him. As Paul states so boldly to Timothy, “If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13)

God saved Abram from his own folly and sin for the sake of His glory. He gives grace to you and me for the same reason. As you think about the unconditional, overwhelming grace of God, how does it affect your life?

¹¹ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 93.



Disobedience and Grace

Genesis 12:10 – 13:18

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most dangerous thing you've ever done?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 12:10 – 13:18

- How has God been at work in the world around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there people and things that you fear more than God? What are they, and why do you fear them?
- Has there been a time in your life where you've settled for what looked best without consulting God for His wisdom? What was the result?
- When Abram found himself having wandered from God, he returned to Bethel to repent and worship. Is there a "place" in your life you tend to return to when you find yourself wandering or struggling?
- Is this group a safe place to repent? Why or why not?
- How can we help one another trust God in a way that leads us into blessing, enabling us to bless the world?

World: The blessings of God certainly go beyond land and family. In Christ, we experience true freedom, grace, and unconditional love that we then have the privilege of passing on to the world around us. Identify at least one specific person in your life that you know to whom you could be a conduit of blessing. Then, compile a list of each of those people for your group, and pray intentionally for God's blessing in the lives each of those people—by name! Trust God to give you opportunities to be a blessing this week, and then keep your eyes open to take advantage of the opportunities you've been given!

Good Choices

Genesis 14

Activity or passivity? Worship or apathy? Spiritual integrity or material blessing? Faith or sight? Faced with a series of difficult decisions, Abram trusts God and makes the right decisions. The result is that, for the first time, God's blessing of Abram passes through to those around him, and the saving work of Jesus, the ultimate blessing, is foreshadowed. When we choose to follow God, we're not only a blessing to the world, but we reflect Jesus to those around us.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 14, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: What's ONE THING that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change based on this passage?

Am I My Nephew's Keeper?

I recently saw a bumper sticker on the back of a large, well used pick-up truck: "Yes, this is my truck. No, I won't help you move." As someone who is regularly borrowing trucks from friends and neighbors, I heard the message loud and clear! It's easy to see people for what they can do for us, and miss who they actually are. Of course, as Christians, we can err on the other side as well—because we're not technically responsible for something, we can fail to jump in and help and, thereby, miss being used by God as a blessing.

Abram's been called by God with the promise that he will be blessed and, through that blessing, be a blessing to all nations. Thus far, he's struggled to handle his own affairs well, let alone be a blessing to others. However, with Lot being separated from Abram, having chosen the land near Sodom, God would finally have Abram in a position to be used as a blessing.

Read Genesis 14:1-13 to get an overview of the situation. How would you summarize what's taken place?

We might ask, "Why get involved? Lot greedily chose Sodom and now he's getting what he deserves." However, Abram didn't seem to hesitate—he immediately jumped to action! Read Genesis 14:14-16.

- Who went to battle along with Abram?

- What does this say about the relationship that he had with his neighbors and those within his household?

In the early chapters of Genesis, God asked Cain about his brother Abel and, in guilt, Cain famously responded that he was not responsible for the location and well-being of his brother. (See Genesis 4:6-10) Now, Abram is proactive in the opposite direction—he becomes his nephew’s keeper!

Read Jesus’ words from Luke 6:27-30. He makes eight statements, and then a summary statement. List them below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Summary:

Jesus’ ethic is not only that we be willing to help our brother, nephew, neighbor or friend, but that we treat everyone according to this same standard. This is the weight of the gospel—that, although we are not worthy of the grace of God, it’s been freely given to us, and we have the privilege of giving it to others.

Application:

- As you look at the people around you, are there people that you’re in a position to help or bless, but whom you tend to overlook or look past?

Melchizedek

Genesis, as an ancient book, is full of mysterious characters and passages that are difficult to understand. However, one of the most mysterious and most difficult is the King/Priest Melchizedek found in Genesis 14.

Read Genesis 14:17-24. What two kings does Abram meet on the way back from battle?

The King of Sodom, of course, is an expected and understandable character, as Abram's heroism in battle has served to liberate his people. However, Melchizedek is not mentioned prior to this point in Genesis, and won't be mentioned again. He will, however, be mentioned several other times in the Bible.

First, read Psalm 110.

- Turn to Matthew 22:41-46 where Jesus quotes this psalm. Who does He infer King David is talking about in Psalm 110?

- Who, then, is a "priest forever in the line of Melchizedek?" (vs. 4)

Now, read Hebrews 7.

- As you read, what are some of the similarities the author lists between Melchizedek and Jesus?

- How is the priesthood in the line of Melchizedek different from the Old Testament priesthood of Aaron, through the line of Levi?

- Finally, in what ways is Jesus different from both the priesthood of the Old Testament and that of Melchizedek?

Go back to Genesis 14.

- When Melchizedek meets Abram, what does he do? How does Abram respond?

- When the King of Sodom meets Abram, what does he do? How does Abram respond?

Abram's brilliant response to the King of Sodom shows that he's come a long way from the man who ran to Egypt at the first sign of trouble—he is learning to trust!

Application:

- Are there ways that you've forfeited spiritual blessing in order to gain material blessing?

El Elyon, God Most High

In the ancient world, “polytheism,” or the worship of many gods, was the prevailing behavior. Lacking revelation from the true God, the people of the earth sought to cover their bases as best they could by worshiping whatever and whomever they thought might work best for them. Of course, worship was quite pragmatic and self-serving—the people didn’t worship because of the inherent worth of any of the “deities” in their pantheon, but because of some blessing they wanted to receive.

Of course, our modern, sophisticated world, replete with revelation from the true God through Jesus Himself and through His Word, is dramatically different from the world of the ancients. Or is it? While most of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus would never admit to worshiping a variety of gods in order to pragmatically get what we want, our reality is eerily similar: We “worship” careers in order to get the position and power we long for; we “worship” our money and possessions in order to have the comfort and status we long for; we “worship” our families in order to have the companionship and security we long for; and we “worship” God so that we might be “blessed” with all of these things!

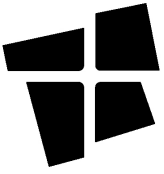
Melchizedek, the King/Priest of Jerusalem, shows up in the face of Abram’s unlikely victory and pronounces blessing over his life, using the name “El Elyon”—the most high God. This title was used for a variety of gods in the ancient world, but it was always a designation reserved for the god that was recognized as the one true God. The title is used again in the Psalms, always designating God as the “exalted One,” referencing His sovereignty. In essence, Melchizedek is making a dramatically counter-cultural statement in the midst of a polytheistic, ancient culture: Abram’s blessing has come through the God who is the “most high,” the only One truly worthy of praise.

What does it mean for us that God is *El Elyon*? At minimum, it’s a declaration that, despite the multiplicity of options, God is the only One who can truly satisfy and the only source of real blessing. The name *El Elyon* admits that we live in a world of competing ideas and competing deities, all vying for position

in our hearts and lives, but also states unequivocally that God Himself is the only true God.

Genesis 14 isn't only the story of a great and unlikely military victory—it's also the story of Abram boldly declaring his faith in the one true God. Immediately following Melchizedek's blessing, the King of Sodom seeks to negotiate with Abram, offering him the great wealth of Sodom which he had recovered in his victory. In fact, that wealth was rightfully his already based on his conquest. However, in a brilliant response of faith, Abram rejects the offer of wealth, citing a promise he made to God prior to the battle: "I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High (*El Elyon*), Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or thing that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" (Genesis 15:22-23) In effect, Abram was saying that his faith is in the most high God, *El Elyon*, alone, and he wouldn't be swayed by the offer of wealth or comfort as a competing god.

How about us? Can we make an honest declaration that God is *El Elyon*? What other gods compete for allegiance and worship? When we are worshiping God, is it based on His worth, or simply based on what we hope to receive from Him, betraying that our hearts are actually more consumed with the blessing than the Blessor?



Good Choices Genesis 14

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the hardest choice you've had to make this week?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 14

- How has God been at work in the world around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there people around you that you are in a position to bless but whom you tend to look past or miss?
- What are some ways that you're uniquely positioned to help people out when they are in difficult situations?
- Are there instances in your life where you've forfeited spiritual blessing in order to gain material blessing?
- If you are a follower of Jesus, how are you like Melchizedek?
- What are some ways that we as a group can move outside of our immediate sphere of influence in order to be a blessing to someone?

World: Like Abram, we are able to be blessings in the world around us even when we don't force our belief system on those around us. In the next seven days, before your group meets again, challenge *each member of the group* to be a tangible blessing to someone in need, simply because they've been blessed. This could be an anonymous financial gift, some time spent together, a card sent, etc. However, for this exercise, the person you they are blessing should be someone who isn't walking in a close relationship with Jesus. If you're asked why you're willing to bless them, respond with the promise of God to Abram: "I've been blessed so that I can be a blessing to others!"

Covenant

Genesis 15

In one of the most important chapters in the entire Old Testament, God meets Abram at a point of doubt and reiterates His promise. Abram's belief translates to the gift of righteousness, and God shows him a covenant sign that becomes the foundation not only for Abram's future, but for the whole of redemptive history. God is not only the One who makes covenant with His people; He keeps that covenant as well.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 15, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Righteous by Faith

James Montgomery Boice, the great Philadelphia preacher, wrote that Genesis 15 is “by many standards...the greatest [chapter of the Old Testament], for it tells Abram’s justification by grace through faith and records the official covenant established with him by God.”¹² He goes on to say that “in the middle of this chapter occurs what is perhaps the most important verse in the entire Bible: Genesis 15:6.”¹³ What would cause such a celebrated Bible teacher and expositor to make such a bold statement?

Begin by reading Genesis 15:1-6.

- Look back at Genesis 12-14. How many times has God already spoken His covenant promise to Abram?

- Does Abram sound confident in God’s promises in this passage? (See vs. 2-3)

In vs. 4, God unveils the promise in a clearer way, telling Abram that his “very own son shall be your heir,” and He gives a new image to the promise, showing Abram the stars as representative of his offspring.

Re-read this celebrated verse, Genesis 15:6, and write it below:

Many commentators liken Abram’s statement of faith and then his subsequent doubt (vs. 8) to a statement made by the father of a boy possessed by a demon in Mark 9:24. What is that statement, and what is the father trying to say?

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 539.

¹³ Ibid.

Boice states that in Genesis 15:6 “the doctrine of justification by faith is set forth for the first time.”¹⁴ But what is so earth-shattering about that? Through Abram, God is, for the first time, answering the question that everyone wants to have answered: What will make a sinful person right before God?

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, quotes Genesis 15 in making his case for righteousness by faith.

- Read Romans 3:21-26. Where does Paul say that our righteousness comes from?

- Now read all of Romans 4. This long chapter explains clearly the importance of this statement in Genesis 15:6, not just for Abram, but for us as well. Read Romans 4:24. What is Paul saying in this verse?

In Galatians 4, Paul goes on to explain who the “stars” that Abram saw that night with God actually referred to. Read Galatians 4:6-7. Who are the true children of Abram?

Application:

- Are there ways that you are seeking to add other forms of righteousness to your faith?

¹⁴ Ibid.

The Word Made Visible

Study after study shows that very few of us learn best by hearing. Rather, when we learn by *seeing* and *doing*, we tend to retain far more information. Maybe that's why, after several verbal statements of His covenant promises, Abram still seemed to be doubting. However, in Genesis 15, God gave two distinct visual reinforcements of His promise.

Have you ever been outside on a clear night, far away from a city or any kind of artificial light? The beauty of the skies can be spectacular—an array of stars, planets, and what seems to be clouds of dust shining back in the night sky. It was likely a night scene like that one that God is showing to Abram.

Read Genesis 15:1-8.

- What does God say the stars are in reference to?

The stars that were out that night didn't prove anything new—rather, they served as “a visible word, a focus of the promise...for the experience was unforgettable.”¹⁵ After God recognizes Abram's belief (vs. 6), Abram expresses honest doubt, to which God gives an incredible vision.

Read Genesis 15:9-21.

- What did God ask Abram to do?

- To what event is God's prophecy in vs. 13 referring?

- What vision did Abram see after he heard the prophecy?

¹⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis, TOTC*, (IVP Academic, Downer's Grove, IL, 2nd edition 2008.), pg. 134.

A partial explanation of this strange scene is given in Jeremiah 34:18-19. Read these verses, which describe the Hebrew technical term "to cut a covenant." Baldwin describes this process further: "The solemn commitment was made by passing between the parts of the sacrifice, and those who broke their word the Lord would 'make like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts.' In other words, death awaited the person who broke a covenant."¹⁶

This covenant ceremony required that both parties, together, walk through the split animals. However, Genesis 15 records a different process. Read vs. 17 again.

- What passed through the parts of the animals? What did the parts represent?

- What did Abram need to do?

Now, read Luke 22:19-20. How did Jesus' sacrifice fulfill this covenant vision?

The stars and the covenant vision are a visual display of God's promise: the Word made visible. John 1 tells us that Jesus Himself was the ultimate Word made visible, coming in flesh and dying for our sin. In this momentous chapter, God declared that He was serious about keeping His promises.

Application:

- What stops you from resting in the finished work of Jesus on the cross?

¹⁶ Joyce Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50, BST*, (IVP, Downer's Grove, IL, 1986.), pg. 53.

Divine Faithfulness

In our modern world of lawyers, fine print, and professional athletics, contracts don't seem to mean much these days. With divorce rates skyrocketing and many couples choosing to forego marriage altogether, covenants don't seem far behind. Why, then, should we pay any attention to a covenant ceremony that took place in the mind of an eighty-five year old man in a vision nearly 4000 years ago?

The answer lies in the reality of the faithfulness of God. Unlike men and women, God is wholly and perfectly faithful. This is illustrated through this odd series of couplets that Paul quotes in his second letter to Timothy:

If we die with him,
we will also live with him.
If we endure hardship,
we will reign with him.
If we deny him,
he will deny us.
If we are unfaithful,
he remains faithful,
for he cannot deny himself. (2 Timothy 2:11-13)

This same truth is given cadence in Psalm 136 with its refrain, repeated after each staccato declaration: *His faithful love endures forever*. Forever. The psalmist states it twenty-six times in a row. His faithful love has no ending point, no expiration, and no limit. He will never cease to fulfill His promises; never cease to be who He's declared Himself to be, and to do what He's said He will do.

Tozer reminds us:

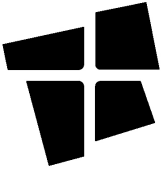
In studying any attribute, the essential oneness of all the attributes soon becomes apparent. We see, for instance, that if God is self-existent He must be also self-sufficient; and if He has power, He, being infinite, must have all power. Similarly, His immutability presupposes His faithfulness. If He is unchanging, it follows that He could not be unfaithful, since that would require Him to change.¹⁷

¹⁷ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 78.

