

**DAILY BIBLE
READING:
*GENESIS***

Chuck Lowe

GENESIS

What God said to them...

What God is saying to us...

© Chuck Lowe

Layout design: Melissa Yang and Grace Zhao

Cover Photo: [NASA Earth Observatory/Joshua Stevens](#)

The satellite photo captures the Western hemisphere under four simultaneous cyclones, encapsulating the theme of Genesis 1-11: the beauty and fallenness of the world and its inhabitants.

Verse Photo: [Calwaen Liew on Unsplash](#)

This photo recalls the first of God's three covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants, that he would give them as many descendants as there are stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4). The progressive fulfillment of that promise in the face of all obstacles is the theme of Genesis 12-50.

DAY 1

THE BEGINNING OF AN EPIC STORY

Genesis 1-50 Overview

The name 'Genesis' comes from its opening words in the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint, or LXX): "In the beginning..." The title accurately captures the content of the book:

- the beginning of the world and humanity (chapters 1-11);
- the beginning of Israel (chapters 12-50).

At the same time, Genesis begins an even bigger storyline, one that runs all the way through to the end of the Bible and the end of time.

What God said to them. As narrative, Genesis shares several features characteristic of the genre. Among them, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This may seem too obvious to need stating, but it provides a helpful guide to identifying the main point of a passage: comparing the beginning and end often reveals shared themes that can then be traced through the entire work.

In Genesis 1, the first episode climaxes in the divine blessing on humankind: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the

earth [Hebrew: *aretz*] and subdue it” (1:28). The book closes with Jacob offering a deathbed blessing on his twelve sons. First, he reminds them of his own blessing from God: “I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers... I will give this land [*aretz*] as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you” (48:4). Then he extends that dual promise to his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph: “May they increase greatly on the earth [*aretz*]” (48:16). The similarity between beginning and end suggests that the storyline of Genesis will focus on these two themes: population growth and geographical distribution.

The comparison also highlights two differences between beginning and end. In Genesis 1, the focus is on the entire world population; by chapter 48, the spotlight narrows to population growth within Israel. Additionally, in the creation story, the Hebrew word *aretz* signifies the entire earth; by the deathbed blessing, it means the land of Canaan. Something has happened between beginning and end that narrows both facets of the theme.

The middle confirms the two-part thematic focus, as well as its narrowing. In Genesis 6, humankind reproduces, but so does evil, so God decides to drown nearly all terrestrial life. Once the waters recede, he renews the original creation blessing on the few survivors: “Be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it” (9:7 cf. 9:1). Yet again, as population increases, so does rebellion. Humanity refuses to disperse, building instead an enormous city and pretentious tower, with the express purpose to

avoid being “scattered over the face of the whole earth” (11:4). So God muddled their communication and “scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (11:8-9).

With the failure of these two worldwide efforts, God shifts strategy, from the entirety of humanity throughout the breadth of the earth, to a single family within the land of Canaan. Still, the dual theme continues: God promises Abraham innumerable descendants and the entire land of Canaan (12:1-3; 13:14-17; 17:6-8). In the next generation, he extends the promises to Isaac (21:12; 22:17-18). Isaac, in turn, passes on the blessing to his son Jacob (28:34 cf. 35:11-12). By the end of Genesis, Abraham’s great-grandsons number twelve: a modest increase, but the patriarchs of what will become the nation Israel. At the time, they find themselves in Egypt, though with expectation of eventually returning to Canaan (48:4,16,21).

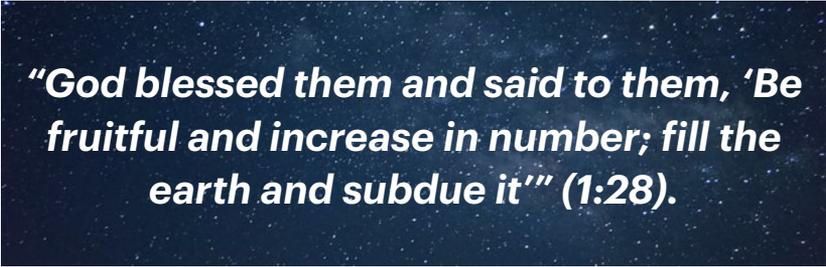
So the plotline of Genesis is: the progressive – yet partial – fulfillment of the two-fold divine blessing, beginning with the entirety of humanity spreading throughout the world (chapters 1-11), then narrowing to the descendants of Abraham settling in the land of Canaan (chapters 12-50).

This is an aerial map of key landmarks. Subsequent readings will fill in the detail, along with a third core element to the plotline. (Hint: God does not turn his back on the rest of the world forever.) For the moment, this provides sufficient direction to begin the journey.



What God is saying to us. The first lesson to draw from Genesis is a corrective. We tend to apply the Bible to our personal lives and moral conduct (sin to confess, promise to claim, etc.). Genesis speaks to how individuals live, but it also speaks to God’s work in human history, among the nations of the world.

Fortunately, in this instance, common sense prevents most Christians from supposing that Genesis promises each of us many children, and a home with land. Or that it calls us to conceive many children, and live in the countryside. Still, common sense has more stable footing when coupled with a methodology broad enough to guide wherever Scripture leads, and accurate enough to avoid wrong directions.

A dark blue rectangular box with a background of a starry night sky. The text is centered within the box.

“God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (1:28).

DAY 2

WHY THE WORD IS THE WAY IT IS, AND HOW GOD TRIED TO FIX IT

Genesis 1-11 Overview

The sun that kisses tropical beaches scorches human skin. Fossil fuels power our conveniences and pollute our environment. Youth combines energy with impulsiveness; age brings wisdom and frailty. Romance launches us to the pinnacle of joy, and careens us down the abyss of despair. Even relationship with God swings between the extremes of glorious ecstasy and dark night of the soul, separated by lengthy seasons of boring routine.

This is the symptom with which Scripture begins its analysis: our world is bipolar. Or worse: life is a corrupted amalgam, where joy is mixed with sorrow, more often than despair is moderated by hope.

Why? And what can be done about it?

Genesis 1-11 recounts the origin of the condition, and God's first attempt to cure it. An overview of these chapters provides the context for daily readings on the individual passages.

What God said to them. Chapters 1-11 develop a single theme, in two parts. Each part develops parallel motifs in the same order:

	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Event</i>
	1-5	Creation and rebellion
A	1-2a	God creates the world and all living things.
B	2b	God blesses Adam and Eve with life in Eden.
C	3	Adam and Eve sin; God judges, but does not destroy.
D	4	Humanity devolves from bad to worse.
E	5	Fast forward: ten generations from Adam to Noah.
	6-11	Destruction, recreation and rebellion
A'	6-7	God destroys terrestrial life with a flood.
B'	8-9a	God repopulates animal and human life.
C'	9b	Ham sins; God judges, but does not destroy.
D'	10-11a	Humanity devolves from bad to worse.
E'	11b	Fast forward: ten generations from Noah to Abraham.

The structure of Genesis 1-11 points to its message. In the first cycle, the sovereign God creates and blesses the world: this accounts for its goodness (A,B). Humanity disobeys him, corrupting the world, and coming under his judgment: this accounts for the misery (C,D). God waits patiently, to no avail: with only one exception, humankind never changes, never even repents (E).

Instead, sin festers and rots. God regrets ever having created humankind, and resolves to start over with the one righteous man of his generation. He drowns all terrestrial life, and then blesses the few survivors (A',B'). But even this re-creation does not remain pristine for a single generation: first, the righteous Noah and his family sin; then, as

humanity multiplies, they unite against God (C', D'). Again he waits patiently, to no avail (E').

God cannot destroy the world and start over yet again: he has given his word. Besides, after two failures, there is no reason to suppose that a third creation would succeed. Yet the parallelism between these two episodes implies that God will not just give up. What will he try next? The answer awaits chapter 12.



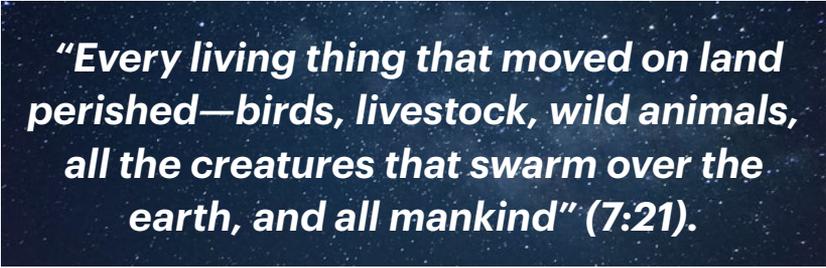
What God is saying to us. It would be easy – but mistaken – to suppose that this passage applies directly to us: that we, like the characters of Genesis 1-11, are recipients of divine blessing and prone to rebellion, with the caveat that we escape divine judgment by the death of Christ for our sin. Such a parallel is wrong both in method and in substance.

With regard to method, Genesis 1-11 is predominately salvation-historical, so any contemporary parallel should be, as well. That is, the primary parallel is not between those miscreants and ourselves, but between the ancient flood and the final judgment. Jesus invokes the flood as a paradigm for an end-of-time destruction, that will similarly catch the wicked by surprise, and destroy them (Matthew 24:36-41).

In substance, Jesus warns his disciples against any parallel with the wicked, for if they repeat the same behaviors, they too will be destroyed. According to Jesus, we do not escape

judgment merely by appealing to his death for our sin; we must also diligently serve him. Since we cannot know the time set for the final judgment, we must remain ready at all times, faithfully fulfilling the responsibilities he gives us. Those who comply will reap a reward when he returns. This is not salvation by works. Those who profess to be disciples but do not serve him are hypocrites, and will suffer eternal judgment. At the end of time, as in Noah's time, the disobedient are condemned (Matthew 24:42-51).

Pastorally, the threatened consequences are so severe that we may want to couple this warning with some of Jesus' comforting reassurances. At the same time, his teaching here is both clear and explicit, so we do well not to discount it in favor of those reassurances.



“Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind” (7:21).

DAY 3

THE ONE TRUE GOD CREATES ALL THINGS GOOD

Genesis 1:1-2:3

With the rise of modern science, our most pressing questions often concern the harmonization of Genesis 1-2 with scientific conclusions regarding the origins of the universe and humankind. While this is a legitimate issue, it is not one that the book of Genesis originally addressed. Instead of molding the biblical text to answer our questions, we consider the questions it was addressing in its own time, and the answers it provides.

What God said to them. Two features of the creation account are important to interpretation: its artistry and its cultural context. First, its artistry. In well-crafted literary works, form matches content. So it is natural that in recounting the origins of creation, routine language does not suffice.

One facet of this artistry is the structure of the passage. A brief introduction (1:2) characterizes earth as ‘formless’ and ‘empty’. The first three acts of creation supply form; the next three fill the void:

a	1:3-5	Day 1 creates light and darkness.
b	1:6-8	Day 2 divides sky from sea.

c	1:9-13	Day 3 differentiates land from sea.
a'	1:14-19	Day 4 fills the light and darkness with sun and moon.
b'	1:20-23	Day 5 fills the sky with fowl, and the sea with fish.
c'	1:24-31	Day 6 fills the land with animals and humans.

The seventh day (2:1-4) concludes the account, repeating the key terms of 1:1 in reverse order; literally:

- *Day 1: "Created / God / the heavens and the earth" (1:1);*
- *Day 7: "The heavens and the earth / God / created" (2:4).*

God brings structure to unstructured, and fills the void.

Another facet of this artistry is recurring vocabulary and themes. With minor variation, each day uses the same terms in the same order: (a) 'And God said', followed by (b) a creation command, (c) the item springs into being, (d) God approves ("And God saw that it was good"), culminating with (e) a time record: "And there was evening, and there was morning – the nth day." The content points to the central theme of this chapter, the power and excellence of this God. His power: he speaks the entire world into existence, solely by command. His excellence: all that he does, he does well.

A second feature that guides interpretation of this passage is its cultural context. Creation stories were common among ancient Near Eastern cultures. While the stories

differ from each other in both substance and detail, they share similar features in distinction from the biblical narrative. Generally they portray creation as the result of a cosmic battle between competing deities. The conflict is less between good and evil, than between stronger and weaker. Through titanic struggle, the forces of order triumph over the powers of chaos.

Genesis 1 does not cite any of these stories, but challenges the sort of ideas common among them. There is only one God, maker of heaven and earth. He works alone, without consort or colleague, competitor or opponent. The sun and moon are not divine; they are his handiwork. He, not the stars, controls human destiny. Formidable sea creatures are not rival deities or fearsome demons; they are mere creatures under his control.

This God creates all things out of nothing; he does not merely reshape preexisting matter. He speaks and creation springs into being, without delay or exertion. He sets boundaries between sky and sea, between sea and land. All that this God does, turns out well and good, neither flawed, nor capricious, nor amoral.



What God is saying to us. Given the biblical claim that God both created and rules the world, then we honor him by exploring how he did so. We need not fear the validated conclusions of science, but instead, encourage biblical theologians and Christian scientists to work together to

uncover the processes and means that God used in creating the world.

Today, though, as when Genesis was first composed, sentiments against Christianity derive less from science than from pluralism and relativism. Contemporary culture pressures us less to prove that our God is real and creator of the world, than to repudiate exclusive claims as inherently arrogant and offensive. Yet God's uniqueness is the starting point of Scripture. To compromise this point would deny God's central claim. Instead, this passage summons us to worship God for his creative power and excellence.

Given the uniqueness of God, it is notable that the earliest Christians included Christ as agent of creation: "There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came... and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came..." (1 Corinthians 8:6). We worship Father and Son for their power and excellence in creation.



"And God said, 'Let there be...' and there was..." (1:3 cf. 1:6-7,9,11,14-15,20-21,24).

DAY 4

HUMANKIND: GOD'S VICEROY ON EARTH

Genesis 1:26-31

Yesterday we considered the entirety of 1:1-2:3, focusing on what it teaches about God. Today we take a second look at verses that explain humankind's identity and role. In short, humankind functions like a viceroy from the era of colonial empires: an authorized representative who rules over a local territory and its subjects on behalf of a distant monarch.

What God said to them. The first paragraph is artistically structured. In verse 26, God proposes: (a) to make mankind in his own image and likeness; and, (b) to assign him to rule over the other living creatures. In verse 27 he does the former; in verse 28, the latter. Both 'image' and 'rule' warrant further consideration.

The text provides two clues to the meaning of 'image'. The concept is connected with deity: "Let us make mankind in our image." Images of gods were widespread among the surrounding religions, and forbidden by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4-6). It is not carved figurines which physically represent the invisible God; it is human beings. This is an extraordinary affirmation of human prestige.

The concept of image is also connected with authority, “so that they may rule” (1:26). In ancient Near Eastern cultures, it was typically the king who represented the patron deity of a nation; he was the ‘son of God’, that is, the human embodiment of deity. Genesis 1 democratizes this role. No single political figure represents God in this world; all humanity does, in our collective function as ruler over creation. This is an extraordinary affirmation of human equality and authority.

So it is not idols which represent God, but human beings. Not just a single ruler, but all humanity (notably for a male-dominated culture, both males and females, 1:27). The biblical text implicitly rebukes the idolatry characteristic of polytheism and animism, as well as the sociopolitical and gender inequities of ancient Near Eastern cultures. At the same time, its statements are more positive than negative. Its rejection of the surrounding religious, political, and social practices is implicit. Its explicit teaching affirms the dignity and status of humanity.

In addition to establishing human dignity and status, God blesses humanity with fertility and territory: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth” (1:28). This is the same blessing as pronounced earlier on the animals (1:22), and later on Noah (9:1,7), and the patriarchs (17:2,6,20; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:4). God also blesses humankind with a variety and abundance of food: the right to eat from every plant and fruit tree (1:29). This is another implicit contrast with ancient Near Eastern creation narratives. For them, humans were typically created as an afterthought, to

provide food for the gods and to do their chores. Here, humans are the pinnacle of creation, and God graciously provides for them, not they for him.



What God is saying to us. Today the challenge is to live out the same commission in changed circumstances.

The commission persists: as viceroy for God, humankind is imbued with dignity and status. This has implications for human rights on a socio-political level, relativizing socio-economic, ethnic and racial distinctions. It also holds implications for how we treat one another individually.

Circumstances, however, have changed dramatically. The earth groans under the weight of an increasing population, so the mandate to ‘be fruitful and increase in number’ is arguably fulfilled. In the first days, the human role was predominately reproduction and exploration. Now, after centuries of abuse, our primary role is necessarily restoration and preservation.

God’s benevolent reign over his world sets the standard for our role. The mandate to ‘rule’ and ‘subdue’ has often been invoked to condone the exploitation of nature. But Genesis allows for none of this. We rule as his image and in his image, i.e., in his place and as he does.

As ruler, God nurtures us with food and protection; as viceroy, we are to do the same for the rest of creation. As

creator, he brought structure and substance to a formless void; as viceroy, we are charged with bringing order and productivity within the natural world and its resources.

This point reappears in Genesis 2:15, as God sets Adam over the Garden of Eden: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” Not to pillage and plunder, but to work and to care. We rule on his behalf, nurturing the creation, as he nurtures both it and us.

Given the challenge of restoring nature to a healthy state, we find encouragement in the promise that God will one day intervene, in a glorious recreation of heaven and earth (Revelation 21-22).



***“God created mankind in his own image”
(1:27).***

DAY 5

LIFE AS GOD INTENDED

Genesis 2:4-25

This passage presents a second creation narrative. The preceding account described the origins of the entire universe, treating the creation of man and woman only briefly. This second report elaborates the latter.

What God said to them. This passage develops in two movements. In verses 4-17, God creates Adam and places him in an idyllic garden. Then, verses 18-24 culminates in God creating a suitable helper from, and for, Adam. The man-woman pairing is set within a broader network of relationships. In essence, the passage sketches the parameters of the good life in terms of four relationships.

God: The terminology for God in this chapter is distinctive. Chapter 1 used the term 'Elohim', signifying his power over all the world. The Old Testament tends to use 'Yahweh' when referring to God's special covenant relationship with Israel. Here – a full twenty times in chapters 2-3, and rarely elsewhere in Scripture – the text combines both titles, Yahweh Elohim. The combined title affirms that Yahweh is not just patron deity of Israel, but creator of all the whole earth, including all humans.

Nature: Adam is a combination of mundane and glorious. He is made from the soil; in Hebrew, the name 'Adam' is a

homonym of 'soil'. Yet he is spiritual, given life by the breath of God. God provides him a special place to live, Eden, a homonym of 'pleasure'. Its garden supplies him with all that he needs, both aesthetically ('pleasing to the eye') and nutritionally ('good for food') (verse 9). In the center of the garden are two special trees: one provides immortality; the other, moral judgment (verses 16-17). Adam is denied access to both, because humans are to depend directly on God for life and for moral guidance.

Work: While Eden is idyllic, it is not a tropical beach reserved for sun-bathing. Humans play an essential role, 'working' the garden, and 'caring for' it. In Numbers, the same two words will be used of the Levites' service in the tabernacle. As Adam 'works' in the garden, the Levites 'work' in the tabernacle; as he 'cares for' the garden, they 'care for' the sanctuary (Num 3:7,8; cf. 1:53; 4:23-24; 18:3-8). His work in the garden – like their ministry in the tabernacle – is in service of God. Both labors are sacred.

Marriage: This passage portrays marriage as an essential aspect of a good life. Not even the presence of God, in an idyllic environment, with ample food and meaningful labor, are sufficient. Seven times in Genesis 1, God looked upon his creative efforts and declared, "It is good." But when he sees that man is alone, he declares for the first time: "It is not good."

The creation of Adam takes up a single verse (verse 7); the creation of the woman occupies seven verses (verses 18-24). Previously God named cosmic bodies. Now Adam,

as the image of God, names the birds and animals. None is a suitable partner for him, so God resorts to a special creation. The first recorded words from Adam are a paean in praise of this new creature, focusing on their mutuality:

- bone from my bones / flesh from my flesh;
- she shall be called 'woman' / for she was taken out of 'man' (verse 23).

In Hebrew, as in English, 'woman' (*ishshah*) is a homonym of 'man' (*ish*).

This new relationship supersedes all prior commitments, trumping even bonds with family of origin. Man and woman leave their parents in order to become one flesh. They are to 'hold fast' to one another, language used later of the covenant bond between Israel and God (cf. Deuteronomy 10:20; 11:22). Adam's life is not good without Eve; he is complete with her.

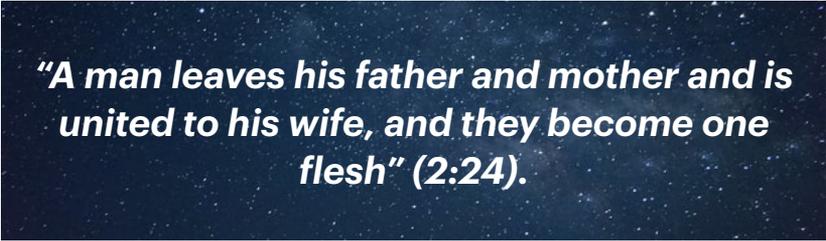


What God is saying to us. Genesis 2 explains our deepest longings. By God's design, a good life entails relationship with him, an idyllic environment, productive work, and marital intimacy. This explains why we innately seek such connections: these longings are encoded in human DNA.

Of course, we never actually experience these blessings to the degree that Genesis 2 portrays. (Genesis 3 will explain why not.) Still, to the extent that we instinctively pursue

these relationships, experience a measure of the satisfaction they bring, and are disappointed when they fail to fulfill our dreams, Genesis 2 validates our longings and explains our frustrations. Equally, both our satisfactions and dissatisfactions implicitly confirm the message of Genesis 2.

This mixture of hope and realism reappears in the New Testament, when the apostle Paul holds out Genesis 2 as a continuing guideline for Christian marriage. Like Genesis, he compares marriage to the Christ-Church relationship (Ephesians 5:22-33).



“A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24).

DAY 6

WHY LIFE IS NOT AS GOD INTENDED

Genesis 3

Genesis 2 portrays life as God designed it to be, with direct access to God, harmony with the environment, rewarding work, and marital intimacy. Genesis 3 explains why our lives are not actually so idyllic.

What God said to them. This passage uses elevated prose, with picturesque imagery, and parallelism on several levels. Due to space limitations, one example must suffice, from verses 1-4:

- *Serpent*: Did God really say that you must not eat from any tree?
- *Woman*: We may eat fruit from the trees.
- *Woman*: God did say that we must not eat from one tree, or we will die.
- *Serpent*: Surely you will not die! When you eat of it...

Speakers alternate in the pattern of inverted parallelism (or, 'chiasm'): serpent, woman, woman, serpent. Lexically (vocabulary), the parallelism is synonymous: eat, eat; die, die. Semantically (meaning), the parallelism is antithetical: must not eat, may eat; will die, will not die.

Parallelism also occurs at a higher level. Apart from God, there are three main characters in this narrative. In the temptation, they appear in the order: serpent, woman, man (verses 1-7). In God's investigation, the order reverses: man, woman, serpent (verses 8-13). In verdict, the order reverts: serpent, woman, man (verses 14-19).

The literary artistry of the chapter highlights its thematic and theological importance. Chapter 3 introduces a sinister character to the story line, a crafty serpent (a common symbol of divine or demonic beings in the ancient Near East). The serpent misquotes God, portraying him as miserly, forbidding the couple to eat from any tree in the garden. While the woman corrects him, she exaggerates the severity of God's single restriction, "'You must not touch it.'" The serpent slanders God, attributing the restriction to small-minded envy, lest humans become equal to God (verses 1-5).

The serpent does not bear sole blame, however. Eve is enticed by her own lusts. Tempted by the fruit's beauty and succulence, and by the promise of moral autonomy, she takes and eats. Though created to partner with Adam, she tempts him, and he eats. Their eyes are opened, as the serpent predicted, but not in the sense implied. The awakening brings guilt and shame. Once they were naked and unashamed; now they cover themselves (verses 6-7).

Barriers spring up between them and God. They hide from him. They shift blame, the man to the woman, and the woman to the serpent (verses 8-13).

God passes sentence. Punishment fits the respective crimes, and debilitates the designated role of each. For disparaging God, the serpent is demeaned beneath all animals, crawling in the dust; perpetual enmity will exist between snakes and humans. The woman will suffer excruciating pain in childbirth, and will engage in a losing battle for dominance over her partner. The man will struggle in work, and then die (verses 14-19).

Even in judgment, God remains merciful. He curses the serpent and the ground, but neither the man nor the woman. Previously he warned that if they ate from the forbidden tree, they would die 'on that day'. Now he delays execution. 'Eve' will first fulfill the meaning of her name, mother of all 'living'. God also provides durable covering for their nakedness. Then he drives them away from his presence, and out of Eden (verses 20-24).



What God is saying to us. This narrative is etiological: it explains the origin of the world's disorder. We long for intimacy with God, but experience distance. We enter marriage as 'soul-mates', only to lock horns in power struggle. Children bring us deep satisfaction, and frequent worry. We seek meaningful employment, but endure daily frustration. Our environment is marked by beauty and adversity. In the end, death awaits.

The narrative is also paradigmatic. The apostle John characterizes temptation in terms drawn from Eve's

experience: 'the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and boastful pride' (1 John 2:16). Sin still lures with the same temptations. Discounting God's extravagant generosity toward us, we bristle at his few restrictions on us. Drawn by immediate satisfaction and longing for the forbidden, we decide for ourselves what is good. Succumbing to sin, we tempt others, and shift blame. Through it all, the serpent assures us that we will not die.

The New Testament also announces the remedy. The seed of the woman has crushed the head of the serpent: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). The atoning death of Christ has reversed the effects of Adam's sin on humankind (Romans 5:12-20). One day, he will also reverse its effects on the physical universe (Romans 8:18-23). Then life will be as God originally intended.



"The Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden" (3:23).

DAY 7

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Genesis 4

The spiritual and moral descent of humankind accelerates through succeeding generations.

What God said to them. The limits of this passage are marked by ‘inclusion’ (i.e., literary bookends): the chapter begins with Adam and Eve conceiving two sons, Cain and Abel (verses 1-2a), and ends with them conceiving a third son, Seth, to replace the murdered Abel (verse 25).

The main unit comprises three short pairs of action-reaction or speech-response, a common Old Testament narrative technique. In verses 2b-7, God rejects Cain’s lackluster offering, while favorably receiving Abel’s top-of-the-line sacrifice (cf. Leviticus 3:16.) God urges Cain to take responsibility for his misconduct, and cautions him to control his anger, lest it master him.

The admonition falls on deaf ears. In verses 8-12, Cain deceives, then kills, his brother. Repetitive vocabulary indicates that divine judgment fits the crime. Since Abel’s blood cries out ‘from the ground’, Cain will be cursed ‘from the ground’. The earth opened to ‘receive’ Abel’s blood; consequently, it will not ‘yield’ crop to Cain. He used to ‘work the ground’ (cf. verse 3), but now when he tries to ‘work the ground’, it will no longer produce a crop.

Given the retributive nature of judgment, in verses 13-15, Cain fears that nomadic existence away from the presence of God will lead to his murder. In response, God promises protection. This same judgment-tinged-with-mercy appears in the epilogue: Cain leaves God and land, but conceives first a son, then a lineage, and eventually founds a city (verses 17-18).

The sin and judgment of Cain are part of a wider trend. The narrator links the incident verbally and thematically to chapter three. Adam and Eve were to 'guard' the garden; now Cain denies that he is his brother's 'guard'. God previously asked Adam, "Where are you?"; he now asks Cain, "Where is Abel?" Adam heard the 'voice' of God in the garden, and the 'voice' of Abel's blood cries out to God from the ground. God asked Eve, and now asks Cain, "What have you done?," and receives an evasive answer. Both Eve and Cain are caught in a power struggle between 'desire' and 'rule', Eve versus Adam, and Cain versus sin. Beyond all this, the overall plot development is parallel: temptation, sin, judgment, grace.

These links signal that chapter 4 is a continuation of chapter 3. Specifically, in chapter 4 the human condition spirals further and faster downward. Adam and Eve ate fruit that God prohibited; Cain commits fratricide in the context of worship. Eve and Adam violated a standing prohibition; Cain disregards a specific warning. In punishing Adam, God cursed the serpent and the ground; now he curses Cain. For Adam, thorns and thistles competed with crops; for Cain, no crops grow at all. God drove Adam and Eve east out of

Eden; he drives Cain further east, and entirely off the land into nomadic existence, in the land of 'Nod' ('wandering').

Despite worsening sin and harsher judgment, grace persists. God clothed the naked Adam and Eve; now he protects the murderous Cain from being murdered. God granted children to Adam and Eve; and now, to Cain and his wife.

A two-part epilogue closes the chapter. The first part looks ahead five generations as the downward spiral gathers speed. In the seventh generation of humankind, Lamech composes a poem, in poetic parallelism, in praise of his own ruthlessness:

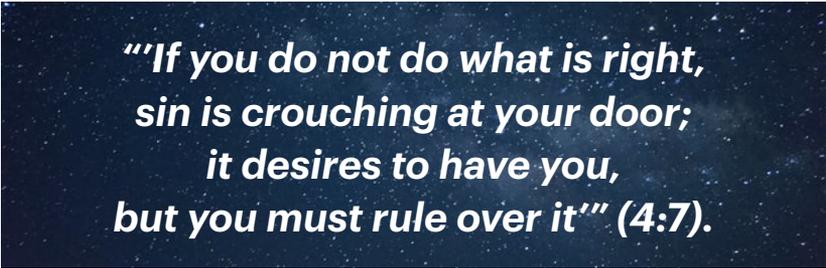
- Those who wound him, he kills [2x];
- Cain is avenged seven-fold; Lamech, seventy-seven (verses 19-24).

Even then, deformed humanity is not beyond redemption. The narrator closes by noting briefly that Adam and Eve bear a third child, Seth. He, in turn, has a son, Enosh, in whose lifetime, people begin to call on the name of the Lord (verses 25-26). This contrast between godly and ungodly lineages runs throughout the book of Genesis.



What God is saying to us. In 1 John, Cain is an archetype of the hostility that the Church may face from the world, or that may even erupt internally. The point begins with a

general principle drawn from this account: “Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous.” The author applies the principle in two directions. It sometimes accounts for outsiders’ opposition to Christian faith: “Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.” Other times, Cain serves as a rebuke to Christians themselves: “Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him” (1 John 3:11-15).



***“If you do not do what is right,
sin is crouching at your door;
it desires to have you,
but you must rule over it” (4:7).***

DAY 8

TEN GENERATIONS OF BLESSING AND CURSE

Genesis 5

For modern readers, genealogies are boring, even pointless, because we are unfamiliar with the genre. But genealogies were common in ancient Near Eastern literature, and they are purposeful in Genesis.

One feature of this genealogy baffles interpreters: Are the extended ages literal? Symbolic? Argumentative, intended to refute ancient Near Eastern parallels? We cannot say definitively. Yet the main point is clear: this genealogy reinforces the central theme of the broader section.

What God said to them. The boundaries of this passage are marked by inclusion, referencing the creation and fall. The genealogy begins with God's original blessing on Adam and Eve, nearly word for word: "When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them 'Mankind' ['Adam']" (verses 1-2 cf. 1:27-28).

The end of the genealogy recalls the judgment God imposed after the fall: Lamech names his son Noah, a homonym for 'comfort', in the hope that, "He will comfort us

in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed” (verse 29 cf. 3:17).

In between, the genealogy provides case studies of blessing and curse. The pattern is largely formulaic, consisting of three parts:

- ‘X’ lived a number of years and became father of a son;
- ‘X’ lived more years and had more sons and daughters;
- Altogether ‘X’ lived total years, and then he died.

The record of births fulfills the divine blessing: “Be fruitful and increase in number” (1:28). The record of deaths fulfills the divine judgment: “On the day you eat of [the tree] you will surely die” (2:17). Thus, the genealogy establishes the new normal: blessing and curse; descendants and death.

Beyond that, the genealogy also fast-forwards the storyline. At this stage, the biblical narrative is episodic, not comprehensive. The text largely jumps over the intervening generations in order to reach the next major event, the flood of chapters 6-9.

Along the way, the genealogy makes a few other points, via four variations in the formula. In the first, Adam fathers Seth “in his own likeness, in his own image” (verse 3). The language comes from the creation of Adam. Humankind continues to bear the image of God, though now the image

is derivative, through Adam, and thus distorted by sin, fall, and death.

The second variation comes in the Enoch account (verses 21-24). Twice the passage describes him as ‘walking with God’ (cf. Noah in 6:9). Then, in lieu of him dying, “he was no more, because God took him away” (verse 24). The same language is used later of Elijah escaping death by ascending into heaven (2 Kings 2:5,9,10). While virtue is exceedingly rare, it is neither impossible nor unrewarded.

The third variation comes in Lamech naming his son Noah, ‘comfort’, in the hope that he will somehow alleviate the struggle caused by the divine curse on the ground (verses 28-31). His name turns out to be ironic: God will indeed use Noah to resolve the curse, though not in the optimistic sense his father apparently intends.

The final variation comes in the tenth account: by the time Noah is 500 years old, he has fathered three sons (verse 32). The flood narrative then breaks in. Four chapters pass before Noah’s genealogy concludes.

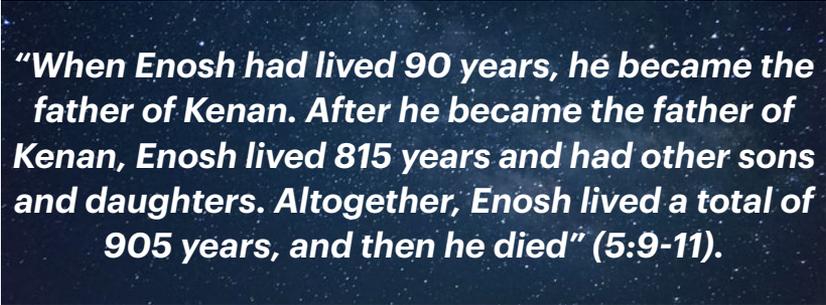


What God is saying to us. While the genealogy bridges generations between the fall and Noah, it also reveals aspects of the character of God. The latter provides food for reflection. Three divine attributes are particularly notable.

First, God continues to bless: generations live and reproduce, despite persistence in sin. Still today, God grants the blessings of life and children.

At the same time, judgment also persists. In naming his first-born, Lamech appeals for relief from the curse on the ground. Later, he dies, like all others before him, except Enoch. Weeds and death persist today as a reminder and consequence of sins.

Through it all, God remains nearly infinitely patient, as generation follows generation. This stability could be misconstrued, as though the present state of affairs will continue indefinitely. In the next chapter, however, God abruptly intervenes. The apostle Peter cites this pattern as precedent for his own generation. God is incredibly patient, providing extended opportunity to repent. Yet he will not delay forever. Just as he once judged the world with water, so he will again destroy it, this time finally, and with fire (2 Peter 3:3-13).



“When Enosh had lived 90 years, he became the father of Kenan. After he became the father of Kenan, Enosh lived 815 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enosh lived a total of 905 years, and then he died” (5:9-11).

DAY 9

NOAH AND THE FLOOD: THE REAL PROBLEM

Genesis 6:1-8

The flood narrative is one of the most recognized stories in the Bible, but for all that, its point is frequently missed. Often we are distracted by questions of history and science: Was the flood local or universal? Do geological sediments and archaeological remains validate the biblical account? Does the ark still exist somewhere, entombed in mountain ice? These are legitimate queries, but here we consider the original significance of the flood for the narrator, and its current significance for us.

These readings typically cover a single passage in a one day, focusing on the central point and passing over the detail. The flood narrative, however, is unusually packed and substantial. So we linger a little longer in order to bring out its significance. Specifically, the readings divide the passage into four parts: introduction (6:1-8); body, part 1 (6:9-7:24); body, part 2 (8:1-9:19); and, conclusion (9:20-29).

What God said to them. As often with Old Testament narratives, the introduction to the flood story actually begins in the conclusion to the previous narrative. Of the ten genealogies in Genesis 5, nine contain three details: the subject's age at the birth of his first son; how many years

more he lived; his age at death. The tenth genealogy – Noah – contains the first detail but then breaks off (5:32). The final two portions of the genealogy appear at the end of the narrative (9:28-29). By splitting Noah’s entry into two parts, and embedding the flood narrative between them, the narrator signals that chapters 6-9 constitute a single unit. This literary device (‘inclusion’) is the first indication of an elaborate and artistic structure.

On closer examination, the flood narrative is set up a few verses earlier. Lamech names his son ‘Noah’ (a homonym of ‘rest, relief, comfort’) in the hopes that he will “[a] bring us relief in the [b] labor and [c] painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed” (5:29; this is a transparent allusion to the divine curse prompted by the first sin, see 3:16-17). While it is not obvious in English translation, in Hebrew these same three terms express God’s current sentiment toward humankind: “The Lord [a] regretted that he had [b] made human beings on the earth, and his heart was filled with [c] pain” (6:6). That is to say, Lamech has misdiagnosed the problem: he focuses on human suffering resulting from God’s punishment on sin; the real problem is God’s suffering as a result of human sin.

Another wordplay in the immediate context reinforces the point. The Lord saw that every inclination of [d] human hearts was only evil all the time (6:5). In response, [d] God’s heart was filled with pain (6:6). The problem is not the punishment that God imposes on human corruption, but the suffering that human corruption inflicts on God.

(One other matter in this passage warrants comment not because it is necessarily relevant to the central theme, but because, unless addressed, it tends to distract from the main point. Verses 1-4 describes sexual relations between 'sons of God' and human women, issuing in the birth of an ancient class of warrior-heroes. The meaning is obscure, but may reference ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian efforts to engage sexually with gods in an attempt to produce hybrid demigods. This impropriety achieves the opposite effect, prompting God to shorten human lifespan. If this is intended meaning, the behavior is a vivid example of the human sin which pains God.)



What God is saying to us. Contemporary diagnosis of the problem with the world typically repeats Lamech's error. Atheists and agnostics commonly cite human suffering as a key argument against the existence of God. Even we who believe in him tend to prioritize his role in alleviating our suffering from a fallen world. This text, however, argues for the opposite: the fundamental problem to be addressed is the pain that our sin causes God.

Here God's response is to remove humanity as the cause of his suffering. In the future, he will do so once again, and once for all, 2 Peter warns. This time he will destroy both earth and sky. In the meantime, though, he delays, not wanting any to perish, but giving all opportunity to repent. Even we who claim Christ do well to pay heed – to live holy

lives – Peter warns, so that we may not fall from our secure position (2 Peter 3:3-18).

“The Lord said, ‘I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created’” (6:7).

DAY 10

NOAH AND THE FLOOD: DECREATION

Genesis 6:9-7:24

The most striking feature of this passage is its verbal and thematic allusions to the creation account of Genesis 1-2. The parallels point to the central thrust of the passage.

What God said to them. The most obvious example is God's verdict: "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground" (6:7, reversing the order of creation; cf. 1:30). Other shared terms include: 'increase' (6:1 cf. 1:28); 'good' (6:2 cf. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31); 'day' (6:5 cf. 1:5,6,8,13,18,19,23,31); 'made' (6:6,7 cf. 1:7,16,25,); 'created' (6:7 cf. 1:1,27[3x]); 'man/ground' (6:6 cf. 2:7); 'earth' (6:11[2x],12,13[2x],17; 7:23; cf. 1:10,11,12,17,24[2x]); 'waters' (7:17,18,19,20 cf. 1:6-10); seven days (7:4,10 cf. 2:2-3); 'according to its kind' (7:14 cf. 1:11,12,21,24,25); 'breath of life' (7:14 cf. 1:30; 2:7); and, 'male and female' (7:16 cf. 1:27).

The links between creation and destruction extend beyond individual words to include various motifs. Living beings are grouped in the same categories, typically in the same or inverted order: birds, animals and crawling creatures, humans (6:20; 7:8,14,21,23; cf. 1:24,26), 'each according to

its kind' (6:20; 7:14; cf. 1:11,21,24,25[2x]). Humankind has 'corrupted' the earth (6:12[2x]), instead of fulfilling their calling to 'work' the garden and 'care' for it (2:15). God 'saw' the earth, that it was corrupted (6:11,12), as he earlier 'saw' that creation was good (1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31). Violence 'filled the earth' (6:11,13), whereas it was God's intention that animals and humans multiply and 'fill the earth' (1:22,28). The animals came to Noah for deliverance (7:9), as they had previously come to Adam for naming (2:19).

The narrator's point in reusing the same terms and motifs is transparent: the flood reverses creation. The second day of creation separated the waters above from the waters below (1:6-8), and the third separated the sea from the land (1:9-10). The flood occurs when both dammed waters break free: "All the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened" (7:11).

As the days roll by, the water rapidly rises, covering the highest mountains (7:17,18,19,20), and the earth reverts to its pre-creation state (1:2). Every living creature dies, and the earth is once again pristine (7:21 cf. 1:20). Everything that had the 'breath of life in its nostrils' dies, undoing the original vivification (7:22 cf. 2:7). Every living thing – initially blessed to multiply and fill the earth – is now wiped off the earth, removing all evidence that skies and land were ever populated (7:23 cf. 1:20,24).

Three times in successive sentences the author drives home his point: in the flood, God destroys all beings that live on earth; birds, animals, crawling creatures, and humans

(7:21,22,23). Six times in the short span of five verses, he emphasizes totality with 'all' and 'every' (7:19-23): all mountains (7:19), every living thing (7:21), all creatures (7:21), all mankind (7:21), everything on dry land (7:22), every living thing on the face of the earth (7:23). This is total depopulation. The flood is a reversal of creation. It is, so to speak, a decreation.

In another allusion to the creation story, death remains the punishment for sin, as Adam and Eve had been warned (7:22 cf. 2:17; 3:3,4). While it is not evident in English translation, in Hebrew the narrator uses repetition to underscore the strictly retributive nature of the judgment. The earth was 'ruined' in God's eyes, and the earth was 'full of violence'... [The earth] was 'ruined', for everyone had 'ruined' his lifestyle on earth. So God said to Noah... "Because the earth is 'filled with violence' because of them, now I will 'ruin' them with the earth."

Human violence has destroyed the earth, so now, God will destroy humanity. The decreation is strictly retributive, and thus, entirely just.



What God is saying to us. We live in an era when the notion of divine judgment is rejected as autocratic, unjustified, and inherently inappropriate. By contemporary standards, it is unthinkable that God would have ever destroyed the entire world. Yet Jesus insists not only that God did so in Noah's time, but that he will do so again.

Jesus draws several lessons from the flood narrative that apply to the final judgment. Judgment is certainly coming. At that time, the wicked will be destroyed; the faithful, rewarded. That day will come unexpectedly, taking many by surprise. Consequently, we must be ready at all times, by engaging continually in the worship and service of God (Matthew 24:36-51).

"The earth was ruined in God's eyes, and the earth was full of violence... So God said to Noah... 'Because the earth is filled with violence because of them, now I will ruin them with the earth'"
(6:11,13 own translation).

DAY 11

NOAH AND THE FLOOD: RECREATION

Genesis 8:1-9:19

With the flood portrayed as a decreation, the aftermath naturally becomes a recreation. The narrator makes the point in two ways: through structural parallels with the flood narrative, and with language drawn from the original creation story.

What God said to them. Together, the flood and restoration narratives form a palistrophe (extended chiasm; i.e., inverted parallelism). The first six units report the flood:

a	6:9-10	Noah is a righteous man, with three sons.
b	6:11-13	Humankind 'ruined' the earth, so God decides to 'ruin' humankind and earth.
c	6:14-22	God directs Noah to build an ark to save family and animals in the flood.
d	7:1-10	God tells Noah to enter the ark with family and animals.
e	7:11-16	Noah is 600 years old when the flood begins.
f	7:17-24	The flood covers the entire earth, and wipes out all terrestrial life.

The last six units report the dissipation of the flood, in reverse order:

f'	8:1-5	The waters recede until the mountain tops become visible.
e'	8:6-14	Noah sends out birds to assess conditions. By his 601 st birthday, the land is dry.
d'	8:15-19	God tells Noah and the animals to leave the ark.
c'	8:20-9:7	God promises never again to destroy the earth, and he blesses Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply.
b'	9:8-17	God covenants never again to 'ruin' the earth; the rainbow is the sign of that covenant.
a'	9:18-19	Noah and his three sons leave the ark; they are the ancestors of all peoples

The parallelism adds aesthetics, aids retention, and guides interpretation.

As with the flood narrative, vocabulary reinforces the meaning of the event. Throughout the episode, the narrator uses the distinctive terminology of the creation story from Genesis 1-2. Especially obvious are three nearly exact citations of the original blessing: "'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth'" (9:1 cf. 8:17; 9:7). At the first creation, 'wind' hovered over the waters (1:2); now God sends 'wind' to push back the waters (8:1). Both times, the waters recede (8:1-5,11-14 cf. 1:6-9). Events transpire over seven days (8:10,12 cf. 1:1-2:3). Other shared words and phrases include: 'every kind of living creature that is with you – the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move

along the ground' (8:17,19; 9:2,10 cf. 1:26,28,30; 2:20); 'waters' (8:1,6); 'the deep and ... the heavens' (8:2 cf. 1:1,2); 'curse the ground' (8:21 cf. 3:17); as well as, 'in the image of God' and 'God made mankind' (9:6 cf. 1:26-27). The point of the parallels: God is recreating the world.

One more parallel is striking, this one between the beginning and end of the flood narrative. God sent the flood because "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). Now he promises never again to flood the earth even though "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (8:21). The wickedness which prompted the cataclysm will not provoke a second. Mercy restrains judgment.

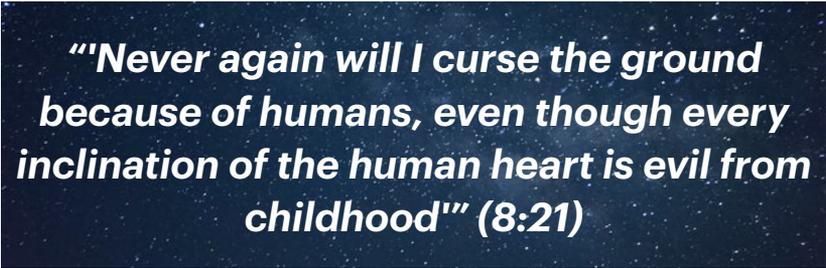
Even considering all these parallels, the recreation does not quite rise up to the utopia of the original. God now 'gives' humans permission to eat meat, bringing 'fear and dread' upon animal life (9:2-4). This language is common in warfare contexts: the relationship between human and animal is now marked by violence and victimization. Moreover, God must again prohibit the murder of humans (9:5-6). Literally, he warns against man killing 'his brother', the first time the phrase has recurred since Cain murdered Abel. This recreated world is no Eden.



What God is saying to us. The central message of Genesis 8-9 contrasts with Genesis 6-7: while God destroys the majority (chapters 6-7), he saves a small minority (chapters

8-9). In New Testament times, when a beleaguered Church is struggling to survive in a dominant and hostile world, the Noah story assures them of eventual vindication: in the final judgment, God will destroy their oppressors, but save them (Hebrews 11:7).

It should be noted, though, that 2 Peter applies this same contrast within the Church. He counsels Christians to renounce false teachers, heresy, depravity, and greed, because the flood shows that, “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment” (2 Peter 2:9 cf. 2:1-10).



“Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” (8:21)

DAY 12

NOAH AND THE FLOOD: THE PROBLEM PERSISTS

Genesis 9:20-29

In the effort to eliminate wickedness, God destroyed and then recreated virtually all terrestrial life. The main storyline is complete by 9:19. That the narrator attaches an epilogue indicates he has something significant to add. In fact, the epilogue directs the point of the entire flood narrative.

What God said to them. The concluding episode is to be understood against the backdrop of the introduction. The narrator signals this intention structurally. Yesterday, we saw detailed parallels between the two episodes that comprise the body of the story, 6:9-7:24 and 8:1-9:19 (below, C/C'). Those, in turn, are embedded in a broader palistrophe (inverted parallelism, or extended chiasm) that encompasses the entirety of the flood narrative.

A	5:32	Noah's genealogy, part one
B	6:1-8	Prologue: sex-related sin provokes worldwide flood
C	6:9-7:24	Core narrative, part one: the flood rises
C'	8:1-9:19	Core narrative, part two: the flood dissipates
B'	9:20-27	Epilogue: sex-related sin provokes an individual curse
A'	9:28-29	Noah's genealogy, part two

The parallelism indicates that the narrator intends us to read B' in the light of B, and thus, the epilogue in contrast with the prologue.

Both prologue and epilogue have two parts: a sex-related offense, and a negative consequence. In the former, the sexual misconduct is uncertain: some unidentifiable 'sons of God' see that 'the daughters of men' are beautiful (literally, 'good' 6:1-4, cf. the creation story 1:4,10,12,18,21, 25,31). As noted previously, this incident may reference ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian efforts to engage sexually with gods in an attempt to produce hybrid demigods. Regardless, the effort is sinful for violating the classification and differentiation of living creatures 'according to their various kinds' (1:11,12[2x],21[2x],24[2x],25[3x]; cf. 7:14). The strategy proves counterproductive, as it prompts God to shorten the limits of the human lifespan (6:1-4). Beyond that, the sexual congress serves as a case-study of the pervasiveness of sin that provokes God to destroy all terrestrial life. All except Noah, of course, who finds favor from God, due to his virtue (6:5-8 cf. 6:9).

Once God has wiped out all the sinners, all that remain are Noah and his family. The epilogue records an incident whose details are again somewhat obscure to the modern reader, but whose general thrust is clear. With the flood over, Noah plants a vineyard, and, once it bears fruit (perhaps around three years later), he drinks himself into a stupor. Reminiscent of the special significance of nudity in the account of Adam and Eve, and in a culture which prioritizes respect for parents, Ham enters the tent,

discovers his father naked, and does nothing except spread the news. Shem and Japheth then do the proper thing, averting their eyes, and covering their father in order to preserve his dignity (9:20-23). Once Noah sobers up, he curses Ham, and blesses the other sons (9:24-27).