Just as we can't truly think on the eternity of the Great I AM, we can't fully grasp the extent of His faithfulness. In our experience, even the most faithful person has a point in which, when pressed beyond, they justifiably forfeit relationship. In terms of marriage, abuse, deceit, a spouse's unfaithfulness, and the like, are all grounds by which would judge a "faithful" party justified in severing a relationship. The degree to which these behaviors can be present and a spouse still chooses to remain faithful is debatable but, at some point, we would understand it to be "wrong" for that spouse to remain faithful to that abusive relationship.

Here's the difficult reality: We have done all of those things, and worse, to God. We have abused, deceived, cheated, abandoned, ignored, and forsaken Him. Based on any human standard, He should justifiably sever His relationship with us. In fact, based on our behavior, it would be "wrong" for Him to remain faithful to us. However, God is not judged by our morality! His faithfulness is never dependant on our behavior—He is eternally faithful based on Himself, not on us! Hallelujah!

And so, when Abram abandons God, leaves for Egypt, disowns his wife and effectively sells her into Pharaoh's harem, God does not abandon him. He doesn't force Abram to obey but, in the midst of Abram's unfaithfulness, He still proves to be faithful. His promise to Abram is not based on Abram's behavior, whether righteous or unrighteous, but on His divine choice of Abram. Believer in Jesus, the same is true for us! As you think about this reality, what impact does that make on your life today?



Covenant Genesis 15

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's your favorite part about autumn?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 15

- How has God been at work in the world around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there things that you seek to "add" to the righteousness that you've already been given by faith?
- How would your life look different if you could *fully* trust in Jesus' finished work for you?
- What stops you from resting in the finished work of Jesus on the cross?
- Do we view one another more through the lens of the gospel or through the lens of religious faithfulness?
- How might we embody the covenant love of Jesus to the world around us?

World: If you took the "challenge" to be a blessing last week (see pg. 43), debrief from that experience. If you didn't, go back and do it this week! Relationships in the world are almost always based on the "worth" of the other person to us. How would it look for you to treat the people around you with the unconditional love of Jesus? Knowing that you've been fully accepted and loved by God, identify one person this week that you are going to *actively* love based wholly on God's love for them. Pair up and share the name of the person that you've identified and then, as the first act of love, pray God's blessing into their life!

Disobedience and Covenant

Genesis 16-17

After the most fantastic display of God's love and grace Abram has ever witnessed, he then steps into the most tragic sin of his life—his adulterous relationship with Hagar. In a re-enactment of Genesis 3, Abram and Sarai step away from trust in God and seek to solve their problems in their own way. Despite their disobedience and the disastrous results, God graciously steps in with a series of covenant signs, pointing them, and us, back to His faithfulness.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 16-17, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

The Fall II

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” George Santayana first wrote this sentence in his 1905 work “The Life of Reason,” and it’s been widely quoted since, largely because it’s so experientially true. As Solomon wrote many centuries earlier: “There is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9) Our problems, our temptations, and our difficult situations have, in large part, already been wrestled with by those who have gone before us. Only when we both remember and understand the past can we avoid repeating the same mistakes in our generation.

Genesis 16 finds Abram repeating past mistakes—both his own, and those of his ancestor Adam. Read Genesis 16:1-6.

- What is the problem that Abram and Sarai are continuing to deal with?

- What solution does Sarai propose?

It’s important to understand that concubinage, or the giving of a concubine by a wife to a husband in order to bear additional children, “was not [an] unusual thing to do”¹⁸ in ancient times. In fact, as Abram’s line continues, we’ll see this reality come into play in a dramatic way in the life of his grandson Jacob. (Genesis 29-30) However, it’s clear that Hagar was not the intended plan of God for Abram.

- Read Genesis 12:2. Who does God state will be the source of Abram’s blessing?

God states that He will bless Abram with both land and lineage, and Sarai’s plan certainly moves the matter of lineage fully into their control. In fact, Genesis 12 is the last place we saw Abram wrestle with this reality.

- Read Genesis 12:10. Why did Abram go to Egypt?

¹⁸ John C.L. Gibson, *Genesis, Volume 2*, (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1982.), pg. 57.

Immediately upon his arrival into the “Promised Land” of God—“the land that I will show you”—Abram finds the land to be barren. Instead of consulting God, he decides that he needs to look further to find fruitful land. Now, faced not with barren land, but with the ongoing prospect of a barren wife, Abram once again strays from his faith in God and takes control.

- Who suggests the “solution” of Hagar?

- What is Abram’s response according to Genesis 16:2?

This isn’t simply a repeat of Abram’s poor decision in Genesis 12. The closer parallel is found much further back in history. Read Genesis 3:1-13.

- Who initiates the plan to eat the fruit and thereby disobey God?

- What is Adam’s response?

- What is the reason that they choose to disobey? (See Genesis 3:5)

Just like Adam, Abram is passively compliant. Just like Adam and Eve, Abram and Sarai failed to trust God for what they needed and, instead, sought to “be like God” themselves. The word to Abram must also be the word to us: Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

Application:

- What is an area of your life in which you need to step back and trust God more fully?

Walking Whole

After the birth of Ishmael, the narrative has a gap of about 13 years. The boy grew up, and as best we can understand, God was silent. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, God's voice breaks the silence in Genesis 17:1.

- What two actions does God call Abram to in vs. 1?

- What response does God promise to these actions?

The first call that God gives to Abram is to "walk" before him; a command that has historical precedent from those who've gone before him.

- Read Genesis 3:8. How does this verse describe God's communion with Adam and Eve?

- Read Genesis 5:24. How is the relationship Enoch had with God described?

- Read Genesis 6:9. How is Noah's relationship with God described?

With the exception of Adam prior to the fall, none of these men were perfect. However, they were described as "walking" with God, a figure of speech meant to remind us that "all of life is an ongoing pilgrimage...the Lord wants His people to [walk] before Him, that is, in his presence, with nothing to hide from Him."¹⁹

The grave difficulty, of course, is found in the second part of the statement: A "blameless" life is an impossibility for Abram. The 13-year old reminder of his

¹⁹ Joyce Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50, BST*, (IVP, Downer's Grove, IL, 1986.), pg. 63.

disobedience is wandering around the camp. So, while he's certainly willing to walk before the presence of the Lord, doing so blamelessly is a definite problem.

The difficulty is really more linguistic than philosophical. The Hebrew word used is the word *tamim*. The root meaning of the word is "whole, integrated, as a person is whole who puts all his energies into one pursuit. Abram is to be wholly dedicated to God's cause."²⁰ This word is, again, found speaking of Noah in Genesis 6:9. Its Greek counterpart, *telaios*, is used in James 1:4.

- Read James 1:2-4. What creates the state of "blamelessness" (or "perfect and complete" in James)?

- Now, read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. What metaphor does Paul use for his devotion to the truth of the gospel?

Rather than calling Abram to unreachable perfection, God is calling him to a complete devotion. He's saying, in effect, walk as a whole person before me, without any part of your life held back. This is consistent with Jesus' call for those who will follow Him.

- Read Matthew 16:24-26. What does He call those who would follow Him to give up for His sake?

Application:

- Are there areas of your life that you, intentionally or unintentionally, live apart from God?

²⁰ Ibid.

El Roi, The God Who Sees

The Old Testament, filled with a vast array of names of God, contains one name that's distinct from all the others. It's not so much distinct in its quality, but in its origin: Genesis 16 records the only time that God is given a name by a human being. In every other instance, God reveals Himself and then declares who He is, giving a name by which we, as mere humans, can grab hold of a portion of His divine nature. But, in Genesis 16, a pregnant Egyptian slave girl, through her first hand interaction with the pre-incarnate Jesus Himself, declares His Name—and it's through that Name we are invited into her story.

A cursory reading of Genesis 16 gives a heart-breaking picture: There are no innocent characters in this sinful scheme, and it doesn't take long for everything to come unraveled. Sarai "gives" Hagar to Abram, with Hagar's full agreement that she would bear him a son. Abram agrees with Sarai's plan, abdicating family leadership and stepping away from life led by faith. Hagar flaunts her pregnancy before Sarai, creating the inevitable animosity between wife and mistress. Sarai lashes out at Abram, shifting blame fully to him. Abram again abdicates responsibility, releasing the woman pregnant with his son to the wrath of his wife. Hagar, hurt and abused, runs from home, vulnerable and alone.

Hagar has been rejected by Abram, repulsed by Sarai, and abandoned by the family/community. She is utterly alone and in despair. It's at that very moment that "the angel of the Lord" finds her, a designation that most theologians agree identifies the pre-incarnate Christ. As Hagar walks alone and in what is likely her lowest point, Jesus shows up!

The exchange is fascinating in itself, but the results are profound: She is to return to Sarai and submit to her, and she is promised a son who Abram is to name Ishmael, and he will also be the father of a great nation. Jesus redirects her back to the path of blessing and, in so doing, describes the nature of the blessing to her. Her joyful response is to declare, "You are *El Roi*," the God of Seeing or, literally, the God Who Sees.

As best we can understand, Hagar is not a follower of Jehovah God. We don't know

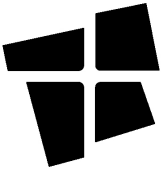
that she has faith in the redemptive plan of God. She is simply a lost and lonely slave girl—a slave girl that God sees, and to whom God reveals Himself.

God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and earth, motion, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell.²¹

Whatever your situation, whatever your plight, whatever your attitude, God sees you. That fact is simultaneously comforting and terrifying. He sees you right where you are, and exactly as you are. He sees you more honestly and clearly than you can even see yourself. He also sees what you have, what you need, what you will become, and how you will get there. You and I can't see it, but He sees it clearly. That's precisely the reason that we need to turn from our own paths and fully submit to His plan for our lives.

Do you feel alone? God sees. Have you wandered off the path? God knows how to bring you back. Are you losing hope? God understands your present circumstance and your future hope. Take heart—He is *El Roi*. How does that reality impact your current reality?

²¹ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 56.



Disobedience and Covenant

Genesis 16-17

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most lost you've ever been?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 16-17

- What has Jesus been doing in your life this past week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Have there been times that you've taken God's work into your own hands? What were the results?
- Is there an area of life right now where you need to take a step back and trust God more fully? What would that look like?
- Are there areas of life where you live, either intentionally or unintentionally, apart from God's plan and presence?
- Is there a point in time you can look back at and know that God was leading you?
- How can we help one another remain on the path God has laid out for us, both individually and as a group?

World: God has called us to be witnesses in the world around us to the incredible love and grace He's given to us. The specifics of that calling (our vocations, our homes, our network of relationships, etc.) are also specifically designed by God for His purposes. (Acts 17:26) Take a few moments in silence to consider both this general call of God and the specifics to which He's called you. Then, divide into two or three groups, and share your heart as a witness with your group—your fears, your opportunities, and your hopes. Take time to pray for each person specifically and those individuals to whom your group members are called.

Sodom and Gomorrah

Genesis 18-19

With the visit of three mysterious strangers, Abram learns grace, the power of prayer, and the necessity of judgment. Ultimately, however, he learns about the character of God Himself. God's wrath toward the unjust is a difficult concept to grasp, but Lot and his daughters remind us that this isn't about those who are holy and those who are unholy. Rather, all are unrighteous, but some are saved solely by the grace of Jesus.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 18-19, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Intercessory Prayer

When I worked in corporate retail, one of the areas I enjoyed the most was negotiation with vendors. Working to get the best product at the most competitive price required creatively, quick thinking and strong communication, and it always felt a bit like a contest that the vendor and I were both trying to win. We nearly always arrived at some sort of a compromise, giving a bit in order to get a bit somewhere else. And then we went out to lunch together!

Negotiation is a necessary part of the free market in corporate America, but it's not a good practice when approaching an Almighty and Sovereign God. However, one error that's prevalent in intercessory prayer is just that: We try to bargain with the God of the Universe as though, by clashing our will with His, we'll somehow come out with a nice compromise and then go have lunch together. The other error might be even more grievous: We avoid prayer all together because we assume God's will is set and that He's not interested in our thoughts.

In Genesis 18, Abraham gives some great principles for intercessory prayer. Read Genesis 18:22-33.

- Did Abraham ask God why He would destroy Sodom, but not Egypt, Babylon or some other godless place?
- How does that inform us as we pray for those people and places who are followers of God?
- Read vs. 27. What did Abraham understand about himself as he came before God?
- As you read Abraham's prayer, what do you learn about persistence in prayer?

F.B. Meyer observes:

“It looks at first sight as if [Abram] forced God back from point to point, and drawing his petitions from an unwilling hand. But this is a mistake. In point of fact, *God was drawing him on...* This was the time of his education. He did not learn the vast extent of God’s righteousness and mercy all at once; he climbed the dizzy heights step by step; and, as he gained each step, he was inspired to dare another.”

- What is the basis of Abraham’s prayer, found most clearly in vs. 25?

Moses seems to take this principle into account as he cries out to God for the people of Israel as well. Read Exodus 32:11-13.

- What is the basis of Moses’ prayer?

Our intercession should be *modest*, recognizing that God’s ways are higher than our ways; they should be *humble*, recognizing that we are only heard because of grace; they should be *persistent*, crying out for God’s heart to be displayed in His people; and they should be *persuasive*, based wholly on the character of God.²²

Application:

- Is there someone or something in the world around you for which God might be calling you to intercede? How might you do that based on the above?

The Sins of Sodom, and Lot’s Wife

²² Based on James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 615-616.

Genesis 19 is one of the most horrific chapters in the entire Bible, encapsulating the gross sinfulness of Sodom, the pathetic bargaining of Lot, the destruction of the city and, ultimately, of Lot's wife, and the incest of Lot with his daughters. Taken as a whole, all but the most hardened readers are left breathless, heads shaking, asking the only question left to ask... "What caused this, God?"

Read Genesis 19 as a whole, and try to let the weight of the chapter land on you.

- Looking back at Genesis 18:20-21, why are the angels going to Sodom?

- What was Lot's solution for the men of the city who were seeking to sexually abuse Lot's angelic guests?

Simply from this incident, we can see the depth of sinfulness and evil that had permeated the city of Sodom. However, the Bible lays out additional charges that God held against Sodom, which are not as readily apparent from this story:

- Read Jeremiah 23:14. What sins does Jeremiah associate with Sodom?

- Read Ezekiel 16:49. What sins does Ezekiel associate with Sodom?

The question that many unnecessarily ask is: "For *which* sin was Sodom destroyed?" There's no reason to assume that one sin or another was the primary cause and, despite some interesting textual work done by some modern scholars, there's nothing in the text to indicate that homosexuality wasn't *a portion* of the sin for which Sodom was judged.

All these texts [Genesis 19, Jeremiah 23, and Ezekiel 16] display the same spectrum of iniquity that Romans 1 describes, in which sexual sins are

only part of the larger pattern of corruption in the pagan world. Sodom was not destroyed because it specialized in homosexuality, but because it was a plague center of every kind of depravity, including pride, sensuality, and injustice.²³

Furthermore, the author takes great pains to display the sinfulness of Lot and his daughters, not simply the sin of the rest of the Sodomites. The issue isn't that some are sinners and that some are righteous; rather, that all are sinners and that God saves some by grace.

One final observation is required—the response of Lot's wife. First, read Genesis 19:23-26. Despite the popular image, "her backwards look was far more than momentary...evidently she refused all encouragements to leave and lingered far behind."²⁴

- Read Luke 17:22-33. When Jesus warns His listeners to "remember Lot's wife" in the context of this passage, what is He warning them against?

"Apparently, she lost her life because of her reluctance to let go of her household stuff."²⁵ She longed for the comfort and luxury that was part and parcel to the sin and immorality of Sodom. Offered life, she chose death. Jesus' warning for us is to be careful we don't do the same.

Application:

- Do you take sin in your life as seriously as God does? What's one thing you can do to take your sin and God's grace more seriously?

Divine Justice

²³ Richard Lovelace, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 623.

²⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2004.), pg. 275.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The attribute of God's Justice is one that brings great conflict into the heart of mankind, believer in Jesus or not. On one hand, the absolute devastation and destruction of Sodom, an event that is to point us to the even greater devastation and destruction of hell, causes us to twinge. Is it really that bad? Couldn't there be a bit more grace? On the other hand, the salvation of a weak and sinful man like Lot, who the New Testament affirms to be a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7) by the grace of Jesus, also leaves us wanting. Why should such a man escape judgment?

Our problem is less with our understanding of justice than it is with our understanding of God. We often think of justice as a principle outside of God which dictates the way that He should act in a given situation.

Of course there is no such principle. If there were it would be superior to God, for only a superior power can compel obedience. The truth is that there is not and can never be anything outside of the nature of God which can move Him in the least degree. All God's reasons come from within His uncreated being. Justice, when used of God, is a name we give to the way God is, nothing more; and when God acts justly He is not doing so to conform to an independent criterion, but simply acting like Himself in a given situation. Everything in the universe is good to the degree it conforms to the nature of God and evil as it fails to do so.²⁶

By thinking of justice as a principle outside of God which dictates His actions, we effectively seek to "judge the Judge" by our own standard of justice (a standard given to us through God's common grace, interestingly enough). When we begin to understand that God *is* justice and, as we should in all areas of life, measure the rightness of our thinking and living by His standards, we are less conflicted.

However, that leaves one massive area of question—the salvation of the forgiven sinner. How can the grace and mercy of God co-exist with the absolute justice of God? This is where the importance of the outdated word "propitiation" comes in. The classic doctrine of Christian redemption is not simply that God forgives the sinner. Rather, it's that the forgiveness of the sinner is possible because Jesus bore the penalty for our sin, incurring the just and righteous wrath of God on our behalf. "However unpleasant this may sound to the ear of natural man, it has ever

²⁶ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 87.

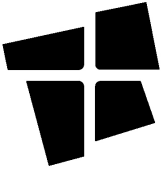
been sweet to the ear of faith."²⁷ Without the idea of Christ as our propitiation, the One who bore the wrath of God, the justice of God is in conflict with His grace. However, none of the divine attributes can ever be in conflict with one another; they each exist perfectly and completely together in the being of God.

That God's justice is among His inherent perfections is a nice theological truth. That God's mercy remains intact alongside His justice philosophically maintains our limited perspective on an unlimited God. However, the implications go far beyond the theoretical. As sinners, we each are subject to the just wrath of God, directed at our folly and rebellion. However, we are offered the free gift of salvation in the sacrifice of Jesus—not simply that we have been forgiven, which can be on nothing other than the whim of a weak-minded judge, but that Jesus has born the entirety of wrath intended for every believer in Jesus. Therefore, our forgiveness is not based on an ongoing performance evaluation, but on a perfectly just transaction that gifted us the righteousness of Jesus because the full penalty for sin has been paid.

Many of us need to re-read those last two paragraphs a few times in order to truly get the weight of what God has done for us. When we get even a glimpse, we must say with the great hymn writer: "Amazing Love! How can it be that Thou, my God, wouldst die for me?"²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "And Can It Be?" by Charles Wesley, 1738, Public Domain.



Sodom and Gomorrah

Genesis 18-19

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Is there anything that really scares you?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 18-19

- How has God been at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- What's your initial reaction to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?
- Is there anyone or anything around you for which God might be calling you to intercede in a specific way? How might we be a part of that as a group?
- Do you feel like you take sin seriously? Why or why not? How might you take it more seriously?
- Do you feel like you take righteousness and forgiveness seriously? Why or why not? How might you take them more seriously?
- What kinds of sin do you tend to sit in judgment over instead of identifying with as a sinner yourself?
- Are we—individually and as a group—more like Sodom, or more of a light into the darkness of Sodom?

World: The great difficulty of the believer is that God has called us into the world, but has expressly commanded us to not be *of* the world. As you think about your contexts and the environments you are in on a day to day basis, how might God use you as a light? Think of one specific *action* that you can do to shine the light of Jesus to those around you—and pray that God would give you the opportunity to do that this week.

Undeserved Blessing

Genesis 20-21

Several decades after God's initial call to Abram, the son of the promise is born. Once again, however, God's grace is shown despite the weakness and sin of His servant, Abraham. Abraham's fear cripples his faith and, without the intervention of God, his fear would have driven away any possibility of the fulfillment of the promise. As the narrative turns from Abraham to Isaac, we see clearly the character of God and we're left to wonder about the character of the man.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 20-21, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Isaac, Jesus, and Romans 4

One of the best parts to play as an actor is the comic role within an otherwise serious and even heavy drama. The reason is simple: When the majority of the action is serious, it's that much easier to make people laugh! As Isaac finally arrives on the scene by Genesis 21, the meaning of his name, *Laughter*, must have been very appropriate!

It's been a year since God's reaffirming words to Abraham and Sarah, at which time He renewed His covenant with them, changed their names to reflect the promise, and gave them the covenant sign of circumcision. The year that followed was a tough one: Sarah being chastised for her laughter, Abraham interceding in a way that was ultimately ineffectual for Sodom, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham's repeat sin in lying about his wife with Abimelech and being chastised *again* by a pagan king. Things have been tough.

Out of these difficult circumstances comes Genesis 21:1-7. Read that passage. It's no wonder they laughed!

There are clear parallels between the birth of Isaac and the eventual birth of Jesus. As you read the following passages, note the parallels:

- Genesis 12:2, 15:4-5, 17:16
- Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6-7

What is the parallel?

- Genesis 18:13-14
- Luke 1:34-37

What is the parallel?

- Genesis 17:19
- Matthew 1:21

What is the parallel?

- Genesis 17:21, 18:10, 14, 21:2
- Galatians 4:4

What is the parallel?

These are just a few of the parallels in the births alone—there are many more in their lives. However, there's another birth that Isaac's and Jesus' birth points to, which Paul lays out in his letter to the Romans. Read Romans 4:18-25.

- Look at Romans 4:19 and Ephesians 2:1, 5. What is the parallel?
- Look at Romans 4:20 and 1 Corinthians 1:28-29. What is the parallel?
- Look at Romans 4:21-22 and then 4:23-25. What is the parallel?

God has woven this story together in an incredible way—that we would believe!

Application:

- Are there areas of your life out of which it's hard to believe that God would be able to bring anything redemptive? What are they, and how does the birth of Isaac give hope to those areas?

Slave and Free

One of the recurring images in Scripture is that of slavery, or bondage, and freedom. The most often used image is that of the Israelites, enslaved in Egypt, but set free by the work of God through the plagues in Egypt, ultimately requiring the death of the first born son. However, the book of Exodus isn't the first place this image shows up. Read Genesis 21:8-21.

Now, read Galatians 4:21-31, where Paul gives some commentary on this passage.

- What does Paul say that these two women represent?

- What does Paul call believers in Jesus? (vs. 28)

- If those born according to the flesh are those who are looking for life through the law, how might they be "persecuting" those born of the Spirit?

- Based on vs. 30, is it possible for those born of the Spirit to trust in the law just a bit as well?

Paul is insistent on the absolute incompatibility of the law and promise, and so interprets the absolute necessity for Hagar and Ishmael to be cast out. Now, look at another passage in which Paul offers some interpretation to this passage. Read Romans 9:1-16.

- Just as Paul calls believers “children of the promise” in Galatians 4, what case does he make about believers in Romans 9:8?

- What is the primary idea that Paul is writing about in Romans 9?

Romans 9:16 is a summary of Paul’s argument. As you read that, what are some of the missteps that Abraham made from Genesis 12-21 that would constitute “human will or exertion?”

While throwing Hagar and Ishmael out seems so harsh, God was clear with Abraham that He had a greater plan, which Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, lays out for us in the New Testament. We are called to be free!

Application:

- Are there ways that you are still seeking to follow the law in order to gain favor before God?

El Olam, the Eternal God

One of the great frustrations we face as human beings is the finiteness of everything in our lives. Our resources are finite—they run out, and usually all too quickly. Our strength is finite—we often need more than we have for longer than we have it. Our patience is finite—for most of us, no explanation is needed; we understand quite clearly what it is to run out of patience. And, maybe most frustrating, our time is finite—the hours go by too quickly, the days are too short, the years are too few. We are unable “to think, to become, to perform what the constitution of our natures indicates we are capable of.”²⁹

Basking in the glow of his promised son, a settled family, and peace with his neighbors, Abraham turns toward the autumn of life, ready to simply rest in the goodness of God’s grace. Little does he know that he is simply experiencing the calm before what will become the greatest storm of his life; but that still lies ahead. For now, all is well. The old patriarch, who has wandered throughout the better portion of his life, has finally settled. So much has he settled that he plants a tree, signifying his claim to the land and his intention to remain there.³⁰ And he calls on the name of the Lord, calling Him *El Olam*, the Eternal God.

Olam. Eternal. Forever. It’s the word Moses uses in penning Psalm 90: “Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from *everlasting* to *everlasting* you are God.” (Psalm 90:2) From *olam* to *olam*, God always remains. It’s the word that provides the capstone for Psalm 100’s joyful praise: “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” His love endures *olam*. “Times change, people change, needs change. *El Olam* never changes.”³¹ God is infinite. Where every aspect of our nature is frustratingly finite, His is absolutely infinite.

How completely satisfying to turn from our limitations to a God who has none. Eternal years lie in His heart. For Him time does not pass, it remains; and those who are in Christ share with Him all the riches of limitless time

²⁹ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 47.

³⁰ Joyce Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50, BST*, (IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL, 1986.), pg. 88.

³¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 676.

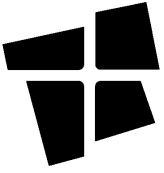
and endless years. God never hurries. There are no deadlines against which He must work. *Only to know this is to quiet our spirits and relax our nerves.* (Italics added)³²

The problem we have is that we have no ability to grasp this attribute of God, for our minds themselves are finite. "Of all that can be thought or said about God, His infinitude is the most difficult to grasp. Even to try to conceive of it would appear to be self-contradictory, for such conceptualization requires us to undertake something which we know at the outset we can never accomplish."³³ And so, instead of trying to wrestle with the impossibility of infinity, we create a god that's nothing like the God of the Bible or the God of our ancestors. However, he is a god that we can understand, because we've made him. We've dissected him, systematized him, and ordered him according to our needs, desires and moral standards. Like all idols, he's powerless in the real difficulties of life, but at least we understand him.

Abraham would have none of this. He worshiped *El Olam*, even though much of the life he had already lived was far outside of his understanding. He would continue to worship *El Olam*, even in the midst of the harrowing trial that would break the peace of that moment of worship. How was he able to? Because God is *El Olam*. We don't need to understand. We need to worship.

³² A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 47.

³³ *Ibid*, pg. 43-44.



Undeserved Blessing Genesis 20-21

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What color do you think best describes your personality? Why?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 20-21

- Where has Jesus been working in your life?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there areas of your life where it's hard to believe that even God would be able to bring anything redemptive? Does the story of the birth of Isaac give you hope? Why or why not?
- Is there a time in your life where you've clearly seen God intercede despite your bad decisions or faithlessness?
- Are there fears in your life that threaten to paralyze your faith? How do you handle those?
- In what areas do you tend to fall into a pattern of seeking to follow the law in order to gain the favor of God?
- How could we as a group encourage the world around us with the redemptive stories that God's written in our lives?

World: In each of our lives, God has done a miraculous work of grace. Of course, we all still have a long way to go, but it's easy to forget the great work He's already done and consider ourselves unworthy to tell our story to those around us. Think about the ways that God has already worked in your life, and think about those with whom you regularly come in contact. How could they benefit from either your story or someone else's story in this group? Pray intentionally for opportunities to share your story with them!

The Test

Genesis 22

Idolatry takes a variety of forms, and God wants to show Abraham, the former idol-worshiper, that he has been truly transformed. In a heart-wrenching story and as an act of worship to God, Abraham is asked to sacrifice that which is most important to him in the world—Isaac. In contemplating the difficulty of that act and the prefigured sacrifice of Jesus, we're each called to consider what might dwell in the seat of highest honor in our own lives.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 22, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Looking for a Lamb

As has already been mentioned in this study, there are a striking number of parallels between Isaac, the son of the promise, and Jesus, the Promised Son. However, none is more striking than the account in Genesis 22.

Read Genesis 22:1-14.

- What is the name of the land where Abraham is to take Isaac for the sacrifice?

- Now, read 2 Chronicles 3:1. Where is the temple of the Lord located?

Incredibly, Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac on the very same mountain that the temple would eventually be built!

- What are the only words from Isaac that we have recorded for us in Genesis 22?

James Boice observes that this same question was asked throughout the entirety of the Old Testament.³⁴ The principle of substitutionary atonement was clearly taught to the people of Israel through the sacrificial system. However, for those who thought deeply, they must have understood that there had to be more to the story. Read Hebrews 10:1-4.

- What image does the writer to the Hebrews use to describe the law?

³⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 691.

- What is his ultimate verdict regarding the effectiveness of the law and the sacrifices to remove sin?

Because the annual sacrifices were unable to truly remove sin, there must have been points of clarity throughout Old Testament history when men and women asked, along with Isaac, “Where is the lamb that’s needed for the sacrifice?”

- Read Exodus 32:30. What is Moses looking for as he approaches God?

- Read Psalm 51:15-17. What does David realize God is looking for?

- Read Malachi 1:8-10. What is God demanding from the people?

- Read John 1:29. What does John announce Jesus to be?

After years of asking “Where is the lamb?”, the lamb that Abraham was ultimately looking forward to appeared. The Lord has provided.