The epilogue has two ramifications. Historically, it anticipates – and justifies – the perennial (and sexually-charged) animosity between Israelites and Canaanites. Additionally, as epilogue, it offers a final reflection on the flood narrative. The prologue explains God’s reason for destroying all terrestrial life: its wickedness is too great to tolerate (6:1-8). God saves the only righteous, blameless, faithful person: Noah (6:9). Yet the first event recorded after the flood is Noah getting fall-down drunk, his son shaming him, and then the father cursing this son’s lineage to perpetual slavery.

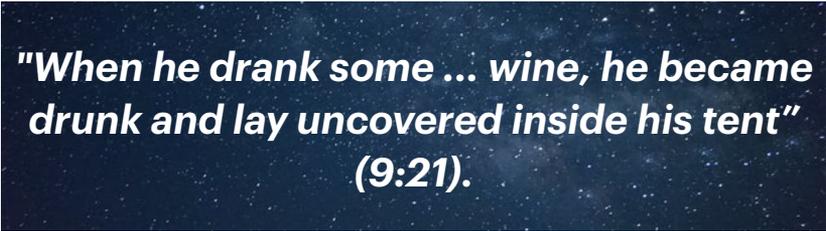
The epilogue shapes the entire flood narrative. God attempts to drown evil, while preserving a slender sliver of good. Yet not even the righteous, blameless, faithful Noah is entirely virtuous, let alone his offspring. The epilogue drives home the pernicious tenacity of sin, and casts doubt on God’s merciful decision to spare anyone. Ultimately, the flood proves futile. Sin survives. In the immediate aftermath of divine blessing comes curse.



What God is saying to us. The initial characterization of Noah is startling: he finds favor with God because of his

virtue, righteousness, blamelessness, and walk with God (6:8-9). The subsequent narrative reinforces his virtue, not least, with the recurring affirmation: “Noah did everything just as God commanded him” (6:22 cf. 7:5,9,16). His first act after disembarking is to build an altar and offer sacrifice to God (8:20), anticipating the later regulations of the Law (cf. Exodus 27:1-8; 38:1-7; Leviticus 20:25). Such positive characterization is unprecedented.

The epilogue supplements this portrait. Sin, judgment, and curse all survive the flood. Even the uniquely virtuous Noah is not without fault, much less his children. In this message, the flood narrative anticipates the gospel. Not even the best among humankind is without fault before God, free from sin, beyond judgment. We all need the atonement that Christ accomplishes, and the transformation that his Spirit effects.



"When he drank some ... wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent" (9:21).

DAY 13

BABBLE AT BABEL

Genesis 10:1-11:9

This reading consists of two parts: 10:1-32 and 11:1-9. At first, they appear to be distinct units covering separate topics: the lineages of Noah's three sons, and the Babel narrative. On closer look, the two are thematically complementary, providing contrasting perspectives on the repopulation and resettlement of the world after the flood. In chapter 10, God's blessing produces repopulation and resettlement. In chapter 11a, repopulation produces overweening ambition and opposition to resettlement. We look first at the individual sections, and then at their interplay.

What God said to them. Chapter 10 is united by two features: (a) the first and last verses are parallel ('inclusion'); and, (b) the entire chapter tracks the descendants of Noah's three sons, and their geographical distribution. The three genealogies appear in order of historical impact on Israel, from least to greatest. The line of Japheth lists only one generation of descendants, who have little impact on future Israel (10:2-5). The lineage of the accursed Ham covers parts of two additional generations, and produces Israel's most powerful and persistent enemies: Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and Canaan (10:6-20). The line of Shem, ancestor to Israel, comes last and extends five generations (10:21-32).

Like previous genealogies, this one makes a point within its context: the repopulation and resettlement result from God’s blessing. Individual entries list both descendants and geographical locales. Each lineage ends with a similar summary: “These are the sons of ‘X’ by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations” (10:20 cf. 10:5,31,32). Both numerical and territorial expansion derive from God’s blessing on Noah and his sons, repeating his original blessing on Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (9:1 cf. 9:7; 1:28).

Chapter 11a reports the Babel incident. The narrator links this episode to the genealogy with shared vocabulary and motifs: ‘earth’, ‘language’, Babylon, Shinar, eastward movement, urbanization, divine intervention, and especially geographic redistribution (‘spread out’ 10:4,32; ‘scattered’ 10:18; 11:4,8,9). The narrative is structured with inverse parallelism (‘chiasm’):

a	11:1-2	Common speech in a common location.
b	11:3-4	Human plan: ‘Come, let us... Come let us...’
b’	11:5-7	Divine counter-plan, ‘Come, let us...’
a’	11:8-9	Diverse speech in diverse locations.

In 11:1-4, as the population increases, the people are emboldened to build a tower ‘that reaches to the heavens’, intending the city to serve as the center of a world empire, to ‘make a name for’ themselves, rather than be ‘scattered’ ‘over the face of the whole earth’. In 11:5-9, God mocks their ambitions. The tower is so short that he must ‘come down’

from heaven to see it. To thwart their ambitions, God permanently ‘confuses’ their languages, and ‘scatters’ them ‘over the face of the whole earth’. The only name they make for themselves is ‘Babel’, i.e., ‘confused’.

Overall, the two narratives are complementary. God’s blessing produces descendants and territory (10:1-32). Yet instead of prompting gratitude, prosperity breeds swagger, which provokes judgment in the form of linguistic and geographic isolation (11:1-9).

As noted previously, Genesis 1-11 consists of two parallel cycles (chapters 1-5, 6-11). Within that structure, today’s passage is comparable to the Cain-Lamech narrative of chapter 4. These ‘sons of Adam’ (11:5) are reminiscent of the wicked Cain, the first city-builder (4:17). In both passages, God blesses humanity, yet they provoke his judgment. Both make the same point: humanity does not include a few bad characters; it is comprehensively depraved. The reboot of terrestrial life brings no change in human nature.

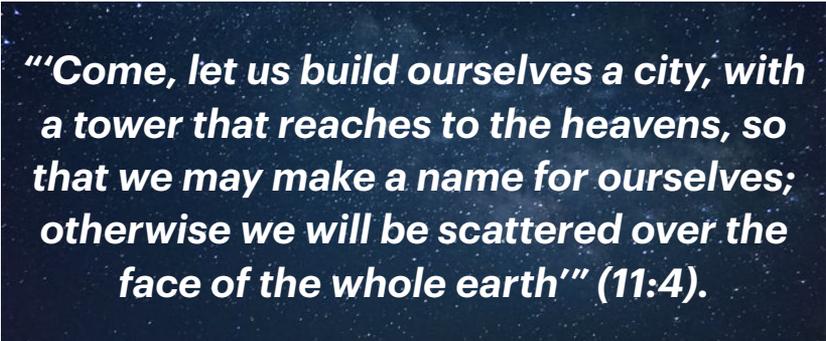


What God is saying to us. This account is implicit polemic against imperial cities. Throughout the Old Testament, Babel referred to a real place: the city and empire of Babylon. When Israel was no more than rural nomads, Babylon was a grand urban civilization, with brick fortresses, towering ziggurats, powerful army, and imperial ambitions. ‘Babylon’ claimed to mean, ‘gate of the god’, portal between god and man. This narrative rebukes such

religious and political pretensions: Babylon means 'confusion', and it is under divine judgment.

The New Testament applies this text in two directions. Negatively, it redirects the anti-imperial polemic against the oppressive, idolatrous Roman empire (1 Peter 5:13; Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:1-24). Contemporary superpowers take note: imperial ambitions provoke God.

Positively, Babel provides the backdrop to the day of Pentecost. When the Spirit enables the earliest Christians to speak in the native languages of Jews gathered from around the world, God signals that he intends his Church, with its worldwide preaching of the gospel and its multiethnic membership, to heal Babel's fractures (Acts 2:1-41 cf. Rev 5:9; 7:9).



“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (11:4).

DAY 14

TEN GENERATIONS OF BLESSING

Genesis 11:10-26

As noted previously (see reading on day 2), Genesis 1-11 consists of two parallel cycles (chapters 1-5, 6-11):

<i>Ch 1-5 Creation & Rebellion</i>	<i>Ch 6-11 Re-Creation & Rebellion</i>
1 creation	6-7 destruction
2 blessing	8-9a blessing
3 rebellion & judgment	9b rebellion & judgment
4 from bad to worse	10-11a from blessing to sin
5 ten generations	11b ten generations

The parallel with chapter 5 highlights the point of today's reading.

What God said to them. The two genealogies are largely similar. Each overviews ten generations, moving the story line along rapidly. In each, individual entries supply name, age at birth of first child, remaining years of life, and additional children. Each genealogy ends with an individual – Noah, Abram – who becomes the main character in the next stretch of narrative. One difference that appears to be negligible for the understanding of this text is its lack of

tangential details that occasionally appear in chapter 5. Beyond this, other differences are more weighty.

Chief among the significant differences is the recurring refrain, “and then he died.” This somber note ends every entry in the genealogy of chapter 5 (5:5,8,11,14,17,20,27,31), but does not appear even once in the genealogy of chapter 11b. In chapter 5, the refrain underscores one half of the theme: ‘blessing and judgment’. Of course, each generation in chapter 11b does suffer death as judgment, but the narrator expresses it in terms of total years of life. Despite the otherwise formulaic content of the entries, the narrator passes over death without a mention. Consequently, if the genealogy of chapter 5 can be characterized as ‘Ten Generations of Blessing and Curse’, It is almost as though this genealogy records ‘Ten Generations of Blessing’.

Almost. But not quite. Because the linguistic and geographic judgment of 11:1-9 implicitly hangs over all subsequent generations. Still, the passing over death is suggestive of the narrator’s point.

What does the narrator intend us to take from the omission? As a genre, narrative typically does not make its point explicitly, but requires the audience to infer from implicit clues that the narrator provides. Chief among a narrator’s tools is literary context, the flow of the narrative.

Part of the explanation may be that the genealogy of chapter 5 prepares for the flood narrative of chapters 6-7, in which all human life drowns, with the exception of Noah

and his family. The recurring refrain "and then he died" in the genealogy anticipates, and implicitly justifies, the coming carnage.

In contrast, what follows the genealogy of chapter 11b is not another entirely-deserved human extinction, for God promised Noah that he would never again destroy the world (8:21; 9:11,15). Instead, what follows is extraordinary blessing of a single lineage. Beginning in chapter 12, God adopts an entirely new strategy. He narrows focus from the entire world to a single man and his descendants. The genealogy ends with Terah, who fathers three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. The first of these sons becomes the focus for the remainder of Genesis.

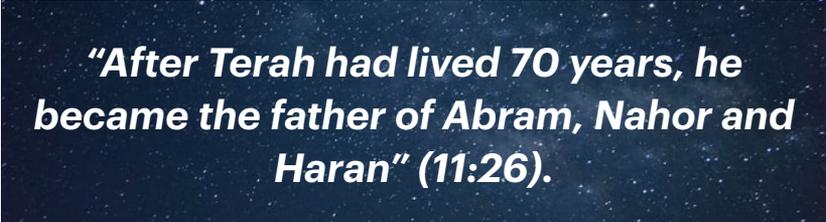
Both genealogies provide a transition between a failed strategy and a new attempt to redeem the world. In chapters 1-5, creation collapses in sin, so God determines to reboot, largely repeating the same creation process, repopulating humanity. In chapters 6-11, re-creation collapses in sin. but this time, instead of implementing the same process a third time, God turns in a new direction. He shifts the focus of his redemptive efforts from broader humanity to Abram and his descendants.

The genealogy in 11:10-26 anticipates this shift in focus and strategy. The exclusively positive thrust of this genealogy sets the tone for God's entirely positive blessing on Abram.



What God is saying to us. This genealogy – especially in contrast with its parallel in Genesis 5 – preaches the gospel, at least in part. It does not minimize human sin. If anything, humanity is in even worse condition now that, for a second time, recreation and blessing have resulted not in worship and obedience, but in rebellion (chapters 10-11a). Instead of again destroying the world, God continues to bless humanity with long life, descendants, and land. This is a patient, generous God.

At the same time, he is not going to stand idly by while his world rushes headlong into disaster. Instead, while keeping the same end goal in view, he shifts strategy: he will now (temporarily) narrow his focus from the world to one man and his lineage. Over a millennium later, God would move this strategy to its next step. With Jesus' advent, death, and resurrection, this constriction is burst, as salvation is thrown open to all peoples: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).



“After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran” (11:26).

DAY 15

THE CREATOR GIVES UP ON HIS WORLD (TEMPORARILY)

Genesis 11:27-50:26

Up until now, the story line has centered on primeval cosmic events involving the entire world: creation, fall, and flood. God blessed all peoples: Adam and Eve as progenitors of all humanity (1:28 cf. 5:2), and again, Noah and his sons as ancestors of all peoples (9:1). In the aftermath of sin, God might curse the miscreant and his lineage: Cain (4:11); Ham (9:25). Yet they remained the exception; the blessing of God remained on all others: Seth (4:25); Shem and Japheth (9:26-27).

Now, in the aftermath of Babel, God narrows his focus from the world to a single person. The preceding genealogy covers that transition, from Noah's son Shem to Terah's son Abra[ha]m (11:10-26). This shift in focus constitutes a shift in strategy, from working with all peoples, to blessing a single man, and the clan and nation which descend from him. From the very beginning, though, God is explicit that his end goal remains the same: to multiply descendants, to fill the earth, and to bless all peoples, only now through Abram (12:1-3).

What God said to them. The remainder of Genesis comprises four biographies. Because the narratives track a

family lineage, the generations overlap, rather than dividing sharply. The four main characters are: Abraham (chapters 12-25a), Abraham's son Isaac (chapters 21-27a), Isaac's son Jacob (chapters 25b-49), and Jacob's sons, Joseph and his brothers (chapters 37-50). Through the course of the narrative, each of these protagonists is contrasted with family rivals for the promises and blessings of God: Abraham, not Lot; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; Joseph, not his brothers.

The biographies share three subthemes. For one, each story line traces the protagonists' geographical movements, from the Promised Land into another country and back again (chapters 12b, 20, 26, 28-31, 39-50). For another, each biography also devotes considerable attention to family dysfunction. Husbands betray wives to save their own lives. Barrenness is common, and provokes conflict with fertile competitors. Sibling rivalry is a persistent problem. Tension also recurs over foreign wives (chapters 12b, 13, 16, 20, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 37).

The plotlines regarding foreign travel and foreign wives are aspects of the third theme: interactions with foreigners. Whether due to marriage, war, treaties, or slavery, the four main characters frequently interact with foreigners. Eventually Abraham's great-grandson Joseph rises to a high rank in the bureaucracy over the empire of Egypt, and settles the entire clan there (chapters 14, 21, 26, 34, 37-50).

Geography, family, and foreign interaction: these subthemes are not random. At the beginning, God chooses

Abram from all peoples to receive a promise and three blessings (12:1-20). The promise is God’s presence and assistance. The blessings are innumerable descendants, a homeland, and international prominence. The biographies document God’s blessing on the patriarchs, especially in terms of descendants, though also, to a lesser degree, with respect to land and international influence.

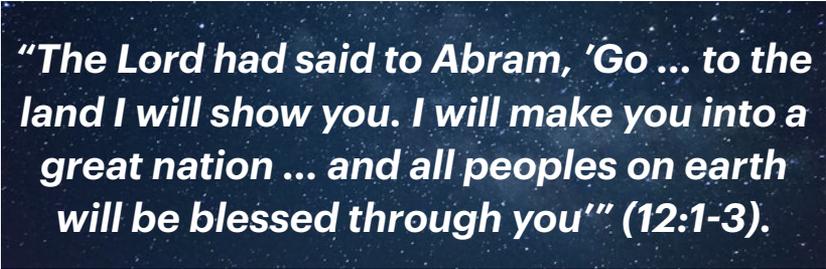
Divine blessing is the larger part of the patriarchal narratives, but not the totality. Blessing accounts only for the good things that occur: children born, land acquired, and foreigners influenced. It cannot account for the bad: family dysfunction, famines that force migration, conflicts with surrounding nations. These setbacks all arise from the corrupting effects of sin.

The overall message of Genesis 12-50 conjoins these two features: God begins to fulfill his promises to Abraham and his lineage, at a measured pace, in the face of obstacles resulting from the debilitating consequences of sin. This, in fact, is the overall message of all Scripture: the complete fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises will take us to the end of Revelation, and to the end of time.



What God is saying to us. At our stage of the story, the promises of innumerable descendants and a homeland for Israel were long ago fulfilled. Our setting involves the third promise: blessing the nations. Those of us who are gentiles are recipients of the Abrahamic blessing on the nations, and

we are called to be its benefactors, extending his blessing further. As we take our place in the long succession of God's people engaged in his mission, the narratives of Genesis 12-50 alert us that the third stage of the task may be just as challenging, conflicted, and protracted, as the first stage. At the same time, the forward movement of God's promises through the use of the flawed patriarchs provides hope that he can use us in some modest way to advance his purposes and bring him glory.



“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go ... to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’” (12:1-3).

DAY 16

GOD PROVIDES A SON FOR ABRAHAM

Genesis 12-21

As noted yesterday, Genesis, even the entire Pentateuch – in fact, the remainder of the Old Testament – reports God fulfilling his promises to Abraham and his descendants, slowly yet surely, overcoming obstacles resulting from sin and the Fall. The first of God’s promises is that Abraham would father innumerable children. These ten chapters record a small step in the fulfillment of the promise: the birth of the first child.

In particular, the chapters identify the promised child among three possible candidates: Lot, his nephew; Ishmael, his son with concubine Hagar; and Isaac, his son with wife Sarah. By birth order, Isaac has weakest claim; by maternal relationship, and by divine edict, he is the promised child.

What God said to them. Given that narrative teaches implicitly, rather than explicitly, literary features play an important role in a narrator’s arsenal, and so, in the interpreter’s clues to the meaning of a passage. As already noted, parallelism is a key literary technique in the Old Testament. It provides aesthetic flourish, aids memory in an oral culture, and guides interpretation by linking related passages.

Many passages in Genesis employ intricate, multi-level parallelism. Generally, to keep the detail manageable, these readings trace only the top level. Today's reading will consider two levels. This is partly because the parallelism highlights the theme, and partly to illustrate how this literary technique works.

At the highest level, chapters 12-21 are structured as a palistrophe (extended chiasm, or inverted parallelism; ABC C'B'A'). The palistrophe guides plot development, winnowing the list of potential answers to the all-important question: Who is the promised heir (A)? Neither Lot (B, B'), nor Ishmael (C, C'); only Isaac (A').

Simultaneously, each unit further divides into two contrasting subunits. One item in each pair advances the fulfillment of God's plan and promises (all the 1's below). The other item obstructs progress (all the 2's below). In this way, the narrator makes basically the same point six times: God takes the first step in fulfilling his promise of innumerable descendants, by providing a single heir for Abraham (A1,B1,C1,C'1,B'1,A'1); in the process, he overcomes all obstacles and impediments along the way (A2,B2,C2,C'2,B'2,A'2). The obstacles include: danger from foreign rulers (A2,A'2); Lot's role in the family (B2,B'2); and, Ishmael's priority in birth order (C2,C'2). God surmounts all these impediments to raise up Isaac as the promised heir.

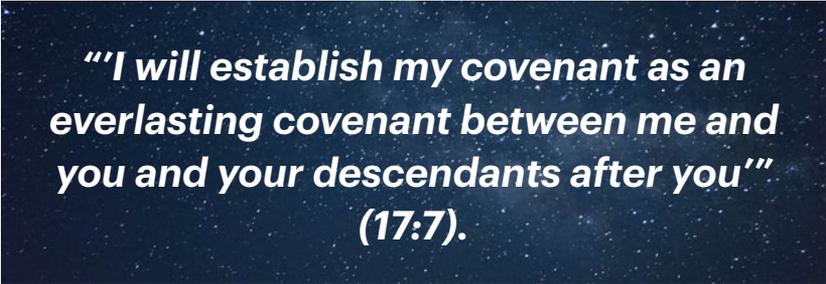
A	A1	12:1-9	God makes a covenant with Abram, promising land, descendants, and international prominence.
	A2	12:10-20	All three promises are threatened when famine drives Abram into Egypt, and Sarai is taken into a harem.
B	B1	13:1-18	Lot moves near Sodom, leaving Abram without an heir, but with the Promised Land.
	B2	14:1-24	Lot and Sodom are captured by foreign forces; Abram rescues both.
C	C1	15:1-21	Abram is unsettled in the face of obstacles, so God confirms the promises in a covenant ceremony.
	C2	16:1-16	Ishmael is born as man-made heir to the promises.
C'	C'1	17:1-14	God confirms the covenant with Abraham, requiring circumcision.
	C'2	17:15-27	Despite their advanced age, Abraham and Sarah will bear Isaac as true heir to the promises.
B'	B'2	18:1-33	Abraham negotiates with God, in an effort to rescue Sodom from destruction.
	B'1	19:1-38	God annihilates Sodom for its sin, but Lot survives.
A'	A'2	20:1-18	All three promises are threatened when Abraham moves to Gerar, and Sarah is taken into a harem.
	A'1	21:1-34	Isaac is born, Ishmael is sent away, and Abraham signs a treaty with a foreign king.



What God is saying to us. It is tempting, but inappropriate, to turn this text into a generalized maxim capable of application to our private lives, to the effect that, “Just as God fulfilled his promises to the patriarchs, even in the face

of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and despite their character flaws, so we can trust him to fulfill his promises to us in the face of obstacles, and despite our flaws.” For one thing, we may not generalize from children, land, and international influence to whatever else we may want instead. More fundamentally, though, the promises to Abraham were covenantal and redemptive-historical, not merely individualistic.

Instead, God's initial fulfillment of his promises in the person of Isaac anticipates his ultimate fulfillment of his promises in the person of Christ. Far more clearly than Isaac, Jesus demonstrates that God fulfills his salvation-historical promises, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and despite character flaws in his people.



***“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you”
(17:7).***

DAY 17

ABRAHAM: FAITHFUL AND FAITHLESS

Genesis 12

This passage consists of two contrasting narratives. Verses 1-9 make three promises to Abraham, and he responds in faith and obedience. Verses 10-20 present an immediate obstacle to the fulfillment of all three promises; instead of trusting God, Abram panics and betrays his wife Sarai.

Promises of blessing recur often in the Abraham and patriarchal narratives (12:1-3,7; 13:15-17; 15:5; 17:4-8; 18:18; 22:16-18; cf. 26:2-5; 28:13-15; 35:11-12; 46:3-4). The remainder of the Old Testament traces the outworking of the promises of descendants and homeland, while the New Testament takes up the promise of worldwide impact.

What God said to them. The thrust of verses 1-9 is reflected in its structure. In verses 1-3, God commands Abram, 'Go'. In verses 4-9, Abram 'went'. The details reinforce Abram's obedience: the two paragraphs begin with the same verb, and their opening clauses are in reverse order ('chiasm'):

- Said Yahweh / to Abram / "Leave!" (verse 1);
- Left / Abram / as said to him Yahweh (verse 4).

God calls Abram to risk everything: he is to leave his place of residence, his clan, and his father's household. Abram's immediate response is an act of deep trust and bold obedience.

God makes four promises to Abram: one is generic; the other three flesh out the detail. Generally, God promises to 'bless' him. The word appears five times in verses 1-3: "I will bless you;" "you will be a blessing;" "I will bless those who bless you;" "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Specifically, the blessings are three: innumerable descendants ("I will make you into a great nation"), a homeland ("to the land I will show you"), and worldwide impact ("all peoples on earth will be blessed through you").

Given initial circumstances, the promises are far-fetched: Abram is seventy-five years old, and Canaan is already occupied (verses 4-5). The prospect of war against a formidable force challenges all three promises. These obstacles underscore the depth of Abram's trust in God.

When he arrives in Canaan, Abram surveys the land, from Shechem in the north, through Bethel and Ai in the central region, to the Negev in the south. At the first stop, God renews the promise of offspring and land. In response, Abram builds an altar and worships. At the second stop, he builds another altar and worships again. This adds a third dimension in his response to God: in addition to faith and obedience, he worships (verses 6-9).

Read in isolation, verses 1-9 are an ideal portrait of a extraordinarily generous God and a remarkably trusting Abram. The narrator tempers this picture by linking verses 1-9 with verses 10-20, demonstrating that the toxic effects of sin and the Fall persist.

Verses 10-20 threaten all of God’s promises to Abraham. With no prior hint that anything may be amiss, we read, “Now there was a famine in the land.” The famine threatens the promise of land, as it forces Abram to migrate. Abram takes bad and makes it worse: once in Egypt, he does not trust the promises of God, but pimps his wife to protect his own life, though doing so jeopardizes the promise of descendants. In response, God afflicts Pharaoh and his household with disease: rather than blessing the nations, Abram brings them curse.