Application:

- Are there areas of your life in which you don’t see Jesus sacrifice as sufficient?

The Crises of Abraham

Over the last twenty-plus years of faith in Jesus, there are times when the Lord has asked me to give up certain things. Some of them were relatively insignificant—at one point, He prompted me to give up a daily podcast that I enjoyed listening to, which would seem like no big deal. However, hitting the “delete” button on the computer took an incredible act of will! Other things have been more significant: my chosen career, specific relationships, etc. However, as I evaluate the whole of life, I quickly acknowledge that I have been asked to give up fairly little, and have gained immeasurably more in my journey of faith.

Abraham’s life was marked by a series of crises, “each of which involved the surrender of something that was naturally dear to him.”³⁵

- Read Genesis 12:1. What are the first things he’s asked to give up?

- Read Genesis 13:1-18. What is he next asked to give up?

- Now, read Genesis 17:17-18. What is the next thing he’s asked to give up?

³⁵ A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, (Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, IL, 1922.), Volume II, pg. 24.

- Finally, read Genesis 22:2. What is the final thing he is asked to give up?

This seems to be God's call for all of His children, although few as clearly as Abraham. Read Proverbs 23:26.

- What seems to be the call for all of those who follow God?

When we read Jesus' words, as well as Paul's and those of other New Testament writers, we see the pathway to life is truly through giving up our own lives.

- Read Matthew 16:24-28. What does Jesus call disciples to do?

- Read Galatians 2:20-21. In Christ, what happens to our old life?

We are each called to give up our lives for the sake of Jesus' life, just as Abraham did over and over again in following God.

Application:

- Are there portions of your "old life" you still desire to hold onto?

Jehovah Jireh, The Lord Will Provide

In our society, much time has been spent and ink spilt over the distinction between *wants* and *needs*. Many of us feel, at various times, that we are lacking in something, and ask that God would provide for our lack. We are struggling to pay our bills, so we look to *Jehovah Jireh*, the Provider, to cover the shortfall. Certainly God is able, and gracious, to provide for our lack in providential ways at various times. However, to determine our bills to be *needs* is a gigantic leap. Which bills *are* needs? The 400 television channels? The unlimited cell phone plan? The payment for the shiny, new car that replaced the slightly used and functional car that needed new brakes? The mortgage for the several hundred square feet that we actually need to live in as well as the several thousand square feet that luxuriously surround it? Obviously, these are wide classifications that don't apply to all of us, but they show the wide disparity between what we can often view as our needs through the lens of our culture.

The situation in which Abraham declared God to be *Jehovah Jireh*, the God Who Will Provide, is instructive for us. God clearly called Abraham to take the long journey up Mount Moriah and to sacrifice Isaac. He obeyed with immediacy, leaving "early in the morning" with his treasured son. He followed through on every detail, building an altar, binding up his son, and placing him upon the altar. The scene was tense, the knife was cocked, tears and sweat both likely pouring from father and son alike. It was at that moment that God showed up, both stopping the finality of the act of obedience and providing a ram for sacrifice.

Through obedience to the clear and expressed will of God, Abraham arrived at a point of *need*. Unless God should intervene, the unthinkable will happen. Of course, it's not solely in the extreme circumstance that God will provide, but in *every circumstance* in which we are clearly obeying the expressed will of God. He will provide what we need for our own personal life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3) and to fulfill the call that He has placed on our lives (Matthew 28:18-20).

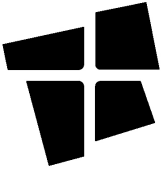
The specifics of the name that Abraham used bears investigation as well. In Genesis 22:8, Abraham declares to Isaac, in response to his question: "*God will provide* for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." The following verses

play out the dramatic narrative, and it's not until Isaac's life is spared and the ram sacrificed that Abraham declares the Divine Name: "Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord *will provide*.'" (Genesis 22:14) The tense remains future, although the substitution has already been found and the sacrifice already made. "Abraham was not merely thinking of his own past experience; he was also reflecting on the fact that it is God's abiding character that prompts him to see to our problems and that at his appointed time, he would undoubtedly provide for the great problem of sin. God would provide a Savior."³⁶

Our lives are certainly full of *needs, wants*, and many things that fall into a gray area in between. However, our need for One to bear the penalty for our sin and gift to us righteousness is in a *need* category that is altogether distinct. There are times we are not "able" to pay our bills with immediacy, but the ability to pay is certainly within the scope of our powers. We are absolutely helpless to address the problem of our own sin. In fact, Paul says that we are "dead" in our sins. (Ephesians 2:1) The only hope that we have is that our God is *Jehovah Jireh*—the Lord Who Will Provide.

In what areas of life do you truly need the provision of *Jehovah Jireh*? As you meditate on your finite needs, recognize that *Jehovah Jireh* is also *El Olam* (see pg. 87), the God Who is infinite is certainly able to meet our finite needs.

³⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 690.



The Test Genesis 22

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most challenging task you've ever *completed*?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 22

- Where have you seen God show up in the past week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- What's your initial reaction to the story of the almost sacrifice of Isaac? Why do you think that is?
- When was your faith most tested in your life?
- Are there areas of your life where you struggle to see the sacrifice of Jesus as sufficient for you?
- What areas of your "old life" do you tend to hold onto?
- Are there times that we, as Christians, seek to make following Jesus too easy? What examples can you think of?
- How can we encourage one another through the difficult times of faith and obedience?

World: Dying to self is a vitally important part of effectively loving the world around us and reflecting Jesus to them. Whether there's desire to guard our time and comfort or one to protect our reputation, "self" often gets in the way of us reaching out to others in the way that we otherwise could. Pair up and take a few minutes to do some honest evaluation: What portion of "self" most gets in the way? Ask God to work in that area as you seek to sacrifice it before Him, praying that *Jehovah Jireh* will give you exactly what you need as you follow after Him. Be as specific as you can, and follow up with one another during the week!

Death and New Life

Genesis 23-24

In the choice of Rebekah for Isaac, we not only see characteristics of a good and godly wife in the mold of Sarah, but we also see a shadow of what it means that we as the Church are the bride of Christ. Like Rebekah, we have been chosen before we even knew there was a choice to be made. We are simply left with the decision that Rebekah made so well and so quickly—will we follow immediately, as so often was true of Abraham, or will we delay our obedience and miss the blessing?

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 23-24, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

The Good Wife

One of the great needs in our culture today is for heroes. Not perfect people, of course, of which there are none except Jesus, but those who have gone before us and been a model for us in specific areas. In areas like being godly spouses, parents, workers and church members, we are constantly in need of good examples.

Interestingly, Genesis is very honest about Sarah's shortcomings. Look at the following passages, and recall what they show us about Sarah:

- Genesis 16:1-2
- Genesis 16:6, 21:10
- Genesis 18:10-12
- Genesis 18:13-15

However, despite these failures, Sarah's life is held up for us as a model—she is an imperfect hero that we are to see as a model for wives and mothers.

Read Isaiah 51:1-2. What seems to be Isaiah's primary point in referencing us to Abraham and Sarah as models?

Read 1 Peter 3:3-6. What are some of the characteristics that Peter attributes to Sarah and encourages wives into?

Finally, read Hebrews 11:11. What characteristic of Sarah does the writer to the Hebrews list as outstanding?

The core of Sarah's example for us is an example of faith. However, when you look back at her two biggest failures, they were related to faithlessness (Hagar and laughing at God). Why might this give us hope?

Sarah wasn't perfect, and neither are we. However, even in the midst of our failure, God calls us back to obedience and blessing. It's not too late!

Application:

- Where in your life have you failed to exercise real faith in God? How can you repent and truly exercise faith?

A Remarkable Servant

Each year, the Oscars attract an incredible amount of attention from both movie buffs and the average man or woman who casually watches movies. In fact, I rarely see movies (even less than once a year!), but I still pay attention to this high profile awards ceremony. The big awards, of course, are “Best Picture” and “Best Actor/Actress.” However, each year, there’s also quite a bit of discussion around the “Best Supporting Actor/Actress” category. There are many movies in which a scene or even an entire story is captured by an excellent but secondary character.

In Genesis 24, we meet such a character. Kidner has called Abraham’s servant “one of the most attractive minor characters of the Bible.”³⁷ There are many aspects of this faithful servant’s life that are reflected throughout the biblical narrative.

First, slowly read Genesis 24. It’s a wonderful story—take time to absorb all that is happening in this narrative.

- Many have wondered about the identity of this unnamed steward, with many pointing to Eliezer of Damascus³⁸, referenced in Genesis 15:2. If that’s true, how is this act a clear precursor to John the Baptist in John 3:29-30?

- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:17. How are the servant’s actions in Genesis 24 a model for this?

- Read Isaiah 65:24. How does this story illustrate Isaiah’s words?

³⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis, TOTC*, (IVP Academic, Downer’s Grove, IL, 2nd edition 2008.), pg. 157.

³⁸ See Kidner and Boice, among many others.

- Finally, read Proverbs 3:5-6. Many commentators tie this story to these verses. Why might that be?

There are many allusions to the rest of the Bible within this story, but probably the clearest connection is to the book of Ephesians, in which Paul likens the church to the “Bride” of Christ.

- Read Ephesians 5:22-33. In what ways is the husband/wife relationship parallel to the relationship Jesus has with the Church?

- Read Ephesians 1:4. How are we like Rebekah in this story?

Application:

- How could you apply what you’ve learned about prayer and faith from the story of Abraham’s servant?

There are times that the world around us seems to be a flood of details, too complex to perceive or comprehend, and they all seem to be spinning out of control. At other times, the world appears to be a neat and ordered place in which all things respond as they ought. The reality from our limited, human perspective is that neither is true: The times that we feel the world is ordered and we are in control, it is merely an illusion waiting to be broken by the next tragedy or crisis. However, while the innumerable details of the world are certainly far too many and far too complex for us to understand, they are certainly able to be understood by an all-powerful Creator.

God's sovereignty is simply a way of saying that God is absolutely in charge of every aspect of His creation. Sovereignty is actually a function of several of His other attributes: omniscience (all-knowing), omnipotence (all-powerful), and omnipresence (present in all places at all times). Were He not omniscient, there would be bits of information that He didn't know; therefore, He would be unable to be fully in charge of that aspect of creation. Were He not omnipotent, there would be actions of which He was not capable; therefore, He would not be able to rule and reign perfectly in every area. Finally, were He not omnipresent, He would not be free to act in the places He is not, only in the places that He is. Sovereignty states that He *is* able to do all of these things. In fact, it's because of these very attributes that we know Him to be God.

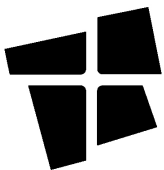
Psalm 115:3 states: "Our God is in the heavens; He does all that he pleases." Not one thing that we experience in our lives fails to pass through His hands. It is with such surety that Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, penned: "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28)

Therefore, when Abraham's servant leaves on his journey to find a wife for Isaac, he can be certain of success. Why? He knows that God intends for the line of Abraham to continue, based on His covenant promises. (Genesis 12, 15, 17) Through his faithfulness and reliance on God, the servant is required to play a part in the process, but God has ordained the success of his mission. Tozer states it clearly:

In the moral conflict now raging around us whoever is on God's side is on the winning side and cannot lose; whoever is on the other side is on the losing side and cannot win. Here there is no chance; no gamble. There is freedom to choose which side we shall be on but no freedom to negotiate the results of the choice once it is made. By the mercy of God we may repent a wrong choice and alter the consequences by making a new and right choice. Beyond that we cannot go.³⁹

Even the mystery of "choosing which side we shall be on" is one that theologians have debated over the years. The point is this: God is fully in control of all things at all times. While there may be much that we see and experience that causes us to question, the ultimate result of all of creation is not open to question: "Every knee will bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10-11)

Practically, the sovereignty of God means that we can absolutely trust Him with every detail of our lives. When things seem out of control, we can know that He is fully in control; when we feel like we are in control, we can rest knowing that He is guiding us every step of the way. What are some situations in your life right now in which the sovereignty of God gives you peace?



Death and New Life Genesis 23-24

³⁹ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 112.

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Were you at a funeral or wedding recently?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 23-24

- How has Jesus been active in the world around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Do you have a hero, either in general or in a specific area? Who are they and why are they your hero?
- Where in your life have you truly had to exercise faith?
- Is there a place in your life right now where you really need to exercise faith? What will that look like?
- What does the story of getting a bride for Isaac tell you about prayer? How might that practically impact your daily life?
- Do we pray enough as a group? Why or why not?
- How can we encourage one another to exercise faith more boldly and trust God more completely?

World: The world around us can often seem out of control and, for those who don't know Jesus, this is often an even greater reality. It's only through real relationship that we're able to share with people the depth of the hope that we can have in the sovereignty of God. As we move into the holiday season, start to talk as a group about how you might connect more deeply with those for whom you've been praying God's blessing into their lives. Is it a small dinner party? A Christmas cookie exchange? Some kind of kid's activity? Depending on your group, there may be 2 or 3 different ideas that would all work for different connections. Start to dream, plan, and pray!

Abraham: The Sequel

Genesis 25-26

Isaac is seen quite clearly as a figure of Jesus, modeling the reality of grace for us. The remarkable part of Isaac's life is truly how unremarkable it was: no long journeys, no great works, no cases of extreme testing. In fact, he didn't even sin with originality—he repeated the sin Abraham committed twice in lying about his wife. The life of Isaac teaches us the clear lesson that the grace of God, though incredibly valuable, cannot be earned.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 25-26, using at least two different translations if possible. Skip Genesis 25:29-34 until next week.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Isaac as Abraham

Watchman Nee, the great Chinese writer and preacher, wrote a series of meditations on the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He recognizes Abraham to

be the father “par excellence,” recognizing that he was the first man in Scripture to do a variety of things: to forsake everything, to “cross over” to Canaan and be designated a Hebrew (Genesis 14:13), and to have an intimate connection with God, as a man does with a friend.⁴⁰ If Abraham represents the Father, Nee posits, Isaac clearly represents the Son. “Abraham did many things that no one else had done. Isaac did nothing that another had not already done.”⁴¹

Indeed, Isaac’s life seems to be remarkable for its passivity.

- Read Genesis 21:8-14. What is Isaac’s recorded response to the teasing of Ishmael?

- Read Genesis 22:1-14. What are Isaac’s only recorded words in this entire narrative?

- Read Genesis 24:1-9, 52-67. What did Isaac do in the process of finding a wife?

Both Abraham and Isaac had two sons—one that would be the son through which the covenant of God would be fulfilled, and one which would not. However, the action that God required of them was dramatically different. As you read the following passages, think about the differences represented in what God is asking of each man:

- Read Genesis 17:15-21, 21:8-14, and 22:1-14. Then, read Genesis 25:29-34 and Genesis 27. What’s different in the activities of these two fathers?