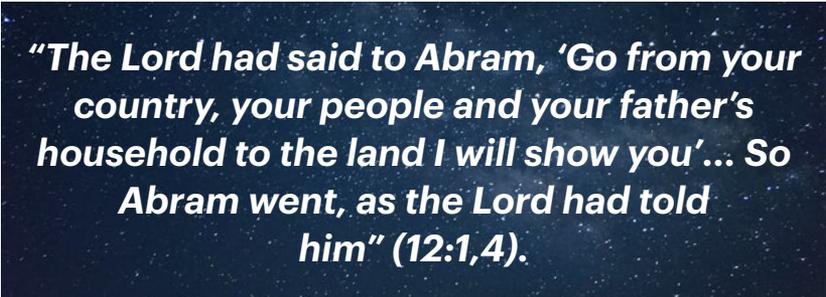
Through the juxtaposition of promise and threat, the narrator cautions that even with divine blessing and promises, the people and purposes of God will face struggles and dangers. The appropriate response is trust, obedience, and worship, not panic, deceit, and scheme. At times, Abram exemplifies the former; at other times, the latter.



What God is saying to us. This passage does not promise us that we will have children, own homes, or become internationally renowned. Nor is its primary message the

moralistic truism, “Live like Abram in verses 1-9, not like he does in verses 10-20.”

As noted previously, at our stage of redemption-history, God’s focus is on his third promise, reaching the world. This passage invites us to take our place in his mission with trust, obedience, and worship. At the same time, the passage urges realism. Even in the plan of God, under his blessing, and possessing his promises, we may face intimidating and intractable obstacles. Sometimes, sadly, we may even be the obstacle, as Abram here. In such times, this passage encourages us to renounce doubt and disreputable schemes. God will ultimately achieve his purposes, whether through us (as with Abram in verses 1-9), or despite us (as with Abram in verses 10-20). Better for all involved, if the former.



“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you’... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (12:1,4).

DAY 18

A SMALL STEP FORWARD

Genesis 13-14

In chapter 12, God promised to bless Abram with countless descendants, a homeland, and international prominence. The rest of Genesis develops this motif in three directions: (a) partial fulfillment of the blessing; (b) in the face of obstacles; (c) for a restricted group of beneficiaries.

Chapters 13-14 report the first progress toward fulfillment of these promises. Chapter 13 takes up descendants and land; chapter 14, international prominence. By the end of the passage, the promises (a) make incremental progress toward fulfillment, while (b) overcoming obstacles, and (c) excluding Lot as a beneficiary.

What God said to them. When chapter 13 opens, Abram is childless. But Lot, an orphaned nephew, is part of his household. Might he be the promised heir?

Lot accompanies Abram and Sarai as they return to Canaan. Both he and his uncle have prospered in Egypt, so much so that their herds are now in competition over grazing land and water. To resolve the tension, Abram suggests separating their families and flocks. As the elder, he has the right to first choice of land, but he generously yields to Lot (13:19).

Seeing the Eden-like fertility of the Jordan plain, Lot moves there, leaving Abram with the hill country of Canaan. The narrator implies criticism of Lot's choice, and foreshadows future developments, noting that he settles near Sodom, whose populace "were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (13:10-13 cf. chapters 18-19).

Abram has just lost both his closest heir and the most arable land. Will the promises of God fail? In the aftermath of the split, God reassures him, repeating the covenant blessing, and promising Abram descendants (once), and land (three times) (13:14-18). Given their split, Lot is implicitly excluded as potential heir to the covenant promises, preserving the promised land for Abram's yet-unborn offspring.

Chapter 14 addresses the promise that Abram would be a blessing to the nations. It consists of three parts. The first supplies background. A coalition from the east subjugated Sodom and surrounding cities. After paying tribute for a dozen years, the cities rebel. So the invaders return to suppress the mutiny (14:1-9).

Sodom and its allies lose the battle. The invaders take spoils and captives, among them, Lot and his family. Word reaches Abram, who sets out with a large band of men. They recover all goods and captives (14:10-16).

On his return, Abram encounters two local rulers: Bera, ruler of Sodom, and Melchizedek, ruler-priest of Salem. The narrative contrasts their responses. Melchizedek

respectfully offers basic provisions for the returning warriors, and formally blesses Abram. In response, Abram gives him the ten percent of the spoils. In contrast, the ruler of Sodom comes out empty-handed. Rather than acknowledge any debt, he arrogantly assumes the prerogative to allocate spoils that he had no part in capturing. Abram's reply drips with contempt, as he renounces any claim to the proceeds (14:17-24).

Chapter 14 provides an example of God fulfilling his third promise to Abram. "Whoever curses you I will curse": Abram defeats the invaders who enslaved his kin. "I will bless those who bless you": Abram receives a blessing from the Canaanite ruler-priest Melchizedek and reciprocates with a tithe.

Thus God begins to fulfill all three of his promises to Abram, in the face of obstacles. At the same time, progress is only incremental.



What God is saying to us. At the end of Genesis 19, we learn that Lot is the forerunner of Moab and Ammon, neighbors and rivals to Israel. So excluding Lot as Abram's heir also implicitly excludes Moab and Ammon from God's chosen people, beneficiaries of the covenant and its promises. Originally, this point was likely a key implication of this passage, but it is of little import for audiences today.

At a more general level, the overall point of the passage remains directly relevant in both respects: God begins immediately to fulfill his covenantal promises; yet that progress is only incremental (by our standards, perhaps even glacial). This is cautionary, as we take up our role in God's purpose and plan for our era, the evangelization of the world. That this process is still incomplete after two millennia must not discourage us. God is not obliged to work at our preferred speed. (Though, more likely, the problem in world evangelization is that the Church has failed to work at God's speed). To perceive God in action, we must not disregard incremental advances at deliberate speed.

(Additionally, the otherwise unknown Melchizedek stimulates subsequent biblical reflection, particularly in his dual role as king-priest as precedent for King David in Psalm 110, and in his non-Aaronic priesthood as precedent for Jesus in Hebrews 5 and 7. These parallels require more exploration than is possible here, and so are best examined in their respective passages.)e I will give to you and your offspring forever" (13:15).



"All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever" (13:15).

DAY 19

TRUSTING THE TRUSTWORTHY GOD

Genesis 15

The narrator continues to link consecutive narratives. In 12:1-9, Abram received promises from God, and responded in faith; in 12:10-20, each of those promises came under threat, and Abram schemed in fear. In chapter 13, the promises of descendants and land seemed weakened by Lot's departure, so God renewed both promises; chapter 14 rounds out the picture, with Abram defeating some foreign rulers, and blessing another. Now, in chapter 15, Abram trusts in the promises of God; in chapter 16, he and Sarai anxiously scheme to fulfill the promise themselves. Today we look at chapter 15; tomorrow, at chapter 16.

What God said to them. The chapter consists of two parts, verses 1-6 and verses 7-21. Shared vocabulary ties them together: 'sovereign Lord', 'descendants', 'inherit', and 'bring out'. Thematically, the successive paragraphs develop two of God's promises to Abram: innumerable descendants (verses 1-6), and a homeland (verses 7-21).

The episodes unfold in parallel. Each paragraph begins with a divine promise to Abram (a a'): first, protection and reward (verse 1); second, a homeland (verse 7). Both times, Abram

responds with ambivalence (b b'). On the one hand, God is sovereign (and so, capable of fulfilling his promise, verses 2,8). On the other hand, each promise faces an obvious obstacle: at an advanced age, Abram does not have even a single child (verses 2-3), and he is a newly arrived and landless migrant (verse 8).

a	15:1	God promises to protect and reward Abram.
b	15:2-3	Abram doubts God's promise of descendants.
c	15:4-5	God confirms the promise, in two stages.
d	15:6	Abram trusts God to fulfill his promise.
a'	15:7	God promises Abram land.
b'	15:8	Abram doubts God's promise of land.
c'	15:9-16	God confirms the promise, in two stages.
d'	15:17-21	God covenants to fulfill both promises.

God counters each objection with a double promise, one near and the other distant (c c'). Regarding descendants, Abram and Sarai will give birth to a son, and eventually their offspring will be innumerable (verses 4-5). With respect to a homeland, their descendants will endure centuries of slavery in a foreign country, but eventually take possession of Canaan (verses 12-16). Each paragraph climaxes with a decisive and positive response (d d'). In the former, Abraham trusts God (verse 6). In the latter, God covenants to fulfill both promises (verses 17-21).

Promise and obstacle are the presenting occasion of each episode; the point comes in the climax. In the first instance,

Abram trusts God and his promise, in the face of a prohibitive obstacle, and before there is any movement toward fulfillment. In the second, God binds himself to fulfill his promises regardless of obstacles. The episodes combine in the dual point of the passage: Abram trusts God, who is trustworthy.

One further point deserves mention: the parallel development of these episodes spotlights a deviation in the second. The first episode ends with Abram trusting God's promise of descendants. To preserve the parallelism, the second episode could have ended with Abram trusting God's promise of land. Instead, it ends with God binding himself to fulfill his promises. The point of the deviation? While trust in God is a necessary condition for right standing with him, human faith is grounded in divine faithfulness. Abram is commended for his trust; God, for his trustworthiness.

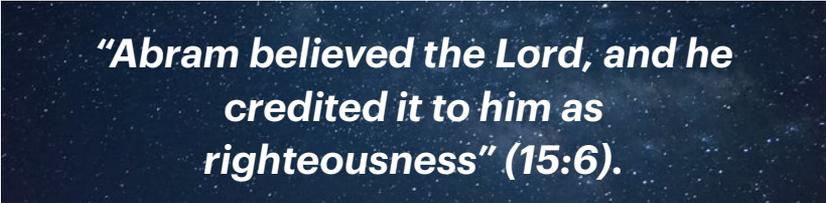


What God is saying to us. This passage applies in two directions: first, in its original point; and, then, in its New Testament application.

In its original context, the passage celebrates Abraham, for trusting the promises of God, and God, for his trustworthiness. First and foremost, God's faithfulness and Abraham's faith are the foundation of the covenant between God and Israel throughout its history. Secondarily and derivatively, Abram is a role model for all his descendants:

faith – trust that God is faithful to his promises, among which salvation is chief – is the essential condition for relationship with God.

In the New Testament era, as Jewish believers in Christ seek to impose the Old Testament law on gentile converts, 15:6 serves as the centerpiece of the argument for gentile acceptance apart from fulfilling the Law’s requirements. “[Abraham] believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham” (Galatians 3:6-8 cf. Romans 4:3; James 2:23). God accepts us through faith in Christ, not through obedience to the Law, nor by any other efforts we might make in a vain attempt to earn his approval.



“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6).

DAY 20

RUSHING GOD'S TIMING

Genesis 16

Genesis 12 reported the initial promises to Abram. Then chapters 13-14 considered – and rejected – the possibility that Lot was his promised heir. Genesis 15 has just repeated the promise of descendants and land. Now chapter 16 considers – and rejects – the possibility that Ishmael is his promised heir. Notably, though, in being disqualified as primary heir to the promises of God, Ishmael becomes a beneficiary of the third promise: that through Abram, all nations on earth will be blessed.

What God said to them. Chapter 15 was a high point, with God promising Abram children and land, and commending him for believing the promise. So it is an abrupt surprise when this very next chapter opens with Sarai having lost either confidence in God, or patience with him. Instead of waiting for him to provide the promised son, she takes matters into her own hands. Her efforts do not advance the promise, however, but directly disrupt it.

The chapter begins and ends on the same theme ('inclusion'). "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children" (verse 1); "Hagar bore Abram a son ... the son she had borne... Hagar bore him Ishmael" (verses 15-16). Abram obtains a son. Yet the son comes not through his wife, but through her maid. That distinction makes all the difference.

Impatient with her prolonged barrenness, Sarai proposes her maid as a surrogate (verses 1-3). Once pregnant, Hagar treats her mistress with contempt. Sarai blames Abram, and provokes Hagar to flee (verses 4-6).

The angel of the Lord intervenes, directing Hagar to return. He also offers two predictions: her son will have innumerable descendants, and they will be in continual conflict with surrounding peoples (verses 7-12). Ishmael is not the promised child, primary heir to the Abrahamic blessing. Nonetheless, Hagar commemorates the sacred encounter and generous promises by naming the Lord, “the God who sees me,” and naming her son, Ishmael, i.e., “God hears” (verses 13-14).

Two more features of this passage bear notice. For one, various forms of parallelism run throughout, structuring each paragraph. It seems more aesthetic and emphatic, than meaningful. Still, the effect is to highlight the chapter. As the first-born son of Abram, Ishmael is a threat to the promised heir. The next narrative, 17:1-18:15, will announce the birth of Isaac, and protect his role as promised son.

Additionally, this passage shares significant features with the temptation account in Genesis 3. Sarai, like Eve, initiates the action. Abram, like Adam, ‘obeyed’ his wife. Like Eve with the fruit, Sarai ‘took’ and ‘gave’ her maid to Abram. When events devolve, Sarai shifts the blame, as both Adam and Eve did in Eden. In linking the two accounts, the narrator implicitly criticizes Abram and Sarai for breaching gender roles (much as he elsewhere criticizes Abram for

failing to fulfill the traditional male role; cf. 12:10-20; 20:1-18).



What God is saying to us. The Hagar-Sarah and Ishmael-Isaac contrasts feature prominently in the New Testament, particularly in Galatians 4 and Romans 9, respectively. Application would typically feature these passages. Both treatments are complex, however, requiring detailed comment. So the texts are best left until they can be the focus of dedicated readings.

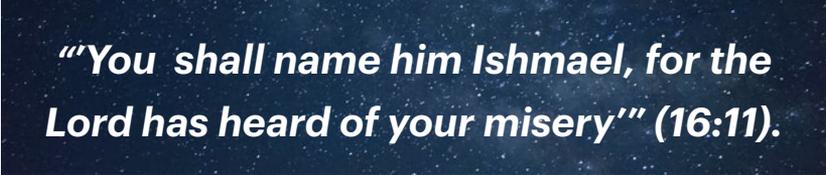
For the present, application can move in any of four directions. First, immediately after the glowing review in chapter 15, this episode casts a cloud over the faith and character of Abram and Sarai. Like other biblical heroes, they are both godly and flawed. We must be alert to the same mix in ourselves, our leaders, and our spiritual heroes today.

Secondly, their strategy for expediting the work of God actually threatens it (and complicates geopolitics still today). Similarly, the recent history of evangelism and missions is strewn with debris left by impetuous or dubious strategies intended to accelerate progress. Genesis 15 affirms that God's salvation-historical promises are reliable; so, Genesis 16 adds, is his timing.

Thirdly, application could explore the possible implications of this passage for gender roles in marriage and ministry

today. The narrator implicitly affirms what many today consider to be a 'traditional' dynamic. Should that norm transfer from a patriarchal culture (assuming that characterization is fair) to a culture that aspires to be egalitarian? Opinions will differ, hopefully with civility.

Finally, God's promises toward Hagar and Ishmael may influence our understanding of election. God does not promise them a dedicated homeland, or international prominence, but he does promise innumerable descendants. He is sufficiently generous for Hagar to nickname him, 'The God who sees me,' and to name her son, 'God hears'. She credits God with greater generosity toward the non-elect than many today assume.



“You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery” (16:11).

DAY 21

COVENANT OBLIGATION AND PROMISE

Genesis 17

Chapter 17 is in the center of the chiasm that stretches from chapters 12-21. It is parallel in structure and in content to yesterday's passage:

C	C1	15:1-21	Covenant blessings on Abram: descendants and land;
	C2	16:1-16	Ishmael is born as man-made heir to the promises.
C'	C'1	17:1-14	Covenant requirement on Abraham: circumcision;
	C'2	17:15-27	Isaac will be born as true heir to the promises.

C and C' consist of two parts, in synonymous parallelism. C1 identifies the covenant blessings that God bestows; C'1, the covenant obligation that he imposes. C2 records the birth of Ishmael; C'2 anticipates the birth of Isaac.

The structure reinforces the two central points of this passage. First, the covenant entails both blessings from God, and also responsibilities toward him; in particular, circumcision (C1 C'1). Vocabulary statistics reflect these emphases: 'covenant' occurs thirteen times; 'circumcision', ten times. Secondly, Ishmael is not heir to the covenant, Isaac is (C2 C'2). Previously the covenant was made with

Abram, excluding Lot; now it is extended to Isaac, excluding Ishmael.

What God said to them. Chapter 17 is set off by literary bookends ('inclusion'). In verse 1, the Lord appears and speaks to Abram; in verse 22, the Lord finishes speaking and goes away. Additionally, both the beginning and the end note Abram's age, ninety-nine (verses 1,24). Abram's age is significant: at last notice, he was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (16:16). So he and Sarai have had thirteen years without another son, thirteen years to acclimate to Ishmael being their sole heir.

The structure of the chapter is clear. Verses 1-2 provide a thesis sentence in two parts: (a) Abram is to live obediently; (b) if he does, God will keep covenant with him, providing innumerable descendants, a homeland, and international influence.

A quick read could lead to the deduction that Abram's obedience earns the covenant with God. To the contrary, this is the third time that God has made this covenant with him, and the first time that he stipulates the required reciprocation (cf. chapters 12,15). Even here, as the chapter develops, it reverses the order, first setting out God's benefactions (verses 3-8), and then Abram's necessary reciprocation (verses 9-14). The covenant is a gracious initiative by God. At the same time, covenant blessings are conditional upon obedience.

The remainder of the chapter divides into four parts, in two pairs, arranged in 'synonymous parallelism' (aba'b'). Similar introductory phrases separate the first three paragraphs: 'As for me [God]' (verse 3); 'As for you [Abram]' (verse 9), 'As for Sarai' (verse 15).

b	17:3-8	God will give Abraham nations, descendants, and land.
a	17:9-14	All Abraham's household males must be circumcised.
b'	17:15-22	God will give Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac, as heir.
a'	17:23-27	All Abraham's household males are circumcised.

Emblematic of the covenant blessings, God modifies their names. 'Abram' becomes 'Abraham', a dialect variation, both meaning 'father of a multitude'. 'Sarai' becomes 'Sarah', a variant pronunciation of the same name, meaning 'Princess'.

The text never explains why God chooses circumcision as a mark of membership in the covenant. The procedure was a common religious ritual through much – not all – of the ancient Near East, though generally at puberty, rather than at birth. Whatever the rationale for this particular ritual, from this time forward, circumcision becomes the outward mark of covenant membership.

Overall, this passage continues the theme of Genesis: God advances his purposes in the face of intractable obstacles. This time, Abraham and Sarah are so old that they laugh at the prospect of conceiving a child. So when Isaac is born, God directs them to name the child, 'he laughs'.



What God is saying to us. As early as Deuteronomy, circumcision develops a deeper meaning: circumcision of the foreskin symbolizes the need for circumcision of the heart. Abraham's compliance with the one command symbolizes the requirement to obey God in all matters (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; cf. Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25-26). The apostle Paul affirms that the Spirit performs this inner circumcision, promoting both faith in Christ and obedience to him (Romans 2:25-29). With the advent of inner circumcision, outward circumcision becomes redundant for gentile converts (cf. Acts 15; 1 Corinthians 7:18-19; Galatians 5:2-6; 6:12-15). It is sufficient – and necessary – that we believe in Christ and obey him.

“On that very day Abraham took ... every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him” (17:23).

DAY 22

MERCY DOES NOT PRECLUDE JUDGMENT

Genesis 18-19

Within the extended chiasm that stretches from chapters 12-21, chapters 18-19 pair with chapters 13-14. In chapter 13, Lot moves near Sodom; in chapter 19, he flees the city. In chapter 14, Abram rescues Lot and Sodom from enemy capture; in chapter 18, he attempts to rescue Sodom from divine judgment, though only part of Lot's family escapes.

B	B1	13:1-18	Lot moves near Sodom.
	B2	14:1-24	Abram rescues Lot and Sodom from a foreign army.
B'	B'2	18:1-33	Abraham tries to rescue Sodom from God's judgment.
	B'1	19:1-38	Lot flees Sodom.

Previously, the narrator characterized Sodom as 'wicked' and 'sinning greatly against the Lord' (13:13). Today's passage fills in the details.

What God said to them. In addition to the macrostructure covering chapters 12-21, internally, this passage employs chiasmic structure:

a	18:1-15	Abraham and Sarah will conceive a son by divine act.
b	18:16-33	God will destroy Sodom, despite Abraham's pleas.
b'	19:1-29	Angels rescue Lot and his daughters from Sodom.
a'	19:30-38	Lot conceives sons through incest with his daughters.

In conjoining these four episodes, the narrator contrasts Abraham with Sodom, on the one hand, and with Lot, on the other. Since the two middle episodes are the more obvious pairing, we begin there and work out.

The middle units contrast the residents of Sodom with Abraham. God promises that Abraham will become a powerful nation that blesses all other nations. The promise is conditional, however: his descendants must do what is right and just. This characterization contrasts sharply with Sodom and Gomorrah, whose grievous sin has provoked an outcry that reaches all the way to heaven, prompting God to investigate. Abraham's immediate response is to bless – i.e., intercede for – Sodom. God eventually consents to withhold judgment if the city has merely ten righteous inhabitants (18:16-33).

Lot meets the investigative team at the city gate, the center of official business. In keeping with ancient protocol, he insists that the travelers accept his hospitality. Before they settle down for the night, all the adult males in the city surround the house, intent on homosexual gang-rape. To shame his neighbors back to their senses, Lot suggests something unspeakable: let them, instead, rape his daughters in his presence. The mob grasps the insult,

objects to his judgmental interference, and threatens violence against him. The angels he was rescuing have to rescue him. Even after such deplorable treatment, Lot and his family resist fleeing the city. Once they are out of harm's way, the Lord rains down burning sulfur (likely volcanic activity). An epilogue recalls Abraham's effort at intercession, and credits him with Lot's deliverance (19:1-29).

As for the first and last units, these contrast Abraham and Lot, with a motif that runs throughout Genesis: distinguishing the heirs of God's blessings from potential rivals. Abraham and Sarah conceive a son through the miraculous intervention of God (18:1-15). Lot conceives two sons through incest with his daughters (19:30-38).

This narrative is political satire. Each of these characters represents an entire people. Abraham's son becomes patriarch of Israel, recipient of divine blessing, provided they "keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just." Sodom is in Canaan, Israel's historic enemy, despicable for its rank sexual immorality. Lot's incestuous sons-grandsons become patriarchs of two of Israel's neighbors and perpetual rivals, Moab (meaning, 'from father') and Ammon ('son of my father's people'). These country names are to be taken literally, the narrator mocks.



What God is saying to us. This is religious-political invective. The judgment of Sodom anticipates and justifies the

coming destruction of the Canaanites. Moab and Ammon transparently represent the Moabites and Ammonites, perpetual enemies of Israel. The narrative divides nations into two camps: Israel, the miraculous descendants of Abraham, beneficiaries of God’s promises, provided they follow his ways; and their enemies, homosexual gang-rapists and bastards born of incest.

At the same time, the narrative is cunningly subversive and rehabilitative, in two respects. First, it reminds Israel that to receive the promised blessings, they must “keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (18:19). Secondly, Abraham models how to respond to other peoples, however despicable their conduct: he does not call down God’s judgment; instead, he negotiates with God for their deliverance, and on minimal standards.

How, then, should we respond to international rivals? Or to our own culture as it embraces sexual mores inimical to biblical values?



“[God] answered, ‘For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it’” (18:32).

DAY 23

FAITHFUL TO THE FAITHLESS

Genesis 20-21

Chapters 20-21 are the final unit of the palistrophe (extended chiasm) that stretches from chapters 12-21:

A	A1	12:1-9	God makes a covenant with Abram, promising descendants, land, and international prominence.
	A2	12:10-20	God's promises are threatened when Abram moves to Egypt and Sarai is taken into a harem.
A'	A'2	20:1-18	God's promises are threatened when Abraham moves to Philistine territory and Sarah is taken into a harem.
	A'1	21:1-34	Isaac is born as the promised heir, and Abraham acquires use of land in a treaty with a foreign king.

In this final episode, Abraham repeats the sin of the first, permitting Sarah to be taken into a foreign harem in order to keep himself safe. Despite this threat to the divine promises, God ensures an initial fulfillment of all three.

What God said to them. In addition to the macrostructure governing chapters 12-21, the internal structure of chapters 20-21 is noteworthy. It consists of two paired episodes in chiasm:

a	20:1-18	Abraham betrays Sarah to Abimelek, ruler of Gerar.
b	21:1-7	Isaac is born to Sarah, as heir to Abraham.
b'	21:8-21	Ishmael is sent away, as not heir to Abraham.
a'	21:22-34	Abraham signs a treaty with Abimelek, ruler of Gerar.

The first and last accounts reference Abraham's dealings with the local ruler Abimelek; the middle two, the identity of Abraham's heir. In addition to their collective significance, the individual episodes warrant comment.

At the end of yesterday's reading, the narrator told a story that would delight his audience: Lot, ancestor to Israel's perpetual enemies, sired their progenitors through drunken incest with his daughters. These sordid origins are immortalized in a double meaning for their national names: Moab ('from my father') and Ben-Ammi ('son of my relative'). The story disparages the Moabite and Ammonite peoples. This is sacred Scripture, but it is also nationalistic contempt (19:30-38).

While his audience is enjoying the slur against their enemies, the narrator shows Israelite ancestry to be little better. Abraham moves to Philistine territory, on the southeastern border of Canaan. For the second time, he pawns off his wife as his sister in order to save his own life. Lot could plead that he was drunk when his daughters raped him; Abraham is sober when he betrays his wife.

Mercifully, God comes to her rescue. He appears to the foreign king in a dream, threatening his family and lineage

unless he returns Sarah to her husband. God's intervention saves the possibility of an heir, secures Abraham land to settle, and blesses a foreign nation, partially fulfilling all three covenant promises, despite Abraham's abysmal behavior (20:1-18).

In the subsequent episode, Sarah conceives and bears a son. They name him 'Isaac', meaning 'he laughs', not only reminiscent of their initial mocking of the promise, but also expressing their joy over its fulfillment. Abraham responds by circumcising Isaac on the eighth day, as required under the covenant (21:1-7 cf. 17:17; 18:12-15).

The birth of Isaac leads to the expulsion of Ishmael and his mother from the family home, at Sarah's insistence, so that her son can claim the entire inheritance. God tells Abraham to comply, "because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." He promises, though, that Ishmael will also have many descendants (21:8-21).

Completing the chiasm, Abimelek makes a treaty with Abraham that fulfills God's promise of land. While originally belonging to the Philistines, Beersheba would become the southern boundary of Israel (21:22-34).

This narrative makes two points, both continuing the core themes of Genesis. First, twenty-five years after God makes three promises to Abraham, he brings about an initial fulfillment: "The Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised" (21:1). Along with a child, he provided use of a plot of land,

through a treaty with a foreign ruler. Secondly, he fulfilled his promise against seemingly insurmountable odds: “[She] bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time that God had promised him” (21:2). Worsening those odds are the complications arising from Abraham’s faithlessness.



What God is saying to us. The long-awaited birth of Isaac, in the face of insuperable obstacles, despite the flaws of Abraham, offered hope to Israel during later, desperate times. The God who ensured the birth of their progenitor against severe odds would preserve the nation through slavery in Egypt, through forty years wandering in the wilderness, through the invasion of Canaan, and through foreign exile. It offers hope to us, too, in our era of salvation history, as we labor to see the gospel spread among all nations, despite opposition and our own flaws.

“Sarah ... bore a son to Abraham ... at the very time God had promised him” (21:2).

DAY 24

“SACRIFICE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON”

Genesis 22:1-19

This episode serves as a bridge between the palistrophe which precedes, and another which follows.

Thematically, all three sections are about Abram and Isaac. What distinguishes this middle portion is chronology, as the newborn Isaac has become a lad, not yet an adult.

What God said to them. In yesterday’s reading, the Abraham story reaches a pinnacle: the long-awaited child is born, and all three of God’s promises – descendants, land, and international renown – advance one step. Now that progress is at risk, as God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

Thematically, the passage divides into five units, alternating between God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son (a, a’, a’), and Abraham’s desperate hope that God will provide an alternative sacrifice (b, b’).

a	22:1-5	God speaks to Abraham, commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, ‘your son, your only son, whom you love.’
b	22:6-8	Against all indication, Abraham tells Isaac that God will ‘provide’ the necessary lamb for the sacrifice.
a’	22:9-12	The angel stops Abraham, but commends his willingness to sacrifice ‘your son, your only son.’

b'	22:13-14	Finding a ram for sacrifice, Abraham names the place 'The Lord Will Provide,' which becomes a lasting proverb.
a''	22:15-18	Because Abraham offers 'your son, your only son', God confirms his covenant promises.

The message of the passage is stated twice in its conclusion. The pronouncement uses chiasm (inverted parallelism) for emphasis: because Abraham obeyed ($\alpha \alpha'$), God confirms the covenant with him ($\beta \beta'$).

α	22:16	Because you have done this and have not withheld 'your son, your only son,'
β	22:17a	I will bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.
β'	22:17b	Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies; through your offspring all nations be blessed,
α'	22:18	because you have obeyed me.

The very same blessing and promises initiated by God's grace (chapters 12, 15) are confirmed by Abraham's obedience (chapters 17, 22).



What God is saying to us. This incident complements the portrait of the covenant in chapter 15. There, God promised Abraham innumerable descendants. In response, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Since Abraham is the father of all who follow, the apostle Paul universalizes faith as the covenant

requirement for all Christians, Jew or gentile: “Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7). The primacy of faith is both familiar to, and comfortable for, most Christians.

The current passage, on the other hand, often creates uneasiness. The conclusion leaves the reader in no doubt about the point of the incident: “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you ... because you have obeyed me” (Genesis 22:16-18). Twice the passage affirms that God blesses Abraham because he obeyed.

Many Christians today suppose that faith is sufficient for salvation, while obedience, though preferred, is ultimately optional. Yet the apostle James quotes this very chapter to make the point that obedience is necessary for salvation: “You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did” (James 2:20-22).

Can these two perspectives be harmonized? When the apostle Paul rejects salvation through obedience, he does not make holiness optional. Instead, he rejects obedience as the basis or ground of salvation. Salvation is grounded in the atoning death of Christ, applied to those who trust in Christ (Romans 3:21-4:25; Galatians 3:10-14). Yet whenever

Paul insists on faith as the means for salvation, he also affirms that holiness is necessary for salvation: “Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:8; cf. Romans 8:13).

Finally, we must not pass over this passage without noting another application. While God calls Abraham to sacrifice ‘his son, his only son’, he no more requires that of us than he did of Abraham. Instead, it is he who sacrifices ‘his son, his only son, whom he loves’, and not to honor a covenant superior, but to rescue sinners from judgment (John 3:16-18).

“Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you” (22:16-17).

DAY 25

BLESSING THE NON-ELECT

Genesis 22:20-24; 25:12-18

The Abraham narrative ends with another palistrophe (i.e., inverted parallelism, extended chiasm).

A	22:20-24	The lineage of Nahor, Abraham's brother
B	23:1-20	The death and burial of Sarah
C	24:1-27	God helps Abraham's servant identify a wife for Isaac
C'	24:28-67	The servant recounts the search to Rebekah's family
B'	25:1-11	The death and burial of Abraham
A'	25:12-18	The lineage of Ishmael, Isaac's brother

Given the thematic parallels, the next three readings step outside the textual order to combine corresponding texts, A with A', B with B', and C with C'.

What God said to them. Paragraphs A and A' serve as the introduction and conclusion to the section. The former tracks Abraham's extended family; the latter, Isaac's. Because the two paragraphs are brief and make a similar point, we consider them together.

At first glance, 22:20-24 seems pretty random. After the chapter-long narrative of Abraham offering Isaac, the story line shifts abruptly to a few verses about Abraham's family

of origin, last mentioned in 11:27-32. Then the topic shifts abruptly back to his immediate family, and Sarah's death.

Closing the section, 25:12-18 also appears random. It provides a brief lineage of Ishmael, last seen in 21:8-21, and seems oddly situated between the death of Abraham, and the birth of Isaac's children.

Taken together, though, the two paragraphs bookend the death reports for Sarah and Abraham, opening and closing the final section of the Abraham narrative. More than mere literary transitions, each paragraph makes a point, the same point.

The first paragraph – 22:20-24 – resumes the lineage of Nahor, who previously appeared in the introduction to the Abraham narrative. In 11:27-32, we learned that Terah had three sons, Abraham, Nahor, and Haran. Haran died young, and his brothers stepped in to look after his children, Lot and Milkah. Lot joined Abraham's family, and they left Ur together, heading toward the promised land. Milkah married her uncle Nahor, and they stayed behind. A generation later, Abraham receives word that his brother Nahor has raised twelve sons, eight with his wife Milkah, and four more with his concubine Reumah.

The last paragraph of the epilogue, 25:12-18, traces the lineage of Ishmael. He was cast out of Abraham's family once the biological son and true heir to the covenant – Isaac – arrived. Eventually he also has twelve sons, each head of a clan, spread over a sizeable territory, with a

reputation as warriors. Both their militarism and their number fulfill God's promises. When God first sent the runaway Hagar back to Sarah, he promised that she would give birth to a son who "will live in hostility toward all his brothers," the phrase repeated here (25:18 cf. 16:12). When God later sent Hagar and Ishmael away, he promised that a nation would arise from Ishmael (21:13,18), a fulfillment recorded here.

The point? Together, the introduction and conclusion close the Abrahamic narrative with a retrospective look at the destiny of the non-elect lines. God chose one son of Terah, Abraham; and not the other, Nahor. God chose one son of Abraham, Isaac; and not the other, Ishmael. Nonetheless, both Nahor and Ishmael bear twelve male descendants, matching the twelve sons of Jacob, patriarchs of Israel. This is the concluding note that the narrator makes in recounting the lineage of Abraham: the non-elect also enjoy God's blessings of descendants. In fact, the non-elect reach twelve male descendants one generation quicker! They are beneficiaries of God's blessings, even though they are not the elect lineage.



What God is saying to us. Genesis emphasizes the election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, over against their siblings; and thus, the election of Israel over the surrounding nations. The election of Israel to be God's special people is a central theme of the book. All the same, the narrator notes, Nahor, Ishmael and, later, Esau, all prosper under the generous

blessing of God, even though they are not the chosen lineage.

This counterbalance may be reassuring for contemporary Christians. The doctrine of election causes considerable consternation today, as it suggests that God sovereignly (i.e., arbitrarily) blesses some and condemns others. How is this either fair or just? Space does not permit detailed consideration here; besides, the discussion more properly centers on the apostle Paul's teaching in Romans 9-10, where the doctrine will be revisited. At the very least, though, this passage assures us that when God elects Abraham and Isaac to be the focus of his work and his blessing, he does not abandon either Nahor or Ishmael. He is gracious and generous even to the non-elect.

“These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, listed in the order of their birth: Nebaioth ... Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah” (25:13-15).

DAY 26

DEATH AND THE PROMISES OF GOD

Genesis 23:1-20; 25:1-11

As noted yesterday, these two sections are thematic parallels, and part of a palistrophe (extended chiasm, or inverted parallelism):

B	23:1-20	The death and burial of Sarah
B'	25:1-11	The death and burial of Abraham

More is going on here than death notices. Both episodes contribute to the overall theme of Genesis, though in different ways.

What God said to them. Roughly thirty-five years have passed since Sarah sent Hagar away, and we have heard nothing more about her, not even during the near sacrifice of Isaac. She reappears now, only to die.

The account is unusual in two respects. For one, the narrator spends only two verses on Sarah's death. The other eighteen verses focus on the negotiation over a burial plot. The disproportion is striking. For the other, the negotiation bargains the price up, rather than down.

Abraham begins negotiations with self-deprecating remarks, acknowledging his lack of standing as a foreigner. The Hittites respond with compliments, offering to share their own family tombs with him. Abraham, however, wants his own piece of property. He has a particular property in mind, and indirectly asks to buy it. The owner twice offers Abraham the land at no cost. Abraham declines and asks for market price. The owner names a figure, but with a quick disclaimer, again offering the land free of charge. Abraham pays the asking price and the field is publicly deeded to him (23:1-20).

Haggling the price up is surprising to us, but commonplace to the narrator. What he highlights is Abraham's desire to own the land, stated five times (23:4,9[2x],13,16). Twice more he records that the land was officially deeded to him (23:17-18,20). Why does owning the land receive more attention than grieving the loss of his wife? The narrator tells us twice, bookending the episode: this land is in Canaan (23:2,19).

God promised Abraham descendants and land. It has taken a long time, but at the end of Sarah's life, and near the end of his own, he does at least have one son, and now, one piece of property within the Promised Land. It is not much, but it is a first step.

The later death and burial of Abraham (25:1-11) also contributes to the trajectory of Genesis, though via a different divine promise. Little is said about the death of the patriarch. He is buried in the same plot as Sarah, but since

the land already belongs to him, land ownership is no longer of special interest. What does receive attention is the identity of his heir.

Ishmael is still in the picture: he joins Isaac to bury their father. But he was long ago excluded as heir. A new potential challenge to Isaac has arisen, however. After Sarah's death, Abraham remarries. His new wife bears him six sons; additionally, seven grandsons and three tribal groups issue from them. Abraham's concubines bear more children. These are a great many descendants, each of them a fulfillment of God's promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations.

Each of them is also a potential threat to Isaac's inheritance. So Abraham acts strategically to preserve the bulk of his estate for his heir. While alive, he makes gifts to all these other sons and sends them away from Isaac. Then, on death, he leaves everything he owns to Isaac. Though father of many nations, Abraham has only one heir. The narrator concludes: "After Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac" (25:5-11).

So the account of the death and burial of Sarah focuses on God's promise of land. The death and burial of Abraham focuses on the promise of an heir. These are only the first steps in a long process, but they give confidence that the rest will follow in due time.



What God is saying to us. The end of Abraham’s life brings us full circle back to the beginning of his call. In chapter 12, God promised Abram descendants, land, and international influence. The very next narrative reported him losing his most obvious heir and the most arable land, though he did, at least, receive a blessing from a single, minor foreign ruler (chapters 13-14). Now, at the end of his life, Abraham has a single heir and owns a single plot of land in Canaan. Not a lot to show for an entire life, especially one that began with explicit and grand promises from God. Yet for Abraham and for Israel, these advances represent the germination of the promise which will eventually grow into a towering tree.

In our case, the promise is to bless the world through the gospel. We often expect rapid and dramatic results. Here the work of God begins small, like a mustard seed, and grows slowly, like a hardwood tree. We do well to resist the lust for immediate and grand results, lest slow success drive us to despair, rather than to celebration.

“The field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site” (23:20).

DAY 27

A WIFE FOR ISAAC

Genesis 24

To review, the Abraham narrative consists of two lengthy panels, each in palistrophe (inverted parallelism, or extended chiasm), connected by an interlude. The first panel, chapters 12-21, recounts the life of Abraham and Sarah, from their calling through the birth of Isaac. The interlude, chapter 22a, skips ahead to the youthful Isaac, and the command that Abraham sacrifice him. The second panel, chapters 22b-25, jumps ahead again, recounting the death and burial, first of Sarah, then of Abraham. In the middle of this second panel – generally the position of emphasis in a palistrophe – comes the search for a wife for Isaac.

That is to say, before the aged Abraham can rest in peace, he must ensure the continuation of his lineage by securing a wife for his son and heir. To this point, God has fulfilled each of his promises to Abraham – albeit incrementally – by giving him a single descendant, a small plot in the promised land, and a positive relationship with one foreign ruler. These promises were consistently to Abraham and his offspring (24:7,60; cf. 12:7; 13:15,16; 15:5; 17:12; 21:12,13; 22:18). In fact, Isaac's main role in Genesis is as a bridge between extended narratives about his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob. So the next step is to ensure generational succession.

What God said to them. As noted in the reading for Day 25, the core – and most obvious feature – of this passage is its double report:

C	24:1-27	God helps Abraham’s servant identify a wife for Isaac.
C’	24:28-67	The servant recounts the search to Rebekah’s family.

The repetition underscores the importance of this incident for the story line.

Examined in greater detail, verses 1-9 introduce the story arc in basically three parts: (a) Abraham’s servant is to find a wife, (b) who comes from extended family outside Canaan, (c) yet who is willing to move to Canaan. (a) In verses 10-21, the servant prays, proposing a process for identifying the appropriate wife; God – and Rebekah – comply. (b) In verses 22-27, Rebekah confirms that she is from Abraham’s extended family. (c) In verses 28-54, the family consents for Rebekah to marry Isaac and move to Canaan; in verses 55-67, she agrees to move immediately, and they marry.

The theme is underscored by recurring vocabulary. In verse 4, Abraham tells his servant to “go and take” a wife for Isaac. In verse 51, Rebekah’s family invites him to “take [her] and go.” In verse 58, her family asks her, “Will you go [now]?”; she replies, “I will go.” In verse 61, the servant “took [her] and went.” The point of the story is clear: (a) God provided Isaac a wife, (b) who was from his father’s clan, and (c) willing to live in Canaan.

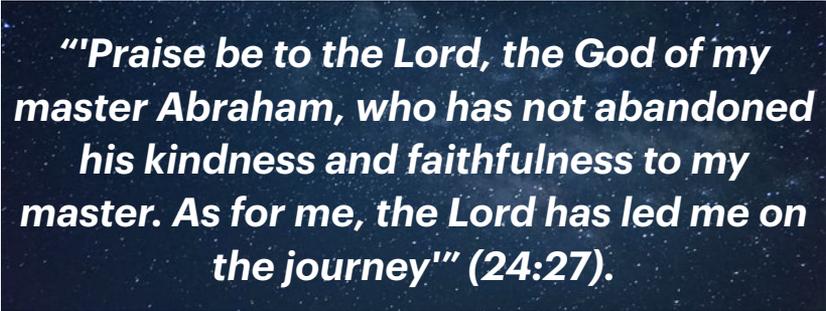
This is the first marriage for the Abrahamic lineage within Canaan. It sets the pattern for all subsequent marriages, in two respects: the wife must not be Canaanite; and, the couple must reside in Canaan, the Promised Land. These provisions are non-negotiable; they were laid down by the father of the nation, and confirmed by God's fulfillment. The restrictions are also feasible: God leads the servant immediately to the right woman. The narrator makes this point more than ten times: God continues to fulfill his covenant with Abraham by providing Isaac a suitable wife (verses 1,7,12,14,21,26-27,31,35,40,42,48,56).



What God is saying to us. This passage is often cited in support of the notion that God has a particular person for each of us to marry. If that is the point, then two corollaries follow: someone else should choose our spouse for us, and from among our relatives. Fundamentally, Isaac played a pivotal role in salvation history: had he not married, the promises to Abraham would have collapsed. Even then, Abraham was only hopeful – not certain – that God would provide a suitable wife (verses 7-8,40-41).

Historically, this passage has also been used to prohibit interracial marriage. The purpose of the original restriction was to forbid religiously-mixed marriages. The New Testament considers all who believe in Christ to be children of Abraham. Nationality and ethnicity no longer have any spiritual or marital relevance (cf. Galatians 3:26-29; 4:28).

What remains relevant is the spiritual commitment of a potential spouse. The New Testament continues to prohibit a believer entering marriage with a non-believer; apart from that, Paul says, marry whomever you wish (1 Corinthians 7:39). Or choose not to marry at all (1 Corinthians 7:25-40). At most, Genesis 24 models the hope that God will provide a suitable spouse; yet, as with Isaac, this is no guarantee.



“Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey” (24:27).

DAY 28

THE JACOB STORY: OVERVIEW

Genesis 25:19-35:29

As previously, the narrator begins this new section with the heading, “This is the account of ...” (Genesis 25:19; cf. 11:27; 37:2). In this case, the stipulated subject is “Abraham’s son Isaac.” Yet while Isaac survives for the entire passage, the narrative focuses predominately on his son Jacob.

Only in chapter 26 is Isaac the major character, and not in a good way. Apart from that single incident, he is occasionally present, yet only as a minor character, necessary but peripheral to the main action. He is the father who prays for children in chapter 25. He is the husband duped by his wife and son in chapter 27. Then he dies in chapter 35. In between, it is his sons who occupy center stage, and particularly the second-born, Jacob, as he plots, cheats, flees, marries, returns, and reconciles. So Genesis 25b-35 is more the account of the family line, and more about Jacob than anyone else.

What God said to them. The extended narrative is again structured in the form of a palistrophe.

A	25:19-34	New generation rises: Jacob and Esau are born rivals.
B	26:1-33	Isaac makes a treaty with foreigners: Abimelech.
C	26:34-28:9	Jacob steals their father's blessing from Esau.
D	28:10-22	Jacob flees Canaan and encounters God at Bethel.
E	29:1-14a	Jacob arrives at Laban's in Haran.
F	29:14b-30	Laban cheats Jacob into marrying Leah before Rachel.
G	29:31-30:8	Jacob has children with Leah, and with Rachel's maid.
G'	30:9-24	Jacob has children with Leah's maid, and with Rachel.
F'	30:25-31:1	Laban and Jacob cheat each other over animal herds.
E'	31:2-31:55	Jacob flees Laban.
D'	32:1-32	Jacob returns to Canaan and encounters God at Peniel.
C'	33:1-20	Jacob partially reconciles with Esau.
B'	34:1-31	Jacob has conflict with foreigners: Shechem.
A'	35:1-29	Old generation passes: Rachel and Isaac die.

As usual, the structure serves several purposes. It is an aid to memory in an oral culture, both for the storyteller and the audience. It adds aesthetics, on the principle that artistic style complements thematic importance. The structure also guides the reader to the coherence of the story, highlighting the central theme and tracing its development.

This section continues the focus on the covenant promises. The same double theme continues: (a) the Abrahamic promises move forward incrementally toward their ultimate fulfillment, (b) despite the persistent obstructions arising from sin and Fall. As the next step toward innumerable descendants, the promises pass to a new generation.

Like previous generations, this family is deeply dysfunctional, with parental favoritism and bitter sibling rivalry. Jacob produces twelve sons with four women in constant competition with each other. The promise of land is under threat, as, after cheating Esau, Jacob must flee the region. Yet God promises to look after him while he is out of the country, and to bring him back safe in the end. Jacob also has significant interactions with two different foreigners: one turns out largely positive; the other, disastrous.



What God is saying to us. The contemporary relevance of this new section continues along the same line as the Abraham narrative. Because application so easily wanders off point, the central thrust bears reinforcing.

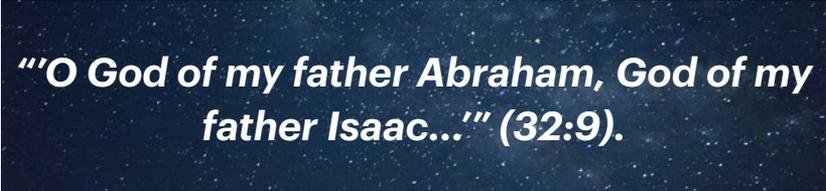
As with the Abrahamic narrative, it is tempting to apply this passage narcissistically and moralistically. Narcissistically, we could appeal to the blessing of descendants, land, and international influence, to promise us the children we want, a beautiful home in a great location, and a prominent job within a multinational corporation. Moralistically, the manifestation of sin in this text – family conflict – could become an exhortation for our families to avoid similar dysfunction.

But Genesis was never simply about God blessing a family line. It is about him reversing the curse in order to restore Eden. During the first stage of salvation-history, the

narrative focuses on the promise of descendants. During the second stage, focus shifts to securing a homeland for Israel. From the New Testament era until today, the blessing widens to all peoples.

As we join the long progression of God's people spreading the gospel to the nations, the promises of Abraham are ours also. Just as God slowly but inexorably fulfilled the promise of descendants to Israel, so he will slowly but inexorably reach the nations through us. Just as he advanced his plans despite Jacob's flaws, so he will continue to advance his plans today, despite our flaws.

In our era, of salvation history, the toxic effects of the Fall inhibit world evangelization through imperialism and nationalism, ethnic cleansing and civil war, persecution and oppression. Yet ultimately, even the worst obstructions cannot stop God's plan to reach and restore his world. This is the overall lesson of the Jacob narrative for us.



“O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac...” (32:9).

DAY 29

SIBLING RIVALRY, NATIONAL RIVALRY

Genesis 25:19-34

This first section of the Isaac narrative provides a preview to the rest of the account. The birth of Esau and Jacob is a modest next step toward innumerable descendants. At the same time, it anticipates life-long tension between Jacob and Esau, and foreshadows the centuries-long conflict between the nations that descend from them, Israel and Edom.

The point of the text is evident not only from what it includes, but also from what it excludes. Rebekah is barren, like Sarah before her. The Abraham-Sarah narrative develops the motif at length. Here, though, the narrator skips over twenty-years of infertility (verse 20 cf. verse 26). Instead, he notes simply that Isaac prays for children, God answers, and Rebekah conceives (verse 21). This account ignores a potentially rich storyline in order to focus exclusively on the rivalry between siblings.

What God said to them. The conflict begins before birth. The two jostle vigorously within the womb. Rebekah consults a prophet, and learns that she is carrying the forerunners of two nations, initial fulfillment of the divine promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations.

In a reversal of ancient norms, however, the younger will usurp the role of the elder. This reversal is signaled at birth, as the trailing child grasps the heel of the first-born. The symbolism of the vignette is institutionalized in the name, Jacob, 'usurper' (verses 21-26).

Parental favoritism exacerbates the conflict between the children. Isaac prefers the more traditionally male hunter, Esau. Rebekah prefers the androgynous homebody, Jacob. This brief mention anticipates later plot development (verses 27-28).

A particularly telling vignette reflects poorly on both siblings. After a day outdoors, Esau returns home famished, while his brother is cooking stew. Esau begs for a meal. Instead of sharing freely, Jacob consents only on condition that his elder brother transfers the status and inheritance rights of primogeniture. Neither comes off sympathetically: Jacob is selfish and greedy; Esau is impulsive and devalues his birthright (verses 29-34).

Thematically, this is more than the story of two men. They are the first fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would be father of many nations. At the same time, the siblings portend the perpetual conflict between the nations that descend from them: Israel and Edom (see Numbers 20:14-21; 1 Samuel 14:47; 2 Samuel 8:13; 2 Kings 8:20,22). Once again, the promises and purposes of God advance incrementally, in the face of the debilitating effects of sin and a fallen world.

Theologically, these episodes supply dual explanations for the reversal of status between Jacob and Esau. On the one hand, it is predicted by divine oracle (verse 23). On the other hand, it is precipitated by human sin: Jacob schemes and Esau disregards his privilege (verse 34). The text offers no hint that the two explanations are contradictory; the silence implies that they are complementary. Divine decree and human sin are the two sides of the one coin.