⁴⁰ Watchman Nee, *Changed Into His Likeness*, (Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL., 1978.), pg. 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 98.

Finally, several aspects of Isaac’s life seemed to be unoriginal duplications of his father’s life. Look at the following:

- Read Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-13, and 26:6-11. What is the common sin?

- Read Genesis 26:1-5, 23-25. Is there anything noteworthy regarding the two times that God speaks to Isaac?

- Read Genesis 21:22-32 and 26:26-31. What parallel do you see?

Neer rightly parallels this reality to the gift of grace and new life given to us in Christ. In place of a specific application question today, consider this final quote, and think about how it pertains to your life in Christ:

Some of us force ourselves to do things we don’t want to do and to live a life we cannot in fact live, and think that in making this effort we are being Christians. That is very far removed from what Isaac was. The Christian life is lived when I receive the life of Christ within me as a gift, to live by that life. It is the nature of the life of Christ not to love the world but to be distinct from it, and to value prayer and the Word and communion with God. These are not things I do naturally; by nature I have to force myself to do them. But God has provided another nature, and he wants me to benefit from the provision he has made.⁴²

The Work of an Heir

Imagine what it might be like to be the only son or daughter of one of the wealthiest people in the world. I don’t mean someone who’s a little bit rich—I

⁴² Ibid., pg. 101-102.

mean incredible wealth like most of us can barely even comprehend! What if you were the only heir to that incredible fortune? How might you live? Since we're already dreaming... now imagine that you gained your status as an heir through adoption. This incredible rich man had no one in his family, so he came and found you, huddled in the back corner of an orphanage. You were forgotten and rejected, but in a matter of moments, you became the sole heir to a tremendous fortune!

This is the image that Paul uses both in his letter to the Romans and his letter to the Galatians. We celebrate the fact that we are co-heirs with Christ, not through natural birth—for we were born into sin—but through re-birth. Through adoption!

However, even worse than being a forgotten orphan, Paul tells us we were slaves. As you read the following verses, list what we once were slaves to:

- Romans 6:14
- Romans 6:23, 8:6
- Romans 8:7
- Romans 8:8
- Romans 8:15
- Galatians 4:3, 9

That bleak picture was the story of our lives apart from God. However, our identity has completely changed in Christ! We have become sons and daughters, co-heirs with Jesus Himself! As you read the following verses, list what we are given as a gift when we are in Christ:

- Romans 6:18
- Romans 6:23, 8:10

- Romans 8:16
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Romans 8:15
- Romans 8:1

The even more incredible news is that these things *are already true* of us in Christ! We don't need to *become* these things, *gain* these things, or somehow *earn* these things. They are already ours in Christ!

- Read 1 Corinthians 1:30-31. Where does Paul say our lives are physically located?
- Is this something that we need to attain, or something that is already true of us?

Application:

- Are you living like someone who has been set free from sin and has been given the life of Christ?

Divine Grace

Theologians define grace as "unmerited favor." We are freely given something that we can't possibly deserve based on nothing that's inherent to us, but only based

on God. When expressed biblically, the doctrine of grace is so... well, gracious... that it sounds scandalous. We are dead in our sins, yet made alive in Christ. (Ephesians 2:5) Where sin increases, grace increases all the more. (Romans 5:20) We absolutely and unequivocally deserve death, but the free gift of God is eternal life. (Romans 6:23) We are not just given life, but we're given *abundant* life. (John 10:10) We are no longer subject to the law, but we are living in Christ alone. (Galatians 2:19-20) And not only are we saved by grace, but we're sanctified (made perfect) by grace as well! (Galatians 3:3)

It's really too much for us to comprehend. Like Isaac, we are simply recipients of the work of Another. The work that we do we simply do in faith, knowing that Jesus is the One who is truly working within us. (Philippians 2:12-13) We have been placed *in Christ* and, therefore, we are no longer seeking to attain, but simply to rest. (1 Corinthians 1:30) Watchman Nee uses the example of a bus ticket placed inside the pages of a book:

Now I put the book into the fire and burn it. What happens to the ticket? Or I throw the book into the river. What about the ticket? Or again, I make the book up into a parcel, and take it to the post office and mail it to Europe. Where is the ticket now? You can answer each question with absolute assurance; and yet it is a fact that, once it was in the book, I did nothing more with the ticket as such. I did not send the ticket to Europe, I sent the book. Because the ticket is in the book, where the book goes the ticket must go. It has a part in everything that happens to the book. When I tell you what has happened to the book, you do not have to stop and think what has happened to the thing that is included in the book.⁴³

Just so, we are in Christ. We died with Him. We've risen with Him. We live with Him. This is completely and fully grace. Our identity becomes His—and this is apart from us so that, as Paul says, no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:9)

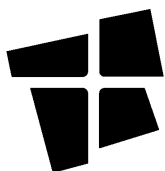
A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian & Missionary Alliance, penned the term "The Fourfold Gospel": Jesus is our Savior, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King. However, beyond simply being the One who saves, sanctifies, heals, and reigns, He *is* these things for us who are in Christ. Therefore, He is not just our Savior—He is our Salvation. He is not just our Sanctifier—He is our Sanctification. He is not solely

⁴³ Watchman Nee, *Changed Into His Likeness*, (Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL., 1978.), pg. 108.

our Healer—He is Himself our Healing. And, indeed, He is our King.

Is the distinction one that has any practical importance? I think so. If we are in Christ and He *is* all of these things to us, we are not, through an act of our will, seeking to *be* something. Instead, we are seeking to be less so that He might be more. When a situation calls for us to be patient, we mustn't try our best to trust His Word, follow His example, and be patient. Rather, *He's already been patient*, and I am *in Him!* Therefore, I don't need to be *more* of anything—I just need to be *less* of me so that He is able to be more clearly seen in me.

In what areas am I trying to be something that He's already been for me? How can I have less of me and more of Him?



Abraham: The Sequel Genesis 25-26

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the best sequel that you've ever seen or read?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 25-26

- Where has Jesus been evident in the world around you this week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- In what way does your life reflect your status as an heir? In what ways doesn't it?
- Are there activities that you do that, if you're honest, make it seem like you are seeking to earn something from God?
- How could you see less of you and more of God in your life?
- What aspect of your life contributes the most to your identity? Who are you when that is taken away?
- Do we treat each other according to the identities we have in Christ, or by some other standard? How about the people in the world around us?

World: We are ambassadors for Christ, transformed from our old selves to new creations in Christ and reflecting that reality to the world around us. (2 Corinthians 5:14-20) Would people around you agree that your life is reflecting the life of Jesus? Pray intentionally about the reflection of Jesus in your life and in those to whom you are reflecting Him. Pick one specific person to pray for this week, and pray that God would give you an opportunity to speak blessing into their life!

Problems at the Dinner Table

Genesis 25:29-34, 27:1-40

Jacob connived to gain what God ultimately had already chosen to give. Esau rejected that which was of immense value, both materially and spiritually. Isaac tried to outsmart his wife by making what should have been public instead to be private. Rebekah pushed Jacob into tricking her own husband so that he would bless *her* favorite son instead of *his* favorite son. In the midst of all of this, the family was destroyed—all around the dinner table.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 25:29-34 and 27:1-40, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Choosing Jacob

One of the unfortunate traits of my youth that I've passed on to several of my children is the inability to make a decision. Over the years, I've learned to make

decisions a bit more quickly and with less angst but, as a child, the process was torturous for all involved. The issue, of course, revolved around the reality that, if I chose one option, it often eliminated the other option. Chicken fingers or a hamburger? Playing football with friends, or cards with family? Listening to Tiffany or Debbie Gibson? (Yes, that was my era, scary as it is...)

From the very beginning of her long awaited pregnancy, Rebekah was exposed to the reality of divine choice. Read Genesis 25:19-23.

- What did Rebekah learn from the Lord when she inquired about her tumultuous pregnancy?

- Why was this shocking, given what you understand of ancient practice regarding birth order?

Before Jacob and Esau were even born, God had made His choice. As is often the case, that choice didn't necessarily correspond with the social practice of the day.

- Read Genesis 4:1-5. Whose sacrifice did God regard?

- Read Genesis 4:26-5:8. Whose line was Noah from, through whom God chose to preserve humanity?

- Read Genesis 17:18-19. Which of Abraham's boys did God choose?

- Read Genesis 37:3, 5-7. Through which of Jacob's children did God choose to work?

- Read Genesis 49:1-12. Which of Jacob's children was ultimately blessed extensively, ultimately becoming the line of the Messiah?

Not only is God's practice clearly not according to tradition or social convention throughout Genesis, it continues throughout the Bible. While the doctrine of "election" is one of the most debated and hard to understand theological principles in the entire Bible, it is at least clear that God chooses those whom He desires to choose. Read the following verses:

- Romans 8:28-30
- Romans 9:10-13
- Ephesians 1:3-6

How would you summarize what each of these passages teach?

Finally, read 1 Corinthians 1:27-29. What does Paul insist is God's practice as it relates to the conventional wisdom of the world?

Application:

- Are you able to rest and rejoice in God's choice of you? Since you don't know whom God has chosen, how might you be a part of seeing others that God has chosen come to know Him?

Lacking Trust

Trust is one of the baseline necessities for a healthy marriage and family life. When trust is gone, it's very difficult to build anything solid. The God-ordained and joyful

marriage between Isaac and Rebekah seems to have quickly broken down. Many have deduced through the “hint” of Genesis 25:28 that the marriage fell apart because they both favored one of the twin boys over the other, which could certainly be the case. Whether that was the reason or whether it was simply a complicating factor, what we know for sure is that, by Genesis 27, the marriage and family relationship has completely broken down and what’s left is a dysfunctional mess.

Begin by reading Genesis 27:1-40 at one time, as a single story. Take in the story of which Boice says “there is probably no more pathetic episode in Genesis.”⁴⁴

- As you read, which of the characters do you find yourself sympathetic towards?

When we read stories, we often try to find a hero, or at least a sympathetic character. Cases have been built by theologians for all four of these characters as the “sympathetic” one in this narrative, but the reality is that each of them holds a significant portion of the blame.

Read Genesis 27:1-4.

- Who did Isaac tell that he wanted to bless Esau?
- Did he tell the rest of the family?
- Look back at Genesis 25:23. Had God already made it clear to Isaac which of the boys He was choosing? Based on Genesis 25:28, why might Isaac have conspired to bless Esau anyway?

It’s important to note that not only is Isaac scheming, seeking to defy the revealed will of God, but he is taking what “should have been a joyful and public occasion

⁴⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 752.

[and turning it] into a despicable incident."⁴⁵ However, he's not the only one who's scheming in the story... Read Genesis 27:5-13.

- How does Rebekah find out about Isaac's plan?

- What is Rebekah's plan?

Jacob, of course, is no better: Read Genesis 27:14-29.

- How many times does Jacob lie, just in these few verses?

The final character is the one who often arouses our sympathies. However, Scripture makes it clear that Esau is not a righteous or lovable character in the story either. Read Hebrews 12: 15-17.

- What is the charge that the writer levels against Esau?

The entire story is a distasteful one, full of brokenness and deceit. God's plan from the beginning was to bless Jacob but, now, Jacob must flee for 20 years, separated from his beloved mother whom he will likely never see again. Sin and rebellion always has consequence, and this family would bear them for years.

Application:

- Are there areas of your life where you are trying to manipulate God's plan instead of waiting for Him?

Divine Transcendence

⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 753.

We've already considered the incredible concept of grace: the divine, unmerited favor given to us based wholly on God. It's an idea worthy of endless meditation as we seek to comprehend the depth of favor and love of God. However, bound up within the concept of grace is another incredible idea found in the words of the classic hymn:

Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within
Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that is *greater* than all my sin.⁴⁶ (italics mine)

Greater. Not only is grace incredible, but it's *greater* than all my sin. All my scheming. All my unfaithfulness. Grace is greater because *God is greater*.

We must not think of God as highest in an ascending order of beings, starting with the single cell and going on up from the fish to the bird to the animal to man to angel to cherub to God. This would be to grant God eminence, even pre-eminence, but that is not enough; we must grant Him *transcendence* in the fullest meaning of that word.⁴⁷

God is wholly distinct from all creative beings, with a greater gulf separating Him from the highest created being than that which separates that same being from an amoeba. Just as the activity of the amoeba cannot thwart the plans of man, neither can the activity of man thwart the plans of God. As the first believers prayed: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*" (Acts 4:27-28, italics mine) God is so far greater than we can comprehend. All things are under His command, and He is above them all.

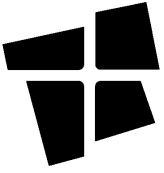
Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob all sought to either "do" or "un-do" the will and plan of God within their own strength and scheming. It's not shocking to us that God didn't bend to their will. However, it should be equally shocking to us that God's will didn't sway away from them based on their deceit and undesirable behavior

⁴⁶ Lyrics by Julia Johnston, *Hymns Tried and True* (The Bible Institute Colportage Association, Chicago, IL, 1911.), number 2.

⁴⁷ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 70.

either! God's choice of Jacob remained despite the unsavory character he became. God blessing would continue to rest on him, even as he plotted and schemed in order to manipulate that blessing. God's transcendence certainly means that we can't thwart His plans, but it must equally mean that we can't negatively manipulate His will through our sinful behavior.

So, what then? As Paul rhetorically asks: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1) Of course not! Our response to such a great, powerful, *transcendent* God can only rightly be worship—worship that submits our hearts to Him, aligns our will with His, and trusts Him to be Lord, even though everything in us longs to be our own lord. While we can't derail His plans, we can certainly align ourselves with His plans and, in so doing, equally align ourselves with His blessing. Through his deceit, Jacob lost 20 years. Through his murderous act, Moses lost 40. God's will ultimately prevailed, but it would be at a high cost in both years and in joy. How could you align your life with God's plan?



Problems at the Dinner Table

Genesis 25:29-34, 27:1-40

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's your favorite Thanksgiving tradition?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 25:29-34, 27:1-40

- How has Jesus been working around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are you able to rest and rejoice in God's choice of you? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been taken advantage of by someone who is close to you and someone you felt you should have been able to trust? Have you been able to forgive them? What has that process been like?
- Do you find it easy to trust God to carry out His plans, or do you tend to "help" Him?
- What's the most difficult part of living out your faith for you in your family? What's the most joyful part?
- How can we encourage each other as a group to trust God and wait through the disappointments and difficulties of life?

World: Divine election can make some become apathetic in reaching out to those around them. However, though God has predestined some, we don't know who, and God has called us to be the vehicles through which some will come to know Him! Rather than guessing, ask God to identify one person that you will pray for and seek to shine the light of Christ in front of for the next month. This might be the same person you've identified in the past, or it might be someone totally different God brings to mind. However, take some time to pray and ask God to reveal the specific person to you, tell the group their first name, and then pray for each of those people by name!