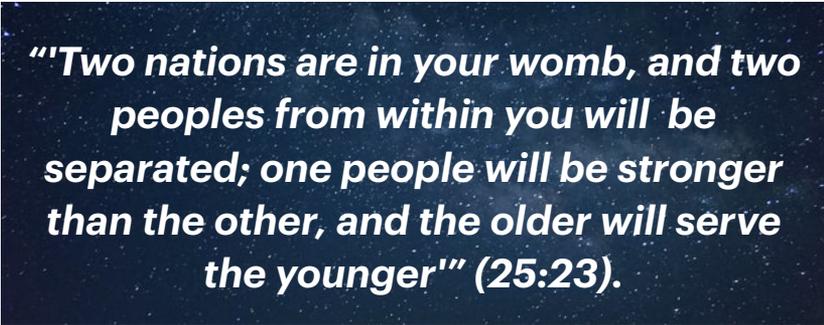
What God is saying to us. It is tempting for parents to use this passage as a warning to quibbling children, or for children to use it to criticize parental favoritism. Yet before we rush into moralistic application to contemporary family life, we properly consider the primary thematic and theological point of the text.

Thematically, the narrator indicates the Jacob's dominance is the plan of God. Other factors obviously contribute to this reversal of norms, including Jacob's competitiveness, Esau's low regard for his birthright, and parental favoritism. The narrator sees the plan of God unfolding through human activity, even through human sin.

Millennia later, the apostle Paul cites this passage to explain why most Jews in his era resist the gospel, while many gentiles accept it. He offers the same dual rationale. On the one hand, election is by divine decree: "Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or

bad – in order that God’s purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls – she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger’” (Romans 9:10-12 citing Genesis 25:23). At the same time, as the passage continues, he offers a second, parallel factor in salvation: many gentiles have put their faith in Christ, while most Jews have not (9:30-10:21).

Paul includes an addendum: ethnic differentiation no longer applies to the descendants of Jacob and Esau. God’s plan and mercy now embrace all ethnicities, races, and nations. So does our mission (Romans 11:11-32). Divine election provides no cover for disbelief or disobedience in response to the gospel, nor for ethnocentrism or lethargy in evangelism and missions.



“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (25:23).

DAY 30

ABRAHAM'S SON, FOR GOOD AND FOR ILL

Genesis 26:1-33

As noted previously, even though the narrator entitles the entire section 'the lineage of Isaac', he is the main focus of this single narrative. Beyond this passage, he functions mainly as a bridge for the covenantal blessing and promises to pass from his father, Abraham, to his son, Jacob.

What God said to them. This narrative is meticulously structured, with parallelism at multiple levels. Here we note only two features, most significant for interpretation.

Overall, the passage consists of four episodes in palistrophe:

a	26:1-11	Isaac migrates due to famine, and fears the locals.
b	26:12-16	Isaac prospers, but faces opposition, so he moves on.
b'	26:17-22	Isaac again prospers, faces opposition, and moves on.
a'	26:23-33	Isaac prospers to the point that the locals now fear him.

Verses 1-11 and 23-33 are contrasting parallels: at the beginning, Isaac migrates and fears the locals; by the end, he has so prospered that the locals now fear him. Verses 12-16 and 17-22 are synonymous parallels: in both, Isaac

prospers under divine blessing, which provokes jealousy from the locals, forcing him to move on to a new locale. Thus, the content transparently continues the theme of the entire Abraham narrative: (i) under divine blessing, God's promises and plans make incremental progress, (ii) in the face of obstacles.

The second structural feature supports this two-fold theme. Each of the four paragraphs consists of the same two elements: (i) the blessing of God on Isaac; and (ii) opposition against him.

In verses 1-11, as famine forces Isaac into the insecurity of migration, (i) God extends him the Abrahamic blessing and promises: divine presence, innumerable descendants, a homeland, and international influence (verses 16). Despite these assurances, (ii) Isaac fears for his life, so, like his father, he passes off his wife as his sister, leaving her vulnerable to sexual advances from the locals (verses 7-11).

In verses 12-16, (i) Isaac prospers under the blessing of God agriculturally, and thus, economically (verses 12-13). As a result, (ii) the locals become resentful, depriving him of access to water, and forcing him to move on (verses 14-16).

In verses 17-22, the previous scenario recurs several times in quick succession: (i) Isaac and his men repeatedly find the water needed for farming and herding (verses 17-19), but (ii) opposition from jealous locals forces them to move on (verses 20-22).

By verses 23-33, despite persistent opposition and disruption, (ii) Isaac has so prospered under the blessing of God that the local ruler, Abimelek, approaches him to propose a non-aggression pact (verses 26-31). In the aftermath of the treaty, (i) God continues to prosper Isaac (verses 32-33).

Thus, as the story transitions from Abraham to his first offspring, the theme remains constant: under divine blessing, the covenant promises move incrementally toward fulfillment, overriding all opposition. Tarnishing the sheen somewhat, one other feature recurs: Isaac manifests the same spiritual and moral flaw as his father, with lack of confidence in God prompting him to jeopardize his wife for his own well-being. Only behind-the-scenes maneuvering by God, and the integrity of this pagan ruler, preserve the promises. The promises of God make forward progress despite external opposition and internal defects.

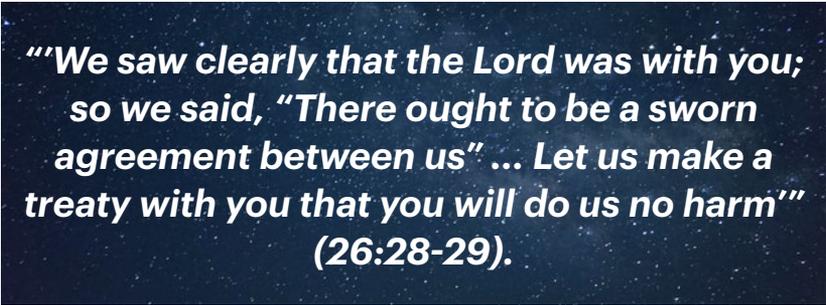


What God is saying to us. Through the parallels between Abraham and Isaac, the narrator demonstrates that God's blessing and covenant promises continue to the first generation of his offspring. Over a millennium later, the New Testament extends God's blessings, incorporating believing gentiles among the children of Abraham (Romans 4:16-25; 11:17-24; Galatians 4:21-31).

Over the two millennia since then, that expansion has continued, numerically, ethnically, and geographically. The

New Testament does not promise us either children or land. It does, however, extend the privilege of sonship beyond Abraham's lineage to include all those who trust in Christ, whether Jew or gentile: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26,29). His promises continue to new generations, and broaden in scope as they go.

As for the downside of the heritage, without referencing the shared cowardice of Abraham and Isaac, the same passages that proclaim our status as children of God also call us to live in keeping with his character. This is God's purpose in giving us his Spirit, that we might overcome sin, and manifest his virtues (Galatians 5:6-26).



“We saw clearly that the Lord was with you; so we said, “There ought to be a sworn agreement between us” ... Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm” (26:28-29).

DAY 31

JACOB LIVES DOWN TO HIS NAME

Genesis 26:34-28:9

In the first episode of this panel, the narrator provided three snapshots of Esau and Jacob that set the tone for their relationship: they wrestled in the womb; at birth, Jacob grasped the heel of first-born Esau; and, Jacob exploited a famished Esau in order to seize his birthright (25:19-34). That sibling rivalry now explodes, as Jacob deceives his father in order to cheat his brother out of the blessing due the first-born.

What God said to them. The reading begins with what, at first glance, may appear to be a random comment: Esau married two Hittites – a subset of Canaanites – to the displeasure of his parents (26:34-35). Then the reading ends with a similar epilogue: Esau realizes that his parents do not like him being married to Canaanites, so he takes a third wife, this time an Ishmaelite (28:6-9). Closer, admittedly, but still not part of the elect lineage. Esau's exogamy forms an inclusion, and sets the tone for reading the intervening narrative. He is about to be cheated out of his birthright blessing. The reader may be inclined to be sympathetic toward the cheated, and critical of the cheater. So the narrator signals that Esau deserves little sympathy: he is the

sort of fellow who marries ‘outside his kind’, and against his parents’ wishes.

The core story is structured with parallelism. It consists of two parts, each comprising four scenes in inverse parallelism (chiasm). The first part covers the planning (a,b) and execution (b’a’) of the deception:

a	27:1-4	Isaac prepares Esau for the blessing.
b	27:5-13	Rebekah prepares Jacob to steal the blessing.
b’	27:14-29	Jacob tricks Isaac and steals the blessing.
a’	27:30-40	Esau receives negative blessing from Isaac.

Key features include Rebekah’s duplicity toward Isaac, and favoritism toward Jacob at the expense of Esau, and Jacob conspiring with his mother to deceive his father in order to cheat his brother. What a mess!

The second part covers the contentious aftermath of the cheating, again divided into planning (c,d) and execution (d’,c’):

c	27:41	Esau plans to kill Jacob.
d	27:42-45	Rebekah plans Jacob’s escape.
d’	27:46	Rebekah gains Isaac’s approval for Jacob’s departure.
c’	28:1-5	Isaac blesses Jacob and sends him away.

A key feature of this segment is Isaac’s two-fold blessing on Jacob. The first repeats the creation blessing granted

originally to Adam and Eve, and then to Noah: “May God Almighty ... make you fruitful and increase your numbers” (28:3 cf. 1:28; 9:7). To this he adds the Abrahamic blessing: “May [God] give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham” (28:4 cf. 12:2-3,7; 13:15,17 etc.).

As God’s blessings continue, the effects of the Fall also continue to interfere. Esau’s marriage choices make his parents miserable (26:35,46; 28:1-2,6-9). In a subtle but sharp indication of family dysfunction, the narrator calls Esau, ‘his’ son, and Jacob, ‘her’ son (27:5-6). Spousal discord feeds sibling rivalry: Jacob steals a blessing from his blind father (27:18-29), and Esau consoles himself by plotting fratricide, in the pattern of Cain (27:41 cf. 4:1-8). Rachel suffers the consequences of her intrigue: she thinks she is sending Jacob away ‘for a while’ (27:44), but never sees him again. Jacob secures the coveted blessing, but forfeits much of its benefits as he flees family and homeland.



What God is saying to us. This story mainly reports that the promises and blessings of God continued across successive generations – from grandfather through son to grandson – and that the destructive force of sin also persisted. The narrator considers this point important enough to make it for fifty chapters. It is a lesson that we do well to take to heart, in both parts. We look to God to bless; at the same

time, we recognize that sin will continue to interfere. Despite sin's havoc – sometimes even because of it – God's purposes and promises move resolutely, albeit gradually, forward.

On a secondary level, the narrator also clearly intends this narrative to provide object lessons on how not to live as family. Their example warns us against a range of dysfunctional behaviors, including spousal discord, parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, and marriage outside Christian faith.

Christ seeks to permeate our families. He calls us to model our life together on our relationship with him: for wives to submit to husbands as to Christ; for husbands to love their wives as Christ loves us; for children to submit to parents as to the Lord; and for parents to raise their children in the Lord (Ephesians 5:21-6:4).



“Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing” (27:35).

DAY 32

JACOB LEAVES THE PROMISED LAND ... AND GOD?

Genesis 28:10-22

This episode contains two prominent features: (a) a travel itinerary; and, (b) a revelatory dream. The two converge to form the main point. In the ancient world – and within animism where it exists still today – gods are generally geographically, ethnically, and/or family specific. So far, the narrative has linked God geographically with Canaan, and relationally, with Abraham’s clan. The question inevitably arises: Is Jehovah their clan deity only so long as they dwell in Canaan? In leaving home and homeland, is Jacob also moving away from God?

The passage has four parts, arranged in chiasm, united by reference to location (‘place’). The first and last elements (a, a’) reference the promises of God; the middle two, God’s presence in that particular ‘place’ (which Jacob names, Bethel, ‘house of God’).

a	28:10-15	Jacob dreams, in a ‘certain place’, of angels descending and ascending a ladder, and receives covenant promises.
b	28:16-17	Jacob awakens and attributes spiritual aura to ‘the place’.
b’	28:18-19	In the morning, Jacob builds an altar in ‘that place’.

a'	28:20-22	Jacob vows to worship God there when he returns, if the promises come true.
----	----------	---

The passage links spirituality with geography, but in what way?

What God said to them. From previous narrative, it could be inferred that Jehovah is geographically and/or family specific. It was when Abraham left Haran for Canaan that he first encountered God and received the three-fold promise, including a homeland (11:31-12:15). Once he arrived in Canaan, God renewed this promise, and Abraham built an altar and worshipped at Bethel (12:8). After moving to Egypt to escape famine, Abraham returned via Bethel, where he again worshipped God (13:3-4).

A generation later, Isaac faced famine, but God directed him away from Egypt. When he reached Beersheba, he had a vision, received the covenantal promises, and built an altar (26:23-25). Thus, God's promises are rooted in their family line, and their life in Canaan.

Jacob now retraces his forefathers' steps, leaving Beersheba, transiting through Bethel, on his way back to the ancestral homeland in Haran. The geographical move provokes a fundamental theological question: Is God the resident deity of Canaan? Or the patron deity of Abraham's clan only so long as they live there? As Jacob travels away from family and homeland, does he travel outside God's jurisdiction? Does he need a new god?

God answers that question by meeting Jacob in Bethel, on his way out of Canaan. He identifies himself as, 'the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac'. He makes the same promises to Jacob, in the same language, in much the same locale, as he made two generations earlier to Abraham: descendants, land, and worldwide influence (28:13-14 cf. 12:1-3; 13:14-17). He makes the same promise to Jacob, in the same language, in the same place, as one generation earlier he made to Isaac: to be 'with' him in his travels (28:15 cf. 26:3-5; 26:23-25). The narrative ends on this same note: provided God is 'with him', 'watches over him', and 'brings him back' to this land, then this location will be known as 'Bethel' – 'the house of God' – and Jacob will worship here (28:20-22 cf. 28:15).

This passage confirms the Abrahamic blessing to the third generation, and extends the reach of the promises beyond the borders of the Promised Land. It also provides a preview of the narrative to follow: God will provide for Jacob outside of Canaan, and bring him back safely.



What God is saying to us. God's presence and blessing outside of Canaan would be crucial for the later survival of Israel. During slavery in Egypt, while wandering in the wilderness, and in Babylonian exile, they would find hope in God's promise to protect and bless Jacob – forerunner of the nation – during his travels out of country.

The translocality of God has also been formative for converts from spiritism, throughout history and still today. For those cultures which suppose gods to be family-based, ethnically-specific, or geographically-restricted, it is empowering to learn that God's authority and protection transcend all boundaries.

Jesus advances this notion a major step forward. Jacob's dream forms the basis of his first interaction with an early disciple. As inquisitive Nathaniel approaches for the first time, Jesus characterizes him with a pun: 'An Israelite in whom there is no deceit' (i.e., a descendant of Jacob in whom is no trace of 'Jacob'). Jesus continues, "'You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'" Jesus – neither Bethel nor temple – is now the place where heaven and earth meet. He is the venue for encountering God (John 1:47-51).

"This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (28:17).

DAY 33

JACOB IS CHEATED, YET GOD'S PURPOSES ADVANCE

Genesis 29:1-31:55

Like his father before him, Jacob seeks a wife from Abraham's homeland, the town of Haran. In both instances, the prospective bride is first encountered at the town well, watering animals. Both women belong to Laban's household. From these parallels, the reader naturally anticipates another heart-warming romance. But the storyline quickly spirals downward.

What God said to them. This is a rather lengthy passage for one reading, yet it is a single narrative. It forms the middle – typically the climax – of the palistrophe that runs the length of the Jacob narrative, chapters 25b-35.

E	29:1-14a	Jacob arrives at Laban's in Haran.
F	29:14b-30	Laban cheats Jacob into marrying Leah before Rachel.
G	29:31-30:8	Leah, and Rachel's maid, bear children.
G'	30:9-24	Leah's maid, Leah, and Rachel bear children.
F'	30:25-31:1	Laban and Jacob cheat each other in business.
E'	31:2-55	Jacob flees Laban.

Overall, these events portray the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises to the next generation, despite the

continuing obstacles created by sin. In this instance, God actually exploits sin to advance his purposes.

The narrative begins auspiciously, with Jacob meeting Rachel, Laban's daughter, in the same place, and under much the same circumstances, as Abraham's servant met Isaac's wife, Rebekah, Laban's sister. Two differences quickly emerge. For one, Abraham's servant enveloped his effort in prayer and worship, but Jacob does not. For another: the servant arrived with a flamboyant display of (his master's) wealth, but Jacob arrives penniless (29:1-14 cf. 24:10-31).

Though Laban characterizes Jacob as 'flesh and blood', he limits hospitality to one month. Then he 'offers' his nephew a job as a laborer. Jacob counters with a proposal that he join the family, marrying Laban's beautiful younger daughter, Rachel. Since he has no money for the bride price, he negotiates seven years' free labor. When the time comes to fulfill the terms of the deal, Laban substitutes his homely elder daughter, Leah.

The irony is rich. Jacob, who cheated his blind father, is now cheated while his vision is clouded by night and by alcohol. Jacob, who cheated his elder brother out of his birthright, is now cheated on the grounds that, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one." Jacob must work another seven years for Rachel (29:15-30).

Once married, the two sisters compete for their husband's affection by giving birth to sons. Eventually, four women sire

eleven sons (with a twelfth coming later). The given names publicize their bitter rivalry: Reuben ('the Lord has seen my misery'), Simeon ('the Lord heard that I am not loved'), Naphtali ('I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won'), and so forth (29:31-30:8; 30:9-24).

Meanwhile, Laban and Jacob attempt to best each other in business dealings. Initially, Jacob puts himself in a disadvantageous position, accepting as payment atypical animals: dark-colored sheep and light-colored goats. Laban agrees, but first removes the breeding stock that manifests those recessive traits. Jacob then employs folk methods and selective breeding, and, with the blessing of God, accrues a great herd and spectacular wealth at Laban's expense (30:25-31:2).

Their contrasting fortunes foster more tension between the relatives, so with the consent of his wives, Jacob sneaks away with family and flock (31:3-55). Deception is a key theme of this paragraph: 'steal, deceive' (Hebrew *gnb*) appears eight times (31:19,20,26,27,30,32,39[2x]).

The point of the narrative comes to the fore in this final episode. Jacob looks back and sees that God has been 'with' him during his exile from Canaan, as promised (cf. 28:10-22). God foiled Laban's three attempts to exploit him (31:5,6-7,8-9). God revealed the breeding strategy that made him rich (31:13). God warns the pursuing Laban to do him no harm (31:24,29). Over his twenty-year sojourn, God has prospered him (31:42).

Under the blessing of God, the promise to Abraham takes a decisive step forward, as Jacob grows wealthy, sires the future patriarchs, and overcomes the machinations of the foreigner Laban. Through the process, God exploits sin – the wrath of Esau, the greed and duplicity of Laban, and the competition between the sister-wives – to advance his purposes.



What God is saying to us. God’s ability to use human sin and deceit to achieve his purposes reaches a pinnacle in the crucifixion of Jesus. The treachery of Judas, the malice of the religious establishment, and the violence of the Roman occupation forces accomplish what God previously decided (Acts 4:23-31). This perception empowered the first disciples – and can empower us – to persist in the plan and purpose of God in the face of deception and opposition.

***“The God of my father has been with me”
(31:5).***

DAY 34

JACOB WRESTLES AN ANGEL

Genesis 32

In the concentric pattern of Jacob's life story, the return to Canaan parallels his earlier departure (cf. 28:10-22).

D	28:10-22	Jacob flees Canaan and encounters God at Bethel.
D'	32:1-32	Jacob returns to Canaan and encounters God at Peniel.

He fled in order to escape the brother whom he cheated; he now returns in order to escape the father-in-law who has been cheating him. As he left the land, God met him in a dream, extending the Abrahamic promises, and pledging to watch over him while he was away and bring him back safe. After twenty years, that day has finally arrived.

What God said to them. The chapter alternates between Jacob's preparations for meeting Esau, and his interactions with God, in a pattern known as synonymous parallelism (aba'b').

a	32:3-8	Jacob divides into two camps in case Esau attacks one.
b	32:9-12	Jacob appeals to God to save him from Esau.
a'	32:13-21	Jacob sends herds of animals to appease Esau.

b'	32:22-32	Jacob wrestles an angel, seeing God face-to-face.
----	----------	---

The structure highlights the two dimensions of Jacob's strategy: pragmatic schemes (aa') and spiritual engagement (bb').

Jacob first divides his people and possessions into two groups, in the hopes that if Esau attacks the one, the other will escape (verses 3-8). Then he prays, in four parts, in inverse parallelism ('chiasm'):

α	32:9	He invokes God's promise to him.
β	32:10	He gives thanks for God's prior faithfulness
β'	32:11	He appeals to God to save him again
α'	32:12	He invokes God's promises a second time

Even in the face of a crisis, his prayer is more substantial than a mere cry of desperation. His appeal for divine intervention is based on specific, explicit, and applicable covenantal promises. Additionally, that appeal comes only after expressing gratitude for past kindness and faithfulness.

After Jacob puts in place additional pragmatic protections (verses 13-21), he unwittingly engages an angel in night-long hand-to-hand combat (verses 22-32). The encounter provokes many questions that the narrator makes no attempt to answer. What the narrator cares about are two defining aspects of the encounter.

For one, it redefines Jacob, whose name is a homonym of ‘cheater’, into ‘Israel’, a homonym of ‘he who struggles with God’. The narrator reinforces the point with an explicit rationale for the name change: “because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (verse 28).

For the other, the encounter also redefines the location, now called, ‘Peniel’, a homonym of ‘face of God’. The narrator provides an explicit rationale for this name change, as well: “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (verse 30). The significance of that name is clearer in the original Hebrew, than in English: Jacob has been anxious about ‘surviving’ (verse 11) when he sees ‘the face’ of Esau (verse 20); now, he has seen God ‘face-to-face’ and has ‘survived’ (verse 30).

These two transformations are mutually reinforcing. The first sets the agenda for both Jacob and the nation that will descend from him. His well-being and theirs will not come easily, but will require tenacious struggle, in two directions: with God and against neighboring peoples. Of those two, it is the former which is decisive. Those who encounter God and survive have nothing to fear from encounters with other humans.



What God is saying to us. The tensions between Jacob and Esau anticipate the later conflicts between the nations that descend from them. Throughout its history, Israel will war

against Edom. The immediate lesson of this chapter is that the deliverance of national Israel lies in two factors: engaging God and persevering in the struggle against Edom.

At our stage of salvation history, the issue is not the well-being of our country amid international rivalries, but the progress of our mission in the face of human resistance and spiritual opposition. Without explicitly citing this passage, the apostle Paul makes a similar point, as the Christians in Rome face opposition and persecution:

“If God is for us, who can be against us?... In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:31,37-38).

“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (32:28).

DAY 35

JACOB RECONCILES WITH ESAU

Genesis 33

In the first half of the palistrophe, Jacob participated in an elaborate deception in order to steal the blessing due his elder brother Esau (26:34-28:9). Now, in the second half, the parallel episode records him offering to return the blessing to Esau.

C	26:34-28:9	Jacob steals their father's blessing from Esau.
C'	33:1-20	Jacob implies he is returning the blessing to Esau.

Assessing the data requires a careful reading of the chapter. Among the features of Isaac's original blessing were promises that Jacob would prosper, and, he would be 'lord' over his brothers, who would 'bow down' to him (27:27-29). Now, as Jacob and Esau meet again for the first time in twenty years, that language recurs, though in an unexpected way.

What God said to them. The chapter consists of two episodes: the brothers meet (verses 1-11), and Jacob settles in his new location (verses 12-20). The former paints an ignoble portrait of Jacob, but one consistent with his

character to this point. Seeing Esau approach with an entourage, he prepares for a potential attack by splitting his group into three, in order of priority: the servants and their children go first; Leah and her children, second; the favored Rachel and Joseph, last. Instead of attacking, Esau warmly embraces his brother. Esau initially declines the gifts of herds that Jacob sent ahead, but when pressed, he relents (verses 1-11).

The encounter recalls Isaac's original blessing, but in reverse. It is Jacob – not Esau – who 'bows', and calls his brother 'lord' (verses 3,7-8). All but once, Jacob avoids reference to the stolen 'blessing', referring instead to 'favor, grace' (verses 5,8,10,11b; though cf. verse 11a). Most dramatic of all, he claims that seeing Esau's 'face' is tantamount to seeing 'the face of God' (verse 10 cf. 32:30), despite his previous apprehension over seeing Esau's 'face' (32:20[2x]). The flamboyance of this last claim tilts the balance toward fawning flattery, intended to defuse anticipated hostility.

That impression is supported by the undertones of the second episode. Esau is solicitous of Jacob's well-being, offering to escort his brother or, at least, to provide a protective detail. Jacob proposes instead to meet up later (verses 12-16). Apparently he is still distrustful of his brother's intentions. Perhaps his own history as a deceiver inhibits his ability to trust the victim of his schemes.

The narrator never reports Jacob following through on the proposed reunion. Instead, he heads to Salem. This puts

some distance between the siblings. It also means that Jacob is living in Canaan, the promised land. Like his grandfather Abraham, he purchases a plot of land. He also builds an altar for the worship of God, in fulfillment of his earlier vow (cf. 28:20-21). God had provided him not only food, clothing, and a safe return, but a great more besides. So, as promised, Jacob declares 'El' to be 'the God of Israel' (verses 17-20).



What God is saying to us. While we tend to apply Scripture to our individual, moral lives, this passage originally carried political and theological ramifications.

Politically, the descendants of Jacob and Esau – Israelites and Edomites – were warring neighbors for centuries. Nations commonly develop a mythology about their founding and founders to inspire political loyalty and a sense of national pride (e.g., George Washington and the Continental Army at Valley Forge in the American story). Israel's origin stories are far less romanticized. Jacob, their namesake, got his start by deceiving his father and defrauding his brother. The best one can say from this passage is that his actions may suggest repentance (though, perhaps, also guilt and fear). Either way, the prolonged enmity between the two nations cannot be blamed on Jacob's theft of birthright, as the founding fathers reconciled. Moreover, both Jacob and God recompensed Esau for his loss of privilege.

Theologically, the passage continues Genesis' striking perspective on election. On the face of it, Esau comes off as the better character. He is the victim, yet makes no mention of betrayal, and declines both revenge and restitution. Instead, he is content in his own success, and offers protection to his exploiter. Jacob, on the other hand, is anxious and distrustful. Despite his extravagant language and gifts, he never gets to the point where he can trust his aggrieved brother to have forgiven him. Election is not based on virtue; nor is non-election an act of rejection.

Finally, even if repetitively, Jacob's return to Canaan is also another testimony to God's faithfulness to his promises, that he blessed Jacob beyond all expectation and against all circumstances, then brought him back to the Promised Land. Consequently, he becomes 'God of Israel'. This history will sustain the nation in future geopolitical adversities. It serves the same role for the contemporary Church.

“Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him” (33:4).

DAY 36

RAPE AND REVENGE

Genesis 34

Under the blessing of God, Jacob has accumulated both wealth and offspring, despite a duplicitous father-in-law and a potentially vengeful brother. Now he lives at safe distance from both, family and property intact, in the land that God promised him. He sets up an altar, and pledges loyalty to the Lord who brought him through the tumultuous decades. With all the good that has suddenly converged, a reader might expect the narrative to be on a continuous upswing. Then this: Jacob's daughter Dinah visits some friends among the local people, and is raped by the predatory son of a powerful local ruler.

What God said to them. Initially this story seems out of place, breaking not only the rising mood of the narrative, but also the flow of recent events. But continuities within the broader narrative provide a helpful clue to its purpose here.

In the palistrophe that extends from chapters 25-35, the current passage parallels an earlier disruption. The Isaac narrative began with the birth of Esau and Jacob, fulfilling the divine promise of descendants (chapter 25). Then it abruptly backed up: Isaac and Rebekah, married without children, flee to Philistine territory in order to escape a famine. There Isaac jeopardizes Rebekah by claiming her to

be his sister. Eventually, the local ruler intervenes, and the two sign a treaty of non-aggression (chapter 26). Now, eight chapters later, the narrative again shifts abruptly to recount the rape of Dinah by the son of a Canaanite ruler, leading to the proposal that the Israelites and Canaanites form an alliance, including marriage and land.

Both chapters 26 and 34 play a particular role in the Isaac/Jacob narrative: they reflect on the third Abrahamic promise, regarding Israel's relations with the nations. The narrative, like Genesis as a whole, mostly traces the fulfillment of the first promise: descendants. Each cycle includes some incident reflecting the second promise: the ownership of land (cf. yesterday's reading). Each cycle also includes one or more incidents reflecting the third promise: relationship with other peoples. That is the purpose of this episode (as of chapter 26).

God promised Abram, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). Chapter 26 provides an example of blessing between Israel and a foreign nation. Now chapter 34 describes an instance of curse.

Here again, we also see the dual aspect of Genesis: the progressive fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, in the face of obstacles. After the blessing of prosperity and descendants, and a modest piece of land, Jacob suffers a brutal episode, first in the rape of his daughter, and then in his sons massacring the rapist's town. The episode of chapter 26 eventually strengthened Jacob's standing with

foreigners; this incident leaves him entirely alienated, and dangerously isolated.

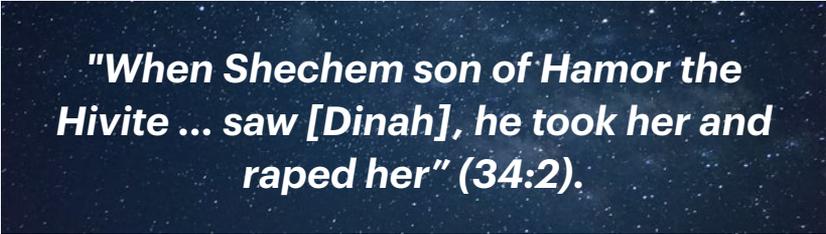


What God is saying to us. The lesson of this text is painful, but also precautionary, and at two levels. At the theological level, this incident warns us that even when God is fulfilling his promises, and we are enjoying his blessings, the most horrific disaster may strike. Jacob and Rachel had an expansive brood of children, and the financial wherewithal to support them. Despite some early hiccups, they had a growing reputation with the surrounding peoples. Then, their daughter is unexpectedly raped, Jacob is paralyzed by the enormity of the consequences, and her brothers take revenge, by committing the same crime, heightened exponentially. The promises of God advance even in the face of the vilest obstacles.

The lesson of this text is also perplexing within this context. Earlier God intervened to rescue Sarah from a harem, on two different occasions (chapters 12,20). He intervened to rescue Rebekah from potential sexual assault (chapter 26). Though God rescued Dinah's grandmother and mother, he does not rescue her. This text frankly acknowledges the reality of sexual violence against women, not only that inflicted by an entitled Canaanite against a single Jew, but also that by the vengeful sons of Jacob against an entire city of Canaanite women. The narrator offers no solution to the theological and moral conundrum. At least, he does not

sugar-coat the barbarity of life in a fallen world, or sanitize brutality committed by those who claim to be God's people.

The main point of the text is the former: that even those who are serving in the frontlines of God's purposes in the world, and who are enjoying his blessings, may suffer vile evil in a broken world. Since we have seen that theme before, and will see it again, this passage also provides an opportunity to reflect on the perplexity of divine sovereignty or the evil of sexual violence.



"When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite ... saw [Dinah], he took her and raped her" (34:2).

DAY 37

JACOB STORY: WRAP-UP

Genesis 35

Genesis 35 is another passage that, at first glance, seems to be a hodgepodge of leftovers thrown together into an impromptu goulash. Yet, in a similar case at the end of the Abraham narrative, the various story lines actually converged in support of the overall theme. The same happens here. As the Jacob story wraps up, the narrator ties together various loose ends in such a way as to reinforce the main point of the storyline, and indeed, the entirety of Genesis.

What God said to them. This passage has two main parts. The first, verses 1-15, reports several episodes connected to Bethel. When Jacob originally left Canaan to escape the wrath of Esau, he spent a night in Bethel, where God appeared to him in a dream, promising to be with him, to extend him the Abrahamic blessings, and to bring him back to the Promised Land one day. In return, Jacob pledged that if the promises were ever fulfilled, he would worship God at Bethel (28:10-22). The promises were abundantly fulfilled, yet while Jacob built an altar and worshipped at Peniel, so far he had not returned to Bethel.

God now calls him to fulfill that vow. This requires not only a geographical move, but also a religious purge. They surrender all their idols and charms, and travel to Bethel,

'house of God', where they build an altar (verses 1-7). The narrator takes this opportunity to provide the most comprehensive statement of God's blessing on Jacob: encounter with the divine presence; name change to 'Israel'; and, transfer of the Abrahamic promises of descendants, nations, and land (verses 9-15).

In the middle of all this feel-good comes a jarring note: Deborah, nursemaid to the beloved Rebekah, dies (verse 8). The comment is quadruply striking. First, it spoils the mood: all this blessing interrupted by death. Secondly, Rebekah's own death has passed without mention. Thirdly, this nursemaid appears nowhere else in the Jacob story. Fourthly, her death is commemorated by burying her under a prominent tree, designated Allon Bakuth, 'oak of weeping'.

The narrator is making the same point he has made from the beginning: even when humans appropriately respond to God with worship and obedience (verses 1-7), even in the midst of generous divine blessing (verses 9-15), death still spoils the best of times (verse 8). And the best of places: the 'oak of weeping' stands just outside the 'house of God'.

Verses 16-29 continue to drive the point home, even more pointedly. Rachel gives birth to Jacob's twelfth son, yet joy is muted when she dies in childbirth. Her midwife puts a positive spin on it: "'Don't despair, for you have another son.'" Rachel is not convinced, naming her son, Ben-Oni, 'son of my sorrow'. Jacob saves his son from the constant reminder of his role in the painful loss by modifying the name to Benjamin, 'favored son' (verses 16-20).

The joy of childbirth is further crushed by the havoc that adult children can wreak. Perhaps resenting that his mother, Leah, was the unloved wife – or perhaps simply because he is twisted – Reuben forces himself on Bilhah, his father’s mistress, maidservant of the deceased Rachel, and mother of two half-brothers. The offense is so vile that Jacob is dumbstruck (verses 21-22). When the narrator lists Jacob’s twelve sons, this no longer seems an unmitigated blessing (verses 23-26).

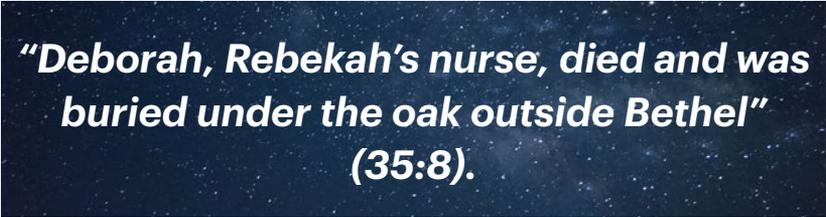
At this point, Isaac dies, at a ripe old age, and is buried by his sons, Esau and Jacob, in the tomb of his father, Abraham, and mother, Sarah, within the boundaries of the promised land (verses 27-29 cf. 49:29-32). This, too, is a reminder of the dual nature of life as God’s people in a fallen world: the blessings of long life, descendants, and land, subverted by the curse of death.



What God is saying to us. The dual theme of Genesis continues in this section: even when God is blessing and we worship and obey him, in a fallen world, we may suffer events that are emotionally traumatic, or unimaginably vile. A mother dies in childbirth; a loved one suffers – or commits – sexual abuse; an elderly parent dies after a long and full life. So the overall theme of Genesis, and the specifics of this passage, deserve repeated exposition.

God never promises that his blessing will grant us a painless and peaceful life. After all, he did not grant Jesus these

benefits. God does, however, offer us at least two assurances. First, even in adversity, he will work for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28). Secondly, any suffering in this life is far outweighed by the glory that we will experience in the next life (Romans 8:18).



***“Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died and was buried under the oak outside Bethel”
(35:8).***

DAY 38

ESAU AND ELECTION

Genesis 36

Genesis contains five extended biographies: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. After each, the narrative narrows the storyline by closing off a non-elect lineage, before continuing with the elect. Thus, the Adam-Eve narrative ends with a synopsis of Cain's lineage, then introduces Seth's line (4:17-24). The flood narrative concludes with brief family histories for Japheth and Canaan, before Shem and his descendants take center stage (10:1-20). The Abraham narrative wraps up Lot's lineage before Isaac appears (19:30-38), and then, rounds off Ishmael's lineage, before continuing the story of Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau (25:12-18).

Now, the Jacob narrative removes Esau's family from the scene as non-elect, in preparation for the Joseph narrative. The Esau narrative makes at least two additional points: (1) his life choices validate his non-elect status; and, (2) despite his non-elect status, God blesses him abundantly.

What God said to them. An inclusion marks the beginning and end of the narrative, identifying Esau as the ancestor of the Edomite people, long-time neighbor and enemy to Israel (36:1,43). The remainder of the chapter fleshes out the details, in three main sections.

Verses 1-19 list Esau's wives, children, grandchildren. This list subdivides into three parts. Verses 1-8 identify Esau's wives and sons born in Canaan, and then records their move to Seir, in an effort to avoid competition with the newly-arrived Jacob. Verses 9-14 list the next generation – Esau's grandsons – born in Seir. Verses 15-19 list the 'chiefs' (perhaps, heads of clan) from among Esau's sons and grandsons.

Verses 20-30 identify the previous inhabitants of Seir, beginning with their namesake founder, and his sons and grandsons. The sons serve as their chiefs. According to Deuteronomy, Esau's descendants drive them out in order to take possession of the land (Deuteronomy 2:12).

Verses 31-43 return to the descendants of Esau, cataloguing their leaders in Seir, renamed Edom. A list of eight kings and eleven chiefs closes out the chapter, and not a moment too soon for the contemporary reader!

What possible use does this chapter have? Its primary function is to close off the lineage of the non-elect Esau, in order to shift focus to the elect lineage of Jacob. Neither Esau nor his descendants appear again in Genesis.

The chapter also serves at least two other functions. First, it identifies choices that Esau makes that validate his status as non-elect. Earlier, he impetuously traded his birthright for a bowl of porridge. In the same vein, he also marries outside the chosen lineage, selecting Canaanite brides. In a second misstep, ironically, he moves his family out of Canaan, the

promised land, into Seir. This is not to imply that divine election depends on foreknowledge, as though God passed over him because he foresaw that Esau would act inappropriately. Nor is it to suggest that election is merited by appropriate behavior. Simply put, Scripture consistently attributes spiritual destiny to two complementary factors: divine election and personal choice.

The other effect of this chapter is to limit the implications of election. That is to say, in choosing Jacob rather than Esau, God does not curse the latter, or doom him to destruction (any more than he guarantees the former a life without hardship). The promise to Rebekah was that she would give birth to twins, who would become two nations, two peoples. Just like his elect brother, the non-elect Esau is fruitful and increases. He has many children, and a great many grandchildren. He is blessed with a land of his own. He becomes wealthy with herds and flocks. Whatever he lacks from not being elect, it is neither blessing nor descendants, neither land nor wealth.



What God is saying to us. Many devout Christians struggle with the doctrines of election and predestination, as though God seems unfair (arbitrarily choosing one over the other), and unjust (punishing the non-elect for a spiritual orientation that God unilaterally predetermines). This text does not systematically expound these doctrines, so it cannot alone resolve these concerns. (Romans 9-11 play an important part in the discussion.)

At the very least, though, this passage provides one data point, among many in Scripture, indicating that the popular (mis)conception of God as unilaterally and capriciously determining eternal destiny requires correction or, at least, nuance. With Esau, God is neither unilateral nor capricious; not even stingy, let alone condemning. Esau prospers, and the text never consigns him to eternal damnation. It is worth noting, too, that his character flaws seem modest compared to Jacob's moral failings.

“Esau took his wives and sons and daughters and all the members of his household, as well as his livestock and all his other animals and all the goods he had acquired in Canaan, and ... settled in the hill country of Seir” (36:6,8).

DAY 39

JOSEPH: FROM SLAVE TO PRIME MINISTER

Genesis 37-50

The entirety of Genesis 37-50 forms a cohesive section, united by structure, theme, and plot line. Three features of the section are noteworthy: (1) parallels with the Jacob narratives; (2) structural pairing (synonymous parallelism); and, (3) its overall theme.

What God said to them. The Joseph narrative repeats at least four features of the Jacob narrative:

- parental favoritism disrupts the family (25:28; 37:3);
- sibling rivalry leads to attempted fratricide (27:41; 37:20);
- the prospective victim moves to a foreign country (27:43-44; 37:36);
- and, a patriarch is deceived using clothes and a goat (27:15-16; 37:31).

Ironic justice is in play: Jacob is victimized by the next generation in the same way as he victimized the previous generation.

An inclusion – in chiasm – marks the beginning and end of the passage (a1 a2; a2' a1'). In an artistic flourish that also has interpretative significance, the remainder consists of thematic pairings (BB' CC', etc.).

A	a1	37a	Joseph and his brothers are in conflict.
	a2	37b	Joseph is taken hostage to Egypt as a slave.
B		38	Judah's character is revealed in a sexual context.
B'		39	Joseph's character is revealed in a sexual context.
C		40	Joseph interprets two dreams for Pharaoh's officials.
C'		41	Joseph interprets two dreams for Pharaoh.
D		42	Joseph assesses his brothers' character in Egypt.
D'		43-45	Joseph's brothers pass the character test in Egypt.
E		46	Jacob and his sons move to Egypt.
E'		47a	Jacob and his sons settle in Goshen.
F		47b	Joseph oversees famine relief for all Egypt and beyond.
F'		47c	Jacob and his sons thrive in Goshen.
G		48	Jacob blesses Joseph's sons.
G'		49	Jacob blesses his own sons.
A'	a2'	50a	Joseph returns to Canaan as an Egyptian official.
	a1'	50b	Joseph and his brothers reconcile.

The climax comes with Joseph testing his brothers' character. Judah, the instigator of the plot to sell him into slavery, offers himself in slavery in exchange for Benjamin's freedom (chapter 44). In response, Joseph is moved to reveal himself (chapter 45).

Thematically, the story is coherent, making a single point. It continues the overall theme of Genesis: God fulfills his promises to Abraham. In this instance, God preserves Abraham's descendants through famine by prearranging their move into Egypt. This narrative also provides the most extensive fulfillment to date of God's third promise, blessing the nations by placing Joseph in charge of famine relief throughout the wider region. These developments, however, threaten the second promise, removing Israel from its homeland.

More precisely, the progressive fulfillment of the first and third Abrahamic promises is half the theme of the Joseph narrative. The other half is that God fulfills these promises despite the toxic effects of sin and Fall. Here, in fact, God uses the effects of sin and Fall as instruments in fulfilling his purposes. The obstacles include murderous brothers, slavery, a scorned adulteress, unjust imprisonment, drought, and famine. Each threat is an instrument in God's hands to place Joseph into position to save not only his clan, but also the people of Egypt and surrounding regions.



What God is saying to us. The quest to find personal applications in every text can result in moralistic truisms: sibling rivalry can destroy a family; we should forgive those who harm us; God may turn the evil done to us into good for others. While such morals are sometimes true, they are almost always trite, and they miss the central point of the text.

Over the course of this narrative, God uses life-threatening crises as stepping stones, elevating Joseph to chief minister of an empire, from which he preserves his people and blesses foreign nations. That is to say, application focuses less on God blessing us in the midst of hard times in our personal lives, than on him accomplishing his salvation-historical purposes against overwhelming odds: murder conspiracy, slavery, sexual assault, false imprisonment, economic collapse, famine, and so forth.

Contemporary illustration could cite the life trajectory of internationally strategic Christian individuals, such as Nelson Mandela. Or it could cite national movements, such as the progress of the gospel in China over the last two centuries. Whether individual or national, the lesson is less about the people whom God uses, than about the God who overrides – even uses – all obstructions to bring his salvation.

“God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (45:7).

DAY 40

DYSFUNCTIONAL FOUNDING FATHERS

Genesis 37

Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence; Paul Revere and the ‘midnight ride’; George Washington at Valley Forge: America, like every country, lionizes its founding fathers. But not the Old Testament. Jacob was born a scoundrel, and may never have completely outgrown it. He ends up siring children with four women. His favoritism provokes competition, so all together, his wives produce twelve sons, who become patriarchs of the future nation. This chapter introduces the family dynamic of that founding generation, and it is a sordid mess.

What God said to them. The chapter is framed by an inclusion in synonymous parallelism (a1 a2 a1’ a2’). The effect is bitter irony: the brother who tattled on his siblings is reported dead by his siblings; the father who favored Joseph now grieves his death. The remainder of the chapter unfolds in a series of pairs:

a1	37:2	Joseph tattles on his brothers.
a2	37:3-4	Jacob shows favoritism toward Joseph.
b	37:5-8	Joseph dreams that his brothers will bow to him.
b'	37:9-11	Joseph dreams that his entire family will bow to him.

c	37:12-14a	Joseph travels from Hebron to Shechem.
c'	37:14b-17	Joseph travels from Shechem to Dothan.
d	37:18-20	Joseph's brothers plot to kill him.
d'	37:21-24	Reuben intervenes to save him.
e	37:25-28	Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery.
e'	37:29-30	Reuben is not there to save him.
a1'	37:31-32	The brothers report Joseph's death to their father.
a2'	37:33-35	Jacob grieves for Joseph.
	37:36	Transition: the Midianites sell Joseph in Egypt.

The word 'brothers' appears over twenty times in the narrative, underscoring the intensity of the rivalry and the intimacy of the betrayal.

The opening verses provide a vivid snapshot of family dysfunction. At seventeen, Joseph still tattles on his older brothers. He is the favorite of his father, who gives him an expensive robe, that becomes the focus of his brothers' anger, and a unifying motif in the story (verses 1-4; cf. verses 23[2x],31[2x],32[2x],33).

Joseph intensifies his brothers' hatred when he reports two dreams in which they – and even his parents – bow down to him (verses 5-11).

Eventually they have opportunity to act on their feelings. Joseph arrives in distant pasture to check on them (verses 12-17). The brothers conspire to kill him, but Reuben intervenes to save his life (verses 18-24).

Then a better opportunity presents itself: by some twisted logic, selling a brother into slavery is both more profitable and less culpable than murder. Reuben is not there to save him this time (verses 25-30).

To cover their crime, his siblings concoct a lie to tell their father. In ironic justice, the man who used clothes and goatskin to deceive his own father is now deceived by his sons using clothes and goat blood (verses 31-35).

The central point of this story: God not only accomplishes his purpose despite these miscreants, he actually uses their betrayal to get Joseph into Egypt, where he will one day save the clan and their host nation (verse 36).

The story also makes a secondary point. This family is rampantly dysfunctional. These are the patriarchs, the founding fathers of what would eventually become national Israel. God's decision to bless this lineage has nothing to do with their merit or virtue.

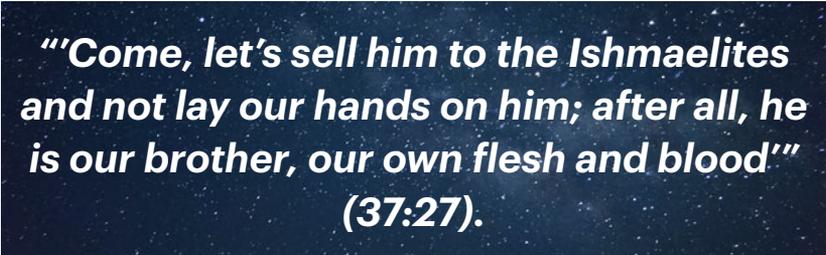


What God is saying to us. God is certainly saying to us, "Don't raise your family this way!" The narrator intends to evoke disgust from his audience over the antics of their national ancestors. Yet moralism and family dynamics are secondary purposes of the text.

At the primary level of salvation-history, this passage portrays God accomplishing his purposes in the world, even

if all he has to work with is deeply flawed humans. Joseph, the spoiled brat, will become chief minister of the superpower Egypt. Judah, the leader of the fratricidal conspiracy, is ancestor to King David. God uses their betrayal to save many. When God cannot work through his people's virtue, he may work through their sin.

The passage also anticipates a later parallel in which God uses human treachery to achieve his purpose. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers for twenty pieces of silver; Jesus, by a disciple, for thirty pieces (Matthew 26:15). God's ability to exploit malevolence does not excuse those involved (consider the fate of Judas!). It does, however, give hope that we need not be perfect, that he can also use us to advance his purposes despite our flaws and foibles. It also promotes humility, in the recognition that whatever God accomplishes through us may be less a testimony to our virtue or ability than to his resourcefulness.



***“Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood”
(37:27).***

DAY 41

JOSEPH vs. HIS BROTHERS: PART ONE, JUDAH

Genesis 38

Genesis 37 portrayed all of Jacob's sons in a bad light. Even in his late teens, Joseph tattles on his brothers, and revels in his father's favoritism. His brothers conspire to kill him, until Judah proposes selling him to foreign slave traders. The next two chapters dive deeper into the behavior of the two main characters. At the same time, more is going on here than a morality tale about sibling conflict.

What God said to them. The first step in interpreting Genesis 38 is to decipher its role within the Joseph narrative. Joseph disappears, as the focus shifts entirely on to Judah. The time frame also differs: while the chapter begins around the time that Joseph is taken into slavery (38:1), it extends over twenty years or more, while Judah marries and fathers three sons, and they in turn grow old enough to marry. Chapter 39 returns to where chapter 37 left off: Joseph has just become a slave in the house of Potiphar. Is chapter 38 a misplaced interruption to the storyline?

Several commonalities link chapter 38 to chapters 37 and 39. Joseph and Judah are the two most prominent figures

across the three chapters. In chapter 37, they are protagonist and antagonist in the slave trade. In chapter 38, Judah finds himself in a scandal, with sexual overtones, involving a foreign woman; in chapter 39, Joseph does likewise.