Seeing God

Genesis 27:41 – 28:22

The grace of God can come to us at the most unlikely times. As Jacob leaves home, lonely and running for his safety, headed on a long journey to his uncle's house, the Almighty would seem to be the last thing on his mind. However, at his point of greatest weakness and distance from God, God shows up to him. Through coming to meet with Jacob, God promises him both significance and security through the covenant He first made to Abraham. These are the same promises He makes to us through the coming of Jesus to meet with us.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 27:41 – 28:22, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Bethel as Babel

C.S. Lewis has famously declared that our problem is not that our desires are too strong, but rather that they are too weak. We settle for less than God's best for us, and when we are satisfied with less than God's best for us, we fail to be driven toward the heart of God.

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁴⁸

Our problem is a universal one, it seems, dating back to the Fall itself in Genesis 3. Jacob leaves home, running for his life and simultaneously seeking a wife. The sun sets and he pulls up a stone for a pillow, alone in a dangerous world, on the way to... literally, God only knows. And as he sleeps, he has a vision.

Read Genesis 28:10-22.

- What specifically does Jacob see in his dream?

- What does God say to Jacob in the vision?

Iain Duguid makes the observation that "the background for this vision is the Tower of Babel story."⁴⁹ Although most translations say that Jacob saw a "ladder," the literal translation of the word *sullam* is "a staircase."⁵⁰ The structure erected in

⁴⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA., 1949, 1980.), pg. 26.

⁴⁹ Iain Duguid, *Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2002.), pg. 52.

⁵⁰ Strong's H5549.

Genesis 11 is a *ziggurat*, “a stepped-pyramid temple, which was conceived as essentially a similar kind of stone stairway to the heavens.”⁵¹

- Read Genesis 11:1-9. What are the two reasons the people desire to build the tower?

In Genesis 11, they were seeking out a place and determined to build this tower. In Genesis 28, Jacob seemingly hadn't given a thought to anything except his flight from Esau. And yet, he found something that his ancestors had longed for.

- Re-read the promise God makes to Jacob in Genesis 28:13-15. What aspects of this promise fulfill the desires of Genesis 11?

- Now, read Ezekiel 37:15-28. What does this vision promise will one day happen with God's people?

The desires of those who constructed the Tower of Babel were not too strong, it seems. They were too weak. They wanted what they could make for themselves, but what they could make for themselves was a cheap imitation compared to what God longed to give them.

Application:

- In what area have you settled for what you can give yourself instead of trusting what God can do?

⁵¹ Iain Duguid, *Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2002.), pg. 52.

Jesus as Bethel

Our lives are full of contracts—some of them are written, some just assumed. We have a contract with our employers stating that we will accomplish certain tasks in exchange for certain pay and other benefits. We have a contract with our cell phone companies stating that we will pay a certain amount per month in exchange for phone and data services. Our leases and mortgages are contracts, many of us have contract loans, and we even have contracts for television service.

At Bethel, God met Jacob, and He promised him security and significance. Jacob didn't invite Him to come, nor did he ask Him for anything, but it didn't take him long to translate the promise of God into a contract. Read Genesis 28:20-22.

- What is Jacob asking of God?

- What is Jacob promising God in return?

Very few of us are so blatant in our bargaining, and we very rarely articulate our expectations, but many of us relate to God in this same way. It's why we get so angry with God when things don't go as we desire them to: We've made a deal with God to serve Him and follow Him, but He's supposed to keep up His end of the deal by making sure our lives go well and that suffering is rare and relatively minor. However, this isn't the deal that God is seeking to make. In fact, He's not interested in making a deal at all. He's interested in offering Jacob grace.

Read John 1:50-51.

- What phrasing does Jesus use to reference this event?

- Where does Jesus locate Himself as He talks about this vision?
- Now look back at Genesis 28:14. Where is Jesus located in Jacob’s vision?
- Read 1 Timothy 2:5-6. What is the role that Paul speaks of Jesus fulfilling?

“Think of this! He is at both ends of the ladder—as Jehovah at the top and Jesus (“Jehovah is Salvation”) at the bottom. Christ is everywhere at all times, hearing our prayers and mediating the commerce of Heaven on our behalf.”⁵² Why does He do this? Because we keep up our end of the bargain? Of course not—He’s not even asking us to bargain. The answer is simple: grace. We, like Jacob, find ourselves running because of our sins. We, like Jacob, imagine that God can’t be with us because we are so sinful. And yet, like Jacob, God shows up in the midst of our running and rebellion, unbidden and unexpected, offering us security and significance. What amazing grace!

Application:

- Are there areas of your life that you tend to, purposely or not, bargain with God?

⁵² R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, (Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2004.), pg. 362.

El Bethel, The God of Bethel or The God of the House of God

At Bethel, God met Abram. (Genesis 13) It was once again at Bethel that God would appear to Jacob. (Genesis 28) In the 20 years that followed, there must have been numerous times that Jacob returned to Bethel in his heart, recalling the promise of God and re-centering himself in God's truth.

The same should be true for us. There are places and ways that God has met us and, in the difficult times, we tend to return to those places, longing to hear from God again. In fact, this is the counsel that God gives to the church at Ephesus: "Repent, and do the works you did at first." (Revelation 2:5) In those places and actions, we can recall the grace of God that has been offered so freely to us, just as it was to Jacob.

However, returning to the old places and practices can become a problem as well. The prophet Amos reminds the people of Israel that it's not in a specific place that they can find grace: "Seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing." (Amos 5:5) It seems that the nation was returning to past holy places in order to find life instead of remembering that it was God Himself who met them at those places, who gave them life. A very similar thing happened with the bronze snake, which was created as a tool for healing for the nation of Israel under God's commands (Numbers 21:9) but ultimately became an object of worship. (2 Kings 18:4)

El Bethel, the God of Bethel, would take up residence in a very obvious way in the temple of God (2 Chronicles 5:14), which would truly *become* the house of God. For centuries, like Jacob of old, Israelites would go to this new "Bethel," the temple, in order to meet with God and worship Him. However, the temple would ultimately be destroyed—the first one in 586 BC, and the rebuilt temple in 70 AD.

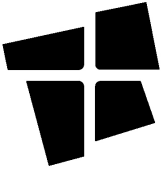
Where, then, is the new "Bethel?" Where can we go to meet with God?

Paul states very clearly in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19 that *we*, as believers in Jesus, are the temples of God! He states quite clearly: "Do you not know that you are

God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" Incredible! As believers in Jesus, when we call out to *El Bethel*, we call out to the God who is within us.

There is a final consummation of the temple of God in the Scriptures as well. Revelation 21:22 says: "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." Jesus Himself *is* the temple, the only way for us to meet with God. Jesus stated this reality to His disciples before His death: "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

How often do we seek something other than God to experience His grace? Although God will graciously meet us in places and ways that He's met us in the past, the truth of God is that Jesus dwells within us, and that, by grace, we can meet with Him whenever we're willing. How often do we fail to take advantage of that glorious reality?



Seeing God
Genesis 27:41 – 28:22

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What activity draws you closest to God?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 27:41 – 28:22

- How have you seen God at work in the past week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there specific sins that were passed down from your family in which you continue without really thinking?
- Is there an area where you've settled for what you can give yourself instead of waiting for what God will give to you?
- Has God ever showed up at a time when you least expected Him?
- How do you respond when you encounter God?
- Do you find yourself, either intentionally or unintentionally, bargaining with God? In what areas?

World: Last week, you determined a specific person that you are going to pray for over the course of the month. (If you didn't do that, look back at the "World" section on page 139.) This week, as we consider the story of Jacob, pray for God to reveal Himself to the person for which you're praying. Of course, it may not be as profound as Jacob experienced in Genesis 28, but pray that God would make Himself evident—and consider the fact that *you* might be the way that He chooses to do it! Continue to pray God's blessing into the lives of each of the people that you've identified as a group.

These are the Days of Our Lives...

Genesis 29-30

Jacob's arrival at Uncle Laban's house reads more like an episode of an afternoon soap opera than a Biblical account. However, despite the drama, the man Jacob is formed through adversity and pain as he comes up against one who is almost his equal in the art of deceit. However, despite Jacob's continued self-reliance, God continued to pour out His grace on him. In the midst of our drama, we can often miss the presence of God—but He's there, working for our good.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 29-30, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Out Jacob-ing Jacob

Up until this point in the Jacob narrative, it seems as though deceit and conniving are the way ahead in the world! Jacob has exhibited character that would make him right at home in some of the most unseemly business and political dealings in our modern world. He's taken advantage of his brother's foolishness, has stolen his birthright, and then has outright deceived his father in stealing Esau's blessing. He might have had to wander to Paddan-aram alone but, when he arrived, he was welcomed with joy and invited into the family. Up until this time, it seems that sin has borne fruit—good fruit!

However, God's justice always remains intact, whether we first see and experience it or not. Read Genesis 29:1-30.

- Now, read Genesis 27:18-27. Who did Jacob deceive in order to receive blessing?
- Who deceived Jacob in Genesis 29?
- Read Genesis 25:29-34 and 27:31-36. In both cases, whose rights did Jacob claim for himself, although he was the younger son?
- Why did Laban say he gave Jacob Leah instead of Rachel?

Throughout the Bible, God often uses same or similar circumstances to enact justice on the unjust. A.W. Pink calls this principle both "Divine retribution" and "poetic justice."⁵³ Consider these examples:

⁵³ A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, (Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, IL, 1922.), Volume II, pg. 58.

- Read Exodus 1:22 and Exodus 14:28. What is the poetic justice for Pharaoh?
- Read Numbers 16:2-3 and Numbers 16:30-32. What is the poetic justice for Korah, who created a “cleft” in the nation of Israel?
- Read Judges 1:6-7. What poetic justice does Adoni-bezek recognize?
- Read 1 Kings 21:1-19 and 1 Kings 22:29-38. What was the poetic justice for King Ahab?
- Read Esther 7:7-10. What was the poetic justice for Haman?

While we can't always put the pieces together, the Bible tells us that God is always a just judge. Psalm 73 is a great meditation on this reality. As you read Psalm 73, pay specific attention to the change of perspective in vs. 17.

Application:

- What's an area where you tend to look at the world around you with too much of a temporary perspective and not enough eternal perspective?

The Prosperity of Jacob

Sadly, we live in a world where the idea of prosperity is often peddled by television preachers and “get rich quick” schemes. The promise is that by spending just a bit—either giving towards a “ministry” as a “faith seed” or to an organization that will teach you all it knows for just a small price—our resources will magically multiply and we’ll have more than what we need.

A quick reading of Genesis 29-30 seems to show this kind of dramatic rags to riches story. However, it’s easy to forget that these two chapters cover some 20 years of Jacob’s life. This was no get-rich-quick scheme! However, there are certainly some principles that we can find in Jacob’s life and, while they probably won’t make the self-help books, they show us a bit of God’s plan for our success.

Read Genesis 30:25-26.

- As best we can understand from the text, what has Jacob “earned” to this point for his work?
- In asking to leave, what security would he have?
- Although he doesn’t explicitly speak it in the passage, where would Jacob’s trust and hope be placed if he would leave at this point?

Jacob doesn’t seem to be pursuing wealth, which he could certainly have received at Laban’s home. (see vs. 27) This is dramatically different from the mindset that seeks to “push” ourselves constantly upward on the corporate ladder. Jacob was not focused on gaining prosperity, but was trusting God.

Read Genesis 30:26-27 and 31:38—41.

- What claim does Jacob make in both of these passages?

- Does Laban dispute this claim?

Although Jacob had already been assured the blessing of God (see Genesis 28), he worked hard for Laban, a fact that Laban never disputed.

Read Genesis 30:31-33 and Genesis 31:4-12, 42.

- Where does Jacob ultimately see his success coming from?

- Read Matthew 6:25-33. What is Jesus' promise to those who seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness?

Jacob didn't pursue prosperity, but he worked hard and trusted God. It might not be a get-rich-quick scheme, but Jesus promises that it will pay dividends!

Application:

- As you look at these three areas (not pursuing prosperity, working hard, and trusting God), which one is the most difficult for you to follow? Why is that?

Divine Omnipotence

We naturally understand our lives in terms of our limits. We know that there are objects we cannot lift, issues we cannot fix, dilemmas we cannot resolve, and tasks that we simply cannot accomplish. It's one of the earliest lessons we learn as babies—we can conceive of talking long before we can form words and of walking before we can stand. We're inherently limited.

However, we also recognize that we have power. While there are objects we can't lift, there are many objects we *can*. There are many fixable issues, resolvable dilemmas, and accomplishable tasks. Our power may be limited, but it is certainly present. This is the paradigm in which we live.

It's nearly impossible, therefore, for us to fully grasp the idea of omnipotence. God, by His very nature, is completely and utterly *able*. To do what? Anything at all! At any time! For as long as He desires! Our power is derivative—to the pagan, it comes from food and sleep, but the believer knows it comes from God. God's power, however, is not derivative—it's generative. Nothing feeds it, nothing drains it, and no amount of effort can exhaust it or even reduce it a single percentage. In fact, the mind-blowing reality is that it can't be attributed a percentage because it's infinite. With no denominator, there can be no fraction.

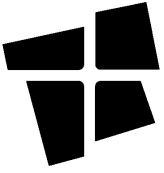
As you read this, you may have just woken from sleep or may be preparing for sleep. You may be refueling at a meal or grabbing a quick snack. You may have sat down for a rest after some work around the house or after a long day at the office. God requires *none* of those things. Psalm 121:4 reminds us that "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." That verse is often quoted as a reassurance that God is never unavailable or unaware, but it's an equal truth that His power never wanes or needs to be renewed.

Not only is the power of God infinite in its duration, but it's infinite in its ability as well. There is absolutely no limit to His power. While our existence is spent pressing against the limits of our power, His power knows no limit. Jesus states it clearly in Matthew 19:26: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." All things, everywhere. No object is too heavy, no issue is too difficult,

no dilemma too complex, and no task too great. God is fully and completely able to do all things.

The implications of this, of course, are staggering. God is able to produce speckled, spotted or striped livestock at His will. God is able to speak to men and women, both commanding their move and restraining it. God is able to guide you and me through difficult circumstances, avoiding the pitfalls that are everywhere around us. He's equally able to guide us into the pitfall, meet us there, and pull us back out again. There is nothing that we can possibly face that is even difficult for Him, let alone something that is beyond His ability. Think about your life circumstances right now. What situation seems impossible to you? What problem seems insurmountable? What relationship seems irreconcilable? As you think about those things, think also of His infinite ability.

The words of Psalm 46:10 make so much more sense in the light of His omnipotence: "Cease striving and know that I am God." (NASB)



These are the Days of our Lives...

Genesis 29-30

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most tired you can ever remember being?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 29-30

- How has Jesus been working around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Have you ever had a long delay in getting what you really wanted? How did that delay affect you?
- In what areas do you tend to have more of a temporary perspective when you should have more of an eternal perspective?
- Can you think of a time in your life when it seemed that God wasn't present but, looking back, you can see His working?
- Why does God sometimes seem to make life difficult for us? How do you tend to respond to that?
- In what practical ways can we help one another focus beyond temporary circumstance on God's eternal plan?

World: Continue to pray God's blessing in the life of the person you've identified over the course of the last few weeks. Divide your group into a few smaller groups, and talk about specific ways that you might, as a group, be a part of bringing God's blessing into the life of that person over the next week. Remember, it's always good to engage others from the group as you reach out to those around you. Are there opportunities for personal connections to be made between those you're praying for and other group members? Be creative and ask God to show you how you've been blessed in order that you might be a blessing to others!

Returning Home

Genesis 31:1 – 32:21

Two confrontations with men Jacob feared, Laban and Esau, show the profound effect guilt and shame have on our lives. When we live in shame, we are unable to stand boldly, even when we are assured that God is with us. Unless our guilt is covered and our shame removed, we will always be captive to our past sin. However, because One has come who can remove our guilt and shame, we can truly be free.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 31:1—32:21, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

A Great Prayer

For some, prayer is learned through a steady process of discipleship, of modeling, and of teaching in a safe and somewhat sterile environment. However, that's not the case for most. For the vast majority of us, prayer and reliance on God is something that we only understand in theory until real crisis hits. When we've planned all we can, done all we're able, and come to the end of ourselves, it's then that reliance on God through prayer moves from theory to a necessary reality.

Up to this point in the life of Jacob, Genesis has recorded him encountering God, speaking of God, and even worshiping God to some degree. However, it's not until Genesis 32, six chapters and almost 100 years into the record of his life, that we hear him pray. However, in his defense, it's a great prayer that he prays—one that is a model for us in many ways.

Read Genesis 32:1-12.

- What is the circumstance that has led to Jacob's prayer? What emotions might he be feeling at this point?

- Look at vs. 9. What two acknowledgements did Jacob make about God?

- In vs. 10, Jacob makes two key statements about who he is in comparison to God—one about his heart and one about his possessions. What is he saying?

It's not until two-thirds of the way through the prayer that Jacob asks God for anything and, when he does, it's a great model for us.

- Looking back at vs. 9-10, what preceded the request that Jacob made?

- As you read vs. 11, what characteristics do you notice in his request?

There are many significant things about this single verse, but here are a few of note: (1) Jacob is clear and concise: "Please save me." (2) Jacob is completely honest: "...for I fear him." (3) For the first time, Jacob isn't only concerned with himself, but is learning responsibility as the leader of his family: "...the mothers with the children." These are huge steps forward for Jacob!

- What does Jacob do at the end of his prayer, in vs. 12?

This is a great model for us in prayer—remembering who God is and His past promises, acknowledging our sinfulness and God's provision for us, making clear requests that aren't simply self-serving but which engage the responsibility for the world around us that God has given to us, and seeing those requests as grounded in the promises of the Word of God. It may have taken crisis for Jacob to pray, but when he finally got there, he prayed a truly great prayer!

Application:

- What aspect do you struggle most with in prayer? How can you grow in that area?

Planning in the Presence of God

Understanding exactly what's happening at the beginning of Genesis 32 is very difficult. Theologians and commentators are divided in their analysis of the heart of Jacob as he prepares to encounter Esau. Part of our difficulty is our lack of connection with the supernatural. From classics like "Highway to Heaven" and "Touched by an Angel" to the (sad) modern day phenomenon of the I've-been-to-heaven-and-came-back-to-tell-you-about-it books and movies, encounters with the supernatural stop us in our tracks. However, it seems that wasn't the case for Jacob.

Read Genesis 32:1-4.

- What is Jacob's response to an encounter with the "angels of God?"

- Does he seem to engage their presence at all or does he just go about his own business?

To our modern Western eyes and ears, a meeting with the angels of God seems to be a bigger deal than either Jacob or Moses (the writer of Genesis) makes it out to be. However, looking back at Jacob's life might give us a clue as to why. Read Genesis 28:10-22.

- Now, read Genesis 29:1. Coming off this encounter with God, what does Jacob do?

- Does Jacob ask for any direction from the Lord?

- Now look carefully at the rest of the passage in Genesis 32:1-21. Even acknowledging the great prayer in vs. 9-12, does Jacob ask God for any direction in this passage?

- What does Jacob do, both in vs. 3-8 and again in vs. 13-21?

What we can't know, because it's not recorded for us, is the state of Jacob's heart. The Scripture is clear that planning is an important part of wisdom. In fact, Jacob's son, Joseph, would later use a detailed planning process in Egypt that would allow the entire region to survive a severe famine. (Genesis 41) Planning that's driven by faith in God is commendable. However, "faith" that is in word only and then supplanted by our own efforts is far from commendable—and much more common in our own lives.

Application:

- We can't know Jacob's heart, but we can know our own. Are there areas where you profess faith but, in actuality, you are relying on your own strength?

- What's an area where you know you've encountered God and, instead of hurrying on with life, you need to dwell on it a bit more?

Divine Mercy

The concept of mercy is one that we understand, but we often hesitate to dwell on our need for it. The promise of God is that we who trust in the righteousness of Jesus will one day stand spotless before Him in heaven for eternity. But how?

Did we not by our sins take part in that unholy rebellion which rashly sought to dethrone the glorious King of creation? And did we not in times past walk according to the evil prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience? And did we not all at once live in the lusts of our flesh? And were we not by nature the children of wrath, even as others? Be we who were one time enemies and alienated in our minds through wicked works shall then see God face to face and His name shall be on our foreheads. We who earned banishment shall enjoy communion; we who deserve the pains of hell shall know the bliss of heaven.⁵⁴

We would be hard-pressed to find a better description of mercy. In referencing the Ephesians 2 passage, Tozer makes it abundantly clear that there is nothing in us that merits the mercy of God, yet it is freely given to us. The just consequence of our sin is eternal separation from God. However, in eternally keeping with divine justice through the judgment of Jesus on the cross, God offers us His divine mercy.

Mercy, however, isn't simply a response to our state as sorry sinners. Mercy is an attribute of God, wholly a part of His Divine being. "If we could remember that the divine mercy is not a temporary mood but an attribute of God's eternal being, we would no longer fear that it will someday cease to be."⁵⁵ The mercy of God doesn't simply show up because we have a need for it—if there were no guilt in the world and no suffering due to sin, the mercy of God would still be as fully present in His being.

In the same way, like each of His attributes, His mercy is as eternal as He Himself is. The mercy of God can no more be exhausted than could His power, His justice, His wisdom, or His very presence. "Mercy never began to be, but from eternity was... It will never be more since it is itself infinite; and it will never be less because the

⁵⁴ A.W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA, 1961.), pg. 90.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 91.

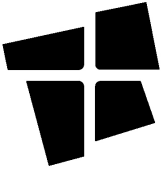
infinite cannot suffer diminution. Forever His mercy stands, a boundless, overwhelming immensity of divine pity and compassion.”⁵⁶

How, then, do we respond to such infinite mercy? I would suggest at least two postures: confidence and joy.

Confidence, not arrogance, should mark our posture before God. Arrogance infers that there’s something in us that is somehow generating mercy; confidence recognizes that mercy is solely found in God. However, the infinite nature of mercy means that as we come into God’s presence recognizing our sin, we need not wonder whether the mercy of God is sufficient. When we cry with the Church of the ages: “*Kyrie eleison! Lord have mercy!*” we need not do so with plaintive despair, but with confidence in knowing that the mercy of God has already been granted to overflowing.

The result of this reality, then, is joy. Because we did nothing to earn mercy, we can do nothing to un-earn it. Despite all evidence to the contrary within our hearts and lives, God has chosen to accept us at His own cost. It’s our pleasure, then, to pass that mercy on to those around us. The world around us doesn’t deserve our mercy. But then, neither did we deserve God’s. Therefore, we can engage the world with joy—not blindly, but with our eyes open to the mercy that we’ve received and have the opportunity to pass on to the rest of the world. Do joy and confidence mark your life because of the mercy of God?

⁵⁶ Ibid.



Returning Home

Genesis 31:1 – 32:21

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What are your plans for Christmas Eve? Christmas Day?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 31:1 – 32:21

- Where have you seen God this week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Rate your prayer life on a scale of 1-10. What aspect of prayer is the most difficult for you?
- Was there a time you found your prayer life to be stronger than today? If so, why was that?
- How do guilt and shame affect the way you interact with people in your life?
- Are there areas in which you profess faith but you rely almost wholly on your own strength?
- How does the mercy of God, shown in Jesus, change the way you relate to God? To this group? How about to the world around you?

World: As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we also remember that He was born to die, bearing our guilt and shame on the cross. Because He has born it fully, we no longer need remain in it. Does this message generate confidence and joy in you that can be seen in the world around you? Take a few minutes to really meditate on these truths as a group, and then talk about how our response to God might be visible to the world around us. Update one another on the specific person(s) you've been praying for, and ask God to allow your faith to be seen by those people as well as others this week.

Wrestling

Genesis 32:22 – 33:20

God's timing is always perfect. As Jacob travels back to Canaan, fearful of the meeting with Esau and unable to return to Laban, God chooses that moment to truly transform this stubborn, self-reliant man. From dusk until dawn, God wrestles with Jacob, and the result is a new man, made weaker in body but transformed in spirit. God calls each of us to submit fully to His Lordship. The question is whether we will gladly submit or if it will require a wrestling match.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 32:22 – 33:20, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

Proactive God

In C.S. Lewis' great fictional work, The Chronicles of Narnia, he needed to choose an animal that would represent God. He developed a character named Aslan, a mighty lion, full of majesty and power but also of gentleness and grace. While Aslan regularly interacts with the children and the other animals, Lewis goes to great pains to have us understand: This lion is not tame. As Mrs. Beaver says early in the story: "He's not safe, but he's good."

In Genesis 32, Jacob is alone, quietly preparing for the confrontation with his brother the next day. In that quiet moment, the unexpected happened. Read Genesis 32:22-24.

- Who seems to be the aggressor in this confrontation?

- Look at Genesis 18:1. According to the author, who is the one that initiates that connection?

It's important for us to understand "that the man (Jesus) is said to have wrestled 'with Jacob' and not that Jacob wrestled with the man, which would be the wrong way around. It is not that Jacob was seeking God so earnestly that when God, as it were, got close to him, he grappled with him and refused to let him go until he blessed him."⁵⁷ Based on the text, it's not at all a stretch to say that God "attacked" Jacob! God was the aggressor, and Jacob was forced onto the defensive.

The question we are left with is: Why? Why did Jesus appear to wrestle with Jacob? If this isn't a story about Jacob wrestling a blessing from God, what, then is God seeking to wrestle from Jacob?

⁵⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis, Volume 2: A New Beginning*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2nd Edition, 1998), pg. 817.

- Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. What is Paul telling the Corinthians? How does that relate to Jacob?

A.W. Pink helps clarify for us: “The best of the commentators are agreed—[Jesus was wrestling with Jacob] to reduce him to a sense of his nothingness, to cause him to see what a poor, helpless and worthless creature he was; it was to teach us through him the all important lesson that in recognized weakness lies our strength.”⁵⁸

So Jesus wrestled with Jacob to show him his weakness. He also was teaching Jacob something that Paul would explain to Roman believers many years later:

- Read Romans 5:6-11. Who is proactive in providing us a pathway to connection with God?

- Read Ephesians 2:8. From where does Paul say that we get the faith to believe?

Like with Jacob, God has proactively come our way. Like Jacob, we need to learn our real strength comes from God, and it can only be seen when we're weak.

Application:

- Have you ever been overpowered by the grace of God? Are there areas of “strength” in your life that need to be submitted to God?

⁵⁸ A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, (Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, IL, 1922.), Volume II, pg. 88.

Jacob and Saul

The record of Jacob's life is a remarkable one, marked in many ways by his encounter with Jesus that on a lonely night at Peniel. From the dawn of that morning onward, Jacob was no longer Jacob, but Israel. He was a brand new man.

- Based on what you've read so far, what are some words that you would use to characterize Jacob's life prior to this experience?

Acts 9 records another instance of dramatic transformation. While we don't have the extensive back story, we have enough to understand the kind of man Saul of Tarsus was before he encountered Jesus.

- Read Acts 7:58, 9:1-2, Philippians 4:3-6. Based on these passages, how would you describe Saul's life prior to encountering Jesus?

The parallels between the two stories are significant. Look at the following pairs of passages and try to find the parallel:

- Genesis 32:24b and Acts 9:3-4

- Genesis 32:29a and Acts 9:5a

- Genesis 32:25 and Acts 9:8-9

- Genesis 28:13-15 and Acts 9:15

- Genesis 32:28 and Acts 9:17, 13:9

While some parallels are easier to see than others, the connections are remarkable. In both cases, God comes to someone whose character should have completely disqualified him from being used by God. However, both men were chosen by God and, instead of changing plans (which God never does!), He changed the men so that they would become the kind of men He desired to use. In the end, both men had new names that represented their new character.

The question that remains for us is clear: Have we encountered God like this? What will it take for us to be transformed in such a way that we can fulfill the plans that God has for us?

Application:

- Have you ever had an encounter with God where you felt like you were wrestling with Him?

El Elohe Israel, The God of Israel

Of all of the names for God spoken in the book of Genesis, this one is probably the least recognizable and the least used. However, when we understand the transformation that took place in Jacob/Israel, it may be the name that's the most applicable for us.

During last week's study, we looked at the prayer that Jacob prayed as he prepared to encounter Esau. (See pgs. 167-168, "A Great Prayer") Jacob opens his prayer as follows: "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good...'" (Genesis 32:9) What is notably missing from Jacob's address to God? He recognizes God to be the God of his grandfather and of his father, but he hasn't yet personalized it. Jacob recognizes that *Yahweh* is God, but that reality hasn't yet been internalized for him.

And then, in the dark of the night, when he was all alone, God wrestles with Jacob. He chooses to wrestle with Jacob at his level, not allowing Jacob to win. However, He doesn't dominate Jacob either which, with the final touch to Jacob's hip socket, shows that He easily could have done that. He meets Jacob where he is and allows Jacob to work through his strength until he realizes that he will never win.

How often does God do this for us? Rather than simply overpower us or issue commands that we must obey, He dignifies our wrestling by allowing us to work out what it means for us to follow after Him. He's not only willing to wrestle with us—it's His primary mode of operation.

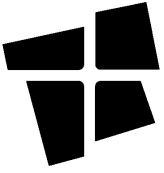
After the wrestling match, Jesus asks Jacob the same question that his father Isaac once asked him: "What is your name?" (Genesis 27:32, 32:27) This time, however, Jacob answers honestly, admitting who he truly is: Jacob, the one who deceives. *Jacob* (the deceiver, the supplanter, the conniving trickster) becomes *Israel* (one who wrestles with God). Not only is his name changed, but his life is dramatically transformed. He's encountered God, wrestled with Him, and lived to tell about it. He has learned that the one who will let him into, or keep him out of, the

Promised Land is not Esau, but God Himself. Not only is his name changed, but the blessing that he once deceived in order to get he has now received through an honest request—a blessing received not from his earthly father but from his heavenly Father.

However, as great as each of these is, it's possible that none of them are the most significant thing that happened that night. It will take another chapter before we'll have a window into the depth of Jacob's transformation. He encounters Esau, they are reconciled, and Jacob settles in the city of Shechem, where he worships the Lord. Genesis 33:20 simply says: "There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel." *God is the God of Israel.* Not the God of my grandfather. Not the God of my father. He is *my* God.

Many of us can come to God and claim to know the God of our parents or the God of our grandparents. Maybe He's the God of our friends. The God of our pastor. The God of our American culture. It's not that we don't recognize that *Yahweh*, the God of the Bible, is truly God—He's just not *our* God.

Is He your God, or does He still belong to someone else? Jacob's story shows us that, as we allow Him to wrestle with us, He can become our God too.



Wrestling

Genesis 32:22 – 33:20

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Do you have a New Year's resolution?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 32:22 – 33:20

- How has God been at work in your life through the holiday season?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Have you ever really wrestled with God over an area in your life?
- Are there areas of strength in your life that you struggle to submit to God?
- Has your relationship with God moved to the point where you would say that He is *your* God? Why or why not?
- As you look at the coming year, is there an area where you sense that God is calling you to really invest?
- As you think about this group in the coming year, what are your dreams for what we might become?

World: Only when we are truly transformed do we have a message for the world around us. Transformation brings joy, contentment, and peace with God that others can easily see in our lives. Therefore, when we are thinking of reaching out to the world around us, it begins with us asking honest questions about our own life with Jesus. Take a few minutes with a partner to talk about the evidence of Jesus in your life, and then pray specifically, either that God would transform areas of your life that don't yet reflect Him, or that He would allow others to see the transformation that He's already brought.

The Solid Rock (In the Midst of Chaos)

Genesis 34-35

The joyful homecoming is marred by a chaotic series of events—rape, deceit, murder, birth, death, and even incest. However, in the midst of the chaos, God calls Jacob to return to Bethel, the first place he truly met God. In preparation for this return, Jacob's family destroys their idols and purifies themselves. While the chaos swirls around him, Jacob is remarkably calm, as one who has learned to truly rely on God.

Inductive Bible Study

Read Genesis 34-35, using at least two different translations if possible.

Observation: Who is involved in the passage? Where does this happen? What details jump out to you as you read?

Interpretation: Why is this happening? What might the characters be feeling? In what way do the characters grow through this passage? What impact does this passage have on the lives of the characters involved? What does this show us about God?

Application: What does this mean for me? What character do I most identify with in this passage, and why? What does this passage show me about God, and what impact does that have on my life?

Action Step: Based on this passage, what's one thing that I should either start doing, stop doing, or change?

The Call to Purity

The final portion of Genesis where the explicit focus is on Jacob is puzzling, to say the least. By Genesis 36, Moses will shift focus to the sons of Jacob, particularly Joseph. Genesis 33 records the anticipated meeting between Jacob and Esau, the surprising reconciliation, and Jacob finally settling down, having returned to the Promised Land. The narrative seems set for Jacob to simply kick back and enjoy his sunset years. However, that's far from what happened.

Read Genesis 33:17-20.

- In what two places did Jacob settle after his reconciliation with Esau?

- Look at Genesis 31:13. To where did God call Jacob to return?

Shechem is only about a day's journey from Bethel, but was far more attractive to Jacob standing

attractively at the crossroads of trade. He was called to be a stranger and pilgrim; but while buying his own plot of land there (33:19) he could argue that it was within his promised borders. It was disobedience nonetheless, and his pious act of rearing an altar and claiming his new name of Israel could not disguise the fact.⁵⁹

This small act of disobedience, falling just short of what God had commanded, had grave consequences as recorded in the tragic chapter of Genesis 34. Following the heavy cost for his disobedience, God again responds in grace.

- What are the first words of Genesis 35?

- What is God calling Jacob to do?

⁵⁹ Derek Kidner, *Genesis, TOTC*, (IVP Academic, Downer's Grove, IL, 2nd edition 2008.), pg. 183.

With no sense of condemnation, God simply repeats the call that Jacob has failed to obey (to go to Bethel) and invites him to engage in real worship (make an altar) when his first attempt was actually in pretense. (33:20) Amazing grace!

- Read Genesis 35:2-4. What does Jacob call his family to do in response to God's gracious call?

Read Psalm 24:1-6.

- What name of God does David use in this psalm?

- In vs. 4, in what two ways is the one who has "clean hands and a pure heart" described?

- Go back and look at Genesis 27:35, 29:25, and 34:13. What common action was consistently associated with Jacob and those around him?

- Based on the Kidner quote above and the call of God to Jacob in Genesis 35:1, what activity described by David in Psalm 24 is Jacob doing in Genesis 33:20?

Not only is Jacob calling his household to purity; David is inviting us into the same work of repentance and cleansing.

Application:

- Is there an area of your life where you've partially obeyed the call of God, but not completely? How might you complete your obedience?

Consequences and Sovereignty

One of the earliest lessons in discipline that a toddler learns is that actions have consequences. Good actions typically breed good consequences. Bad actions... well, not so much. The Hindu and Buddhist concept of "karma" well captures this idea of actions bearing consequences. With karma, it is understood that each person's future circumstances and destiny are determined by the sum total of their past actions. Good actions, good destiny. Bad actions... not so much.

The Bible recognizes another source of destiny—the will and working of God. However, that doesn't mean that our lives are free from consequences for actions! It simply means that God is constantly working to accomplish His will. At times, He uses the natural consequences of our actions to accomplish that will and, at other times, He supercedes the natural consequences to bring about His intended consequence.

Read Genesis 35:9-15.

- Based on what you know of the life of Jacob, is this the natural consequence for his actions?

Jacob's life certainly didn't deserve the blessing of God. However, by grace, Jacob became Israel, and he was blessed nonetheless.

- Read Genesis 34:25-31. Which two brothers usurped their father's authority and enacted vengeance on the Shechemites?

- Now read Genesis 35:22. Which brother slept with his father's concubine?

Read Genesis 49:2-12.

- How does Jacob/Israel handle these transgressions within his blessings?

- Look at Genesis 49:10. What blessing does Jacob give to Judah, the fourth son in birth order?

- Read Revelation 5:5. How is the Messiah described?

Genesis 49:10 is considered to be the first prophecy that would declare that the Messiah would come through the line of Judah. Of course, Genesis 38 shows that Judah was far from righteous himself. The consequences of the actions of Reuben, Simeon and Levi caused them to miss the blessing of Jacob. Judah, by grace and the sovereignty of God, receives the blessing.

- Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13. Was David chosen by consequence or sovereignty?

It's certainly true that our actions have consequences. However, the grace and sovereignty of God is constantly at work around us. Thankfully, God does not treat us as our sins deserve, but shows compassion instead! (Psalm 103:8-14)

Application:

- Are there ways that God has intervened in your life to call you back to obedience and grace, despite what you deserved?

El Shaddai, God Almighty

The name of God that is used again and again from Genesis 12-35 is *El Shaddai*, the Almighty God. In fact, the story of the patriarchs that we know as the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is truly more of a story of the power and might of God. Despite our human perceptions, the focus is rarely on vessels of the promise or even the promises themselves, but over and over again, the focus is on the *God* of promise.

There is nothing that is impossible with God.

He is able to convert an idol worshiper into a man of faith who would be known as a friend of God.

He is able to take a man who effectively divorces his wife not once but twice and build them into a family that is cited as a model throughout the Scriptures.

He is able to utterly destroy entire cities, while graciously saving a few.

He is able to give a son to a 90-year old woman and her 100-year old husband.

He is able to provide a sacrifice in place of Isaac just before he is sacrificed.

He is able to provide a wife from the right family at the right time, through a long series of stipulations.

He is able to give twin sons to a seemingly barren woman.

He is able to form the most hard-headed and stubborn by His fierce grace.

He is able to call the most disobedient back into obedience.

He is able to break the power of sin.

He is able to forgive.

He is able to restore broken marriages.

He is able to change the hearts of wayward children.

He is able to break the power of addiction.

He is able to heal disease.

He is able to reconcile shattered friendships.

He is able to provide employment.

He is able to meet the most practical needs as well as the spiritual ones.

He is able to bring emotional stability.

He is able to speak confidence into the face of fear.

He is able to reach that friend or family member for whom your heart breaks.

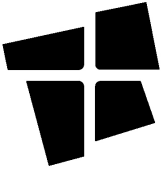
He is able to lift depression and calm anxiety.

He is able to give patience in the midst of trial and joy in the midst of suffering.

He is able to bring you into the presence of the eternal Father completely blameless, without a single fault.

He is able to give you Himself, eternally.

He is *El Shaddai*, God Almighty. Nothing is too hard for Him.



The Solid Rock (In the Midst of Chaos)

Genesis 34-35

Sermon Notes:

LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

Welcome one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the longest drive you've ever taken?"

Worship Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

Word: Genesis 34-35

- Where have you seen Jesus this week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Is it easy or hard for you to trust the grace of God? Why?
- Has there been, or is there now, an area of your life where you've obeyed partially but not completely?
- Why is partial obedience so tempting to us?
- Are there times that God has intervened in your life, despite your disobedience, and called you back into grace?
- Does anything in your life right now seem too hard for God?

World: Acts 17 tells us that God has determined the exact places and times that each of us live. Therefore, He has divinely placed you exactly where you are—within the network of relationships that you have. Why has He placed you there? What is He calling you to do in the world around you? Think about the current circumstances of your life, and determine one person that you believe God is calling you to speak to about your relationship with Him. Pray for boldness! Commit to having that conversation this week. Follow up with and encourage one another in those conversations!

Acknowledgements

By my rough count, this is the thirteenth writing project that I've had the privilege of completing over the past four and a half years as the Lead Pastor at York Alliance. I continue to marvel at how the Lord uses these projects to grow His church—both in our individual lives as disciples of Jesus, and as a community. To say the process of writing is a labor of love doesn't quite capture it; they can be all-consuming, incredibly laborious, even painful at times—but always glorious as well. If these studies can, in some way, continue to further our faith and develop our maturity as a body, they are well worth the hours and the pain.

Genesis is a fascinating book. The ancient narratives contain more gospel orientation that I was ever able to see before I began this in-depth study, and I pray the joy and nature of the gospel has shone out for each of you as you've studied as well. Throughout the last weeks and months, I've seen myself more often than I'd like to admit in the failings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I've also had to admit that my faith is far weaker than I'd hoped, and certainly far weaker than I find in the lives of these great men. However, as always, the Scriptures continue to do their work in reflecting to me my desperate need for a Savior. Therefore, greater than every acknowledgement or thank you I will make in a moment is my overwhelming gratitude for the mercy of God towards me displayed in Jesus. I am in desperate need, and will, literally, be eternally grateful.

This may be the thirteenth writing project, but the amount of work from so many places that goes into them doesn't seem to diminish much over time. I continue to thank our Elder team and Governing Board for allowing the margin for the bulk of this writing to take place this summer, and each summer over the past several years. My hope is that your grace bears fruit that will far outweigh the sacrifice. Our staff does an incredible job of not only keeping things afloat, but moving us forward during my periods of writing. A huge thanks to Nancy, Re, and Mary Beth for keeping the details together, and to Mike and Tim for leading so well in my place. Thanks to Don Weidemann for so capably and wonderfully stepping into the pulpit while I was writing. Chris, I can't say thank you enough for your ability to step into cover design on this project—your creativity and eye for beauty has made the outside of this book look far better than I could ever hope the inside might achieve. And a *huge* thank you to Tim and Kimberly, my incredible editors. Your attention to detail amazes me!

My wonderful family always bears the weight of the process far more than anyone else sees, and I want to thank them each for their grace through the entire process. The hours shut in the office staring at a computer are one thing; the weeks and weeks of preoccupation is another. Thank you for the grace upon grace that you offer, and thanks for celebrating with me each time when it's all over! Tia, Ethan, Josiah, and Micah, you guys are the best and I love you more than I can say. Reading of Abraham and Isaac while thinking of each of you made me shed more tears that you can possibly know. Amanda, thank you doesn't seem to even touch the reality of all you do to help these projects come into existence. In many ways, you're the co-author of each study guide and book. I continue to pray that we would always walk in grace and faith like Abraham and Sarah.

As always, the final thank you goes to a series of people that most of us will never meet but that we can get to know through the art they produce—the artists whose music became the soundtrack for this project. Two new artists that really captured me throughout the writing process are Little Chief and Son of Laughter. Both are fabulous and worth a listen! I was thrilled the album of Rich Mullins' cover songs inspired by the new Ragamuffin movie came out this summer, and the Jars of Clay cover of "Land of my Sojourn" was never far from my head. In addition to those, in no particular order: Steve Moakler, Liz Vice, Audrey Assad, The Brilliance, The Gray Havens, Daniel Ellsworth & The Great Lakes, The Followers, Green River Ordinance, Grace and Tony, Shovels & Rope, and All Sons and Daughters. Plus a few others I'm sure... it's a long book.

My prayer for this study is that we would be people of faith who get to know, trust, and experience God Himself, not simply His promises. If you're reading this at the end of the study, I pray that has been your experience. If you're reading out of order, go back to the beginning and dig in—you will never regret carving out the time to get to know the God of the promises.

Grace and peace,

Brian Kannel

August 23, 2014

Genesis is a book of beginnings.

In Genesis 1, we find a world that is formless and void. In Genesis 12, we find a people whose understanding of God is much the same. In the midst of this pagan, idolatrous world, God calls Abram, the Babylonian moon worshiper, to follow Him. Abram's steps of faith become the canvas on which God declares His character, majesty, and glory. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah, and from them comes Isaac, the son of the promise and precursor to Jesus Himself. From Isaac comes Jacob, both the deceiver and the chosen one. Throughout the rest of history, to this very day, one of the primary designations of God contains these great names: He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The God of Promise is, on the surface, a study of the lives of these great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, it's really much more of a study of God Himself. Throughout the tragedy and drama of these men's lives we see great faith as well as epic failures. We see righteousness and sin standing together. We see incredible courage and controlling fear. In short, we see ourselves. And behind it all, we see the unwavering faithfulness of God. For all that changes in the lives of these great men, that one thing always remains the same.