Additionally, the chapters share some distinctive vocabulary. Jacob 'examines' his son's bloodied robe (37:32,33); Judah 'examines' the items he gave Tamar in bond (38:25,26). Both incidents feature clothing and a goat (37:31-32; 38:14,17). In chapter 37, Jacob cannot be 'comforted' when informed of Joseph's death; in chapter 38, Judah is 'comforted' after the death of his wife (37:35; 38:12). At the beginning of chapter 38, Judah 'goes down' to visit a friend; at the beginning of chapter 39, Joseph is 'brought down' to Egypt.

The links confirm that the narrator intends some connection between the chapters. The content clarifies the point of the connection. To keep the length manageable, today we consider Judah in chapter 38; tomorrow, Joseph in chapter 39.

Chapter 38 begins with Judah violating three generations of precedent against marrying a Canaanite (verses 1-5 cf. 24:3; 26:34-35; 28:1,6-9). His first son is so wicked that God kills him before he produces a descendant. The second son refuses his obligation to sire an heir on behalf of his elder brother, so God kills him, too. Instead of admitting his sons' faults, Judah withholds his last son from the unfortunate woman as if she is to blame (verses 6-12).

Eventually Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, and tricks her father-in-law into anonymous, commercial sex, while retaining some of his identifying possessions (verses 13-23). When she becomes pregnant, and Judah calls for her to be executed for adultery, she reveals his role. The story culminates in his confession: despite her deceit and incest, he concludes, “She is more righteous than I!” (verses 24-26). As denouement, she gives birth to two sons in the pattern of Jacob and Esau: the younger, Perez, usurps the priority of the elder, Zerah (verses 27-30).

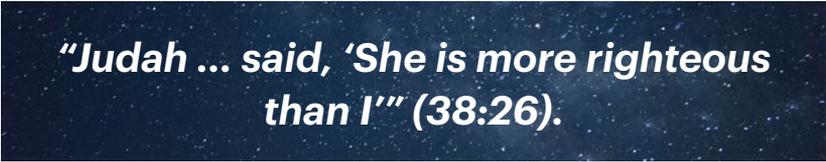
This passage is remarkable for its frank appraisal of Judah and his family. After all, his lineage would rule Israel for much of its history, and give rise to King David (Ruth 4:18). Yet this text makes no effort to sanitize his flaws, or the scandal of his sons’ birth. Moreover, if left to Judah, these illustrious descendants would never have been born. Instead, they spring from the incestuous schemes of the Canaanite Tamar, and the sovereign design of God. This is less to her credit, than to the God who can use even the sins of miscreants to advance his purposes.



What God is saying to us. This passage reinforces the message of yesterday’s reading – and the point of the entire Joseph narrative – that God advances his purposes, even through adversarial circumstances, even if all he has at his disposal is deeply flawed human instruments.

At the same time, today's passage heightens that message in two respects. First, the episode plays off biblical mores, and the Jewish disgust with Canaanite morality. The incest is abhorrent. Worse still, Judah the patriarch owns more blame than his Canaanite daughter-in-law.

Secondly, the divine purpose in this instance is especially dramatic. In the mid-term, one of the offspring of this union – Perez – is forerunner to Israel's illustrious King David. That drama only increases in the long-term: both Perez and David are ancestors to Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17). God's promises are sure, sometimes despite his people, always because of himself.



“Judah ... said, ‘She is more righteous than I’” (38:26).

DAY 42

JOSEPH vs. HIS BROTHERS: PART TWO, JOSEPH

Genesis 39

This reading contrasts with yesterday's. Joseph and Judah were the lead characters in the drama of chapter 37. While that passage finds fault with both, the following two chapters compare their characters, as manifest in similar circumstances. Chapter 38 highlights the sin of Judah. Chapter 39 lauds the virtue of Joseph. More is going on here than moralistic character studies, however; more than, "Be like Joseph, not like Judah."

What God said to them. The chapter consists of four parts, in chiasm:

a	39:1-6a	Joseph thrives as a house slave, as does Potiphar.
b	39:6b-12	Potiphar's wife sexually harasses Joseph.
b'	39:13-20a	Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of rape.
a'	39:20b-23	Joseph thrives in prison, as does the warden.

Joseph begins life in Egypt as a house slave in the home of a government official. While Judah's sons were so evil that God killed them, God blesses Joseph, and he prospers in all his work. In fulfillment of the third Abrahamic promise, so does his Egyptian master (verses 1-6a).

Like Judah, Joseph faces sexual temptation and accusation by a foreign woman. Though in Joseph's case, it is the woman who takes initiative, and he resists. She attempts to rape him, and he flees (verses 6b-12).

Scorned and vengeful, Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of rape, and he is imprisoned (verses 13-20a). God is with him there. He does so well that the warden entrusts him with greater responsibility (verses 20b-23).

The refrain, "The Lord was with Joseph," appears four times in chapter 39, bookends to Joseph's misfortune (verses 2,3,21,23). Because of God's presence and blessing, Joseph succeeds in everything he does (verse 5).

A comparison of chapters 38 and 39 leads to three conclusions. First, Judah and his lineage are severely flawed; Joseph is virtuous. This assessment is striking, given Israel's national history. Descendants of these clans will be in tension for centuries, splitting the nation into two, in the generation after Solomon. The north – including descendants of Joseph – will go into exile for sin in 722 BCE. The south – predominately Judah's line – will survive another century and a half, until 586 BCE. The noble character of Joseph is not matched by his descendants; the low character of Judah is.

The comparison yields a second conclusion: foreign, non-Jewish women, are dangerous. Tamar, a Canaanite, tricks Judah into incest. Potiphar's wife, an Egyptian, tries repeatedly to seduce Joseph, and then falsely accuses him

of rape. These case studies support the long-standing concerns about Jewish men consorting with non-Jewish women.

Thirdly, this passage continues the precedent of God using suspect foreigners to advance his agenda when his own people are unwilling or unable to do so. In yesterday's reading, Tamar tricks Judah into siring sons who keep his lineage alive. In today's reading, Potiphar's wife files false charges that result in Joseph being jailed, where he meets a governmental official, who will eventually introduce him to Pharaoh.

Thus, the overall theme of Genesis intensifies. God's plan moves forward not only despite, but now actually by means of, obstacles and opposition. God purposes advance not only through his obedient people, but also through sinners and foreigners.



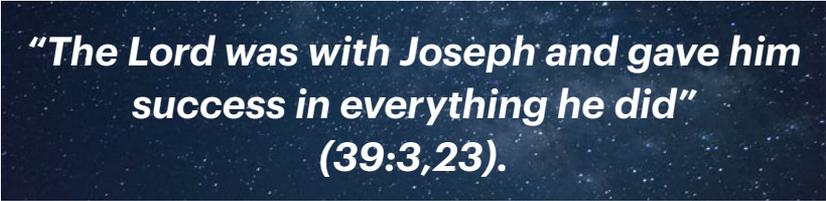
What God is saying to us. Within the flow of the Joseph story, this passage intensifies the overall point of Genesis: God gradually fulfills his promises to Abraham, not only overcoming impediments, but even using calamities (such as false accusation and unjust imprisonment) and scoundrels (like Joseph's siblings and Potiphar's wife) to further his purpose in salvation-history.

This lesson has important implications for Israel's future. In coming generations, they will be enslaved in Egypt. This

passage offers hope that God may use their suffering – and even their oppressors – to further his purposes.

Fortuitously, God’s purpose in salvation-history intersects with Joseph’s life and career, so the patriarch enjoys the side benefits. But in his day, most victims of kidnapping or slavery, sexual assault or imprisonment, did not fare so well. Nor will most fare well today.

This narrative provides no blanket assurance that if ever we face such violence, God is somehow in it, and will turn it to our advantage, or his own. That happened for Joseph; it may not happen for us. In a fallen world, sometimes bad stuff happens, without any silver lining, or any greater good coming from it. God’s presence and blessing may not protect us from victimization by malefactors. But at least this much is sure from the experience of Joseph, not to mention, the experience of Christ, that not even slavery, sexual assault, and unjust imprisonment can halt the advance of God’s purposes.



***“The Lord was with Joseph and gave him
success in everything he did”
(39:3,23).***

DAY 43

IMPRISONED IN THE PLAN OF GOD

Genesis 40

This chapter is one of the simplest in structure and interpretation within the entire book. Its application requires some nuance, however.

What God said to them. The chapter consists of five parts, unified around the interpretation of dreams, and a recurring use of ‘three-peats’ (three branches, three baskets, three days; verses 10,12,13,16,18,19).

Two of Pharaoh’s officials are imprisoned in the same jail as Joseph, and are assigned to his oversight (verses 1-4a). While the terms ‘chief cupbearer’ and ‘chief baker’ sound like kitchen staff, and they bear some culinary responsibilities, they also serve as important advisors to the Pharaoh (cf. Nehemiah 2:7-9; 5:14).

Some time later, both have revelatory dreams the same night, each associated with their professional duties. In many ancient cultures, the gods were thought to communicate on occasion through special dreams, so the interpretation of dreams (oneirology) received considerable attention among ancient priests. Joseph, who had previous experience with his own revelatory dreams, offers to

interpret their dreams. At the same time, he is careful to credit God, rather than to claim special abilities for himself (verses 4b-8).

The chief cupbearer goes first. He dreamt of a grapevine, and serving wine to the Pharaoh. Within three days, Joseph interprets, his head will be 'lifted up': he will be restored to his prestigious position. Joseph adds a personal request: "When you are restored to influence, don't forget me in my unwarranted suffering!" (verses 9-15).

Emboldened by the favorable interpretation of his colleague's dream, the chief baker reports his own. He was carrying three baskets on his head, full of baked goods, with birds eating from the baskets. Within three days, Joseph interprets, his head too will be 'lifted up': he will be decapitated, with his head impaled on a pole, and his body exposed for birds to eat (verses 16-19).

Three days later, Pharaoh celebrates his birthday with a feast. He restores the chief cupbearer to his former position, and orders the chief baker executed and impaled, fulfilling both of Joseph's interpretations (verses 20-22). Yet, the narrator adds tersely, "the chief cupbearer ... did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (verse 23).



What God is saying to us. Two aspects of this passage have potential for contemporary application, though each requires careful treatment.

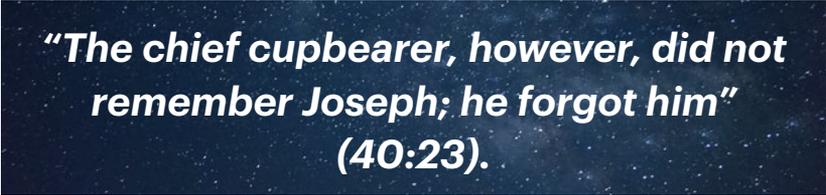
For one, we have the first inkling that God has some purpose in Joseph's misery. Chapter 39 noted that Joseph was imprisoned "in the place where the king's prisoners were confined" and was placed "in charge of all those held in the prison" (39:20,22). Both notes anticipate this chapter, when the king jails two court officials, under Joseph's supervision, setting the scene for him to interpret their dreams. Thus again, God not only fulfills his purposes in the face of – but sometimes also by means of – adversity and suffering.

It goes beyond the text, though, to suppose that God always has some purpose in everything bad that happens to Joseph (or to us). To a sympathetic reader – and more so, to Joseph at the time! – the cupbearer's forgetfulness punctures a desperate hope of liberation. The text neither seeks nor finds any positive aspect to the additional two years in prison. Sometimes in Scripture God uses false imprisonment to accomplish his purposes (e.g., Acts 4:23-30). Other times, he accomplishes his purposes despite imprisonment (e.g., Acts 16:22-40). Other times, bad stuff happens without evident purpose.

For the other, God uses dreams to communicate crucial personal details to both prisoners, as he previously spoke in dreams to Joseph (chapter 37), Laban (31:24), Jacob (28:10-17), and the foreign king Abimelek (20:1-7). Within the New Testament, God continues to speak through dreams and visions; for example, to Ananias and the apostle Paul (Acts 9), and to Cornelius and the apostle Peter (Acts 10).

Nonetheless, accounts of revelatory dreams and visions are infrequent in Scripture. Nor does the Bible ever suggest that most dreams are revelatory, much less that we should write our dreams down, and interpret them through Freudian or Jungian frameworks (as some prominent Christian authors have advocated).

Dream interpretation is secondary in the application of this text. The narrator does not portray the cupbearer and the baker as role models for God's people to hear God speak to them in dreams. Rather, he affirms that God, not Egyptian mediums, is the authoritative interpreter of dreams, because he, not Egyptian deities, is the one who controls history. Today, room may exist for developing a similar response, especially in contexts where oneiromancy still thrives; as, for instance, in contexts where shamanism remains active. Though experience demonstrates that we do well to proceed more with caution than with bravado.



***“The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him”
(40:23).***

DAY 44

FROM PRISON TO PALACE

Genesis 41

The hand of God, thus far hidden, now reveals itself, as all the tragedies of Joseph's life coalesce to elevate him into national prominence and international influence. Behind the scenes, God has arranged the entirety of Joseph's life to bring him to this time and place. His jealous brothers sold him into slavery, and he was transported to Egypt; a scorned adulterous sent him to prison; he aided a governmental official, only to be forgotten. Now, in the fourth episode, his fortunes suddenly skyrocket.

What God said to them. The structure of this passage is straight-forward, proceeding episodically and alternating between Pharaoh and Joseph, thus producing synonymous parallelism.

a	41:1-7	Pharaoh has two dreams.
b	41:8-16	Joseph is released to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.
a'	41:17-24	Pharaoh reports his dreams.
b'	41:25-32	Joseph interprets the dreams.
a''	41:33-45	Pharaoh appoints Joseph to administer the food supply.
b''	41:46-57	Joseph administers the food supply.

(Parallelism also occurs at lower levels, but it need not concern us here.)

Pharaoh has two dreams, the first of cattle, and the second of grain, key agricultural products in Egypt at that time. He sees seven plump cows followed by seven gaunt; then, seven plump heads of grain, followed by seven shriveled (verses 1-7). None of Pharaoh's shamans or counselors can interpret the dream. An advisor – the 'chief cupbearer' – remembers Joseph from prison, and recommends him. Joseph, in turn, credits God for the interpretation (verses 8-16).

Pharaoh recounts his dreams (verses 17-24). Joseph interprets both the same, as God forecasting seven years of abundant harvest, followed by another seven of famine (verses 25-32). He proposes that Pharaoh appoint an administrator to manage the food supply, and Pharaoh appoints him (verses 33-45). In a preliminary yet spectacular fulfillment of the third Abrahamic promise, Joseph preserves both Egypt and the surrounding countries (verses 46-57).

The narrative celebrates Joseph's new status. He is Pharaoh's second-in-command. He marries into an elite family. His wife bears him two sons, whose names express his gratitude to God: Manasseh, 'Forgetful' ('God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household'), and Ephraim, 'Fruitful' ('God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering'). On its face, all that happened previously was unmitigated disaster. With the curtain pulled back, it turns

out that God has been using these adversities to insert Joseph into an internationally strategic role.

Joseph was seventeen when his brothers betrayed him. He is now thirty. It has taken thirteen years of disappointment and suffering for him to see the purpose of God in his life. Throughout those long years, he remained devoted to God. The dismal events of life could have left Joseph embittered. Instead, he hangs on and holds out.

Yet as much as the narrator intends Joseph to be a role model, he can be such only because God is both sovereign and faithful. As much as this chapter holds up Joseph for admiration, its primary purpose is to hold up God for worship, for his sovereign control over nature and history, and the adversities and advances of Joseph's life.



What God is saying to us. Two considerations direct the application of this passage: the priority of God over Joseph; and, the question whether Joseph is a paradigm for each of us.

This passage, like the rest of Genesis, is not primarily about Joseph; it is primarily about God. It is only because God is who he is – sovereign over all that happens in the world and in individual lives – that Joseph can trust him. It is only because God can do what he can do – using opposing forces to further his purposes – that Joseph prospers. Writ larger, it is only because God can use opposing forces to

further his purposes that the crucifixion of Jesus brings our salvation (Acts 4:23-31). So, first and foremost, we celebrate the sovereignty and faithfulness of God.

Secondarily, Joseph indisputably exemplifies persevering trust in the sovereignty and benevolence of God, in the face of circumstances that would challenge anyone's confidence. He is rightly a model for us to emulate, of faith and faithfulness amidst crushing adversity.

At the same time, we must not infer that, in the sovereignty and benevolence of God, our suffering will always turn out as well as Joseph's. The narrator never draws that moral. Sometimes God uses our suffering for spectacular good; sometimes in a fallen world, life is just hard. Sometimes the hidden hand of God slips into view, and all of life's misfortunes are seen to make sense; other times we must simply hang on and hold out.

“I cannot do it,’ Joseph replied to Pharaoh, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires’” (41:16).

DAY 45

REPENTANCE AND RECONCILIATION

Genesis 42-45

This reading is longer than typical, but the passage comprises a single story, reporting the reconciliation between Joseph and his family of origin, and the relocation of the entire clan from Canaan to Egypt.

What God said to them. Structurally, the passage consists of two parts, parallel reports of two trips to Egypt to obtain food supplies during famine.

A	42:1-5	Jacob sends his sons to Egypt for grain.
B	42:6-7	Joseph recognizes his brothers, who bow to him.
C	42:8-20	Joseph accuses them of spying; Simeon is imprisoned.
D	42:21-23	The brothers acknowledge wrong; Reuben scolds them.
E	42:24-26	Joseph weeps privately.
F	42:27-38	Brothers return to Canaan; Benjamin cannot go to Egypt.
A'	43:1-14	Jacob reluctantly allows Benjamin to go to Egypt.
B'	43:15-34	Joseph hosts a meal for his brothers, who bow to him.
C'	44:1-13	Joseph accuses them of theft; Benjamin to be enslaved.
D'	44:14-34	Judah offers himself as slave in place of Benjamin.
E'	45:1-15	Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.
F'	45:16-28	Brothers return to Canaan to bring Jacob to Egypt.

Since the two events are largely parallel, it is the differences that are indicative of developments and emphases in the storyline.

A famine in Canaan prompts Jacob to send his sons to Egypt for grain. He holds back Benjamin, lest harm come to the favored son of his favorite wife, Rachel. This recalls his previous favoritism for Joseph (42:1-5).

In Egypt, the brothers unwittingly meet Joseph, bowing before him in fulfillment of his adolescent dream (42:6-7 cf. 37:5-10; 43:26,28). In another parallel with his earlier experience, he jails Simeon, the second-eldest, until the brothers bring Benjamin to Egypt (42:8-20). They interpret their predicament as divine retribution for selling their brother twenty years earlier (42:21-23). Hearing their remorse, Joseph weeps privately (42:24-26). The brothers return to Canaan, where Jacob, in a characteristic display of favoritism, refuses to risk Benjamin in an effort to rescue Simeon (42:27-38).

Overall, the report of the second trip is nearly three times as long as the first. Another significant difference is a change in spokesman: now Judah, the original ringleader, takes the lead (43:3,8; 44:14,16,18).

When the famine persists, Jacob has to choose between starvation and sending the brothers back to Egypt, along with Benjamin. Judah offers himself in surety for his younger brother's safety (43:1-14).

When they arrive, Joseph hosts them to a formal meal, and they again bow to him. He gives preferential treatment to Benjamin, his brother from the same mother (43:15-34). He sets a trap for them as they head back toward Canaan, enabling his steward to detain Benjamin on charges of theft, punishable by enslavement (44:1-13).

As Joseph springs the trap, his intention becomes clear. He has constructed a *déjà vu*: a spoiled sibling, father's favorite, from the favored wife, faces foreign enslavement. Will his brothers betray Benjamin as they previously betrayed him? Judah demonstrates reform by offering himself in place of Benjamin (44:14-34). Moved by the change in character, Joseph reveals his identity (45:1-15). Finally, with Pharaoh's support, Joseph moves his entire family to Egypt, where he can provide for them (45:16-28).

How can Joseph forgive his siblings? Partly because of their repentance, but especially because he recognizes the sovereign hand of God at work. Three times he draws the lesson: "It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (45:5,7,8).

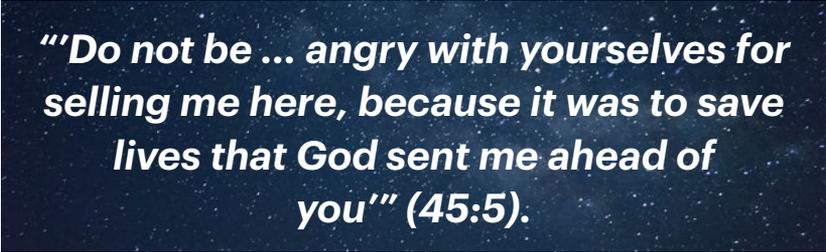


What God is saying to us. This text has primary and secondary themes, and corresponding applications. Judah models repentance; Joseph models forgiveness; Jacob models persistence in self-defeating behavior. These lessons are legitimate, but secondary.

The primary lesson is the sovereignty of God, even through catastrophic circumstances. In their troubles, the brothers see divine retribution. In his betrayal, slavery, and imprisonment, Joseph sees the providence of God saving his family, Egypt, and the surrounding peoples.

Joseph's magnanimity is remarkable, though it pales beside Christ's prayer from the cross pleading for the forgiveness of those who crucified him (Luke 23:34). He, too, recognized the sovereign hand of God at work in his suffering for the salvation of the world (John 3:14-15).

Derivatively, this passage assures us, too, that God, in his sovereignty, can use our misfortunes, betrayals, and suffering, to advance the salvation of others. Recognition of God's sovereignty empowers us to endure in his service, and to offer forgiveness to those who oppose or betray us.



“Do not be ... angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (45:5).

DAY 46

EMIGRATING FROM THE PROMISED LAND

Genesis 46-47

The move to Egypt is laden with significance. Canaan is their ancestral homeland, promised and provided by God. During famine, Abraham moved to Egypt, where his insecurity prompted him to pimp Sarah to ensure his own safety (12:10-20). During a later famine, God prohibited Isaac from moving to Egypt, directing him instead to Philistine territory (26:2-3). In a time when gods were widely held to be geographically restricted, would Jacob and family leave God and his promises behind? Will they end up landless and impoverished, victimized by racism and xenophobia? Will the clan ever make it back to Canaan?

What God said to them. Pushed by the famine, and pulled by the desire to reunite with his long-lost son, Jacob heads for Egypt. The journey takes him through Beersheba, on the southern boundary between Canaan and Egypt, where God had confirmed the covenant with Isaac (26:23-33). Jacob offers sacrifice at the altar that his father built. God responds in a vision, reassuring him in terms reminiscent of his father's earlier vision:

"I am God, the God of your father... Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation

there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again."

Jacob may safely leave Canaan, without leaving behind either the presence or the promises of God (46:1-4).

As Jacob leaves, the narrator takes stock of the current status of the promises. While their departure sets back the promise of land, a genealogy documents progress in the fulfillment of the promise of descendants: in one generation, twelve patriarchs have increased to seventy males. The blessings of God are moving forward, slowly but steadily (46:5-27).

The remainder of these two chapters records progress on the third promise: that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to the nations. The Pharaoh assigns land in Goshen for Jacob's clan to settle. In return, Jacob twice blesses Pharaoh (46:28-47:12). More concretely, in his role as chief administrator, Joseph keeps the people of Egypt, Canaan, and the surrounding nations alive, providing them grain in a time of famine. They respond with gratitude: "'You have saved our lives'" (47:13-26).

The closing paragraph summarizes the state of the Abrahamic blessing. Jacob's family prospers materially in Egypt. They "were fruitful and increased greatly in number." Though the clan no longer resides in the Promised Land, Joseph swears to repatriate his father's remains to the family site (47:27-31). As Jacob's life draws to a close, both blessing and Fall are manifest: the first and third promises make

progress, at the expense – at least temporarily – of the second.



What God is saying to us. One lesson we likely should not draw from this incident is the legitimacy of ‘charge what the market will bear’. Joseph reduced the entire population of family farms to tenant farming, and they were grateful for his help in staying alive (47:25). Even if twenty percent was a fair rate, as some commentators affirm, the Old Testament stipulates permanent ownership of land, to provide economic security.

This passage would legitimately speak to later Israel, as it endured multiple conquests. Typically, the elite would be forcibly exiled. The general populace would have to choose between remaining in their homeland under enemy occupation, or fleeing elsewhere (generally, to Egypt). This passage affirms that God is not bound by geography, that he was with Israel’s ancestors when circumstances forced them out of the Promised Land, and eventually brought them home. He can do so again.

Within the New Testament, the central idea of this passage applies analogically to the persecuted Church. In 1 Peter, the apostle characterizes his readers as ‘exiles’, and assures them of God’s manifold blessings: election, sanctification, atonement, new birth, eternal inheritance, and so forth. As God blessed Jacob’s family in Egypt, so he blesses his people now, in this ‘foreign land’ (1 Peter 1:1-12).

This passage also holds implications for economic migrants and refugees, currently at historic levels around the world. Application in this direction requires caution and care. The clan of Abraham was unique in salvation history; God's promises to them did not apply directly to any other people or nation then, or now. But his promises are at least generally relevant, particularly in countries where famine, poverty, war, or persecution provokes mass migration among the people of God. The ancient Egyptian response to Joseph and his family may also prompt Christians in prosperous countries to consider how we might help migrants and refugees to our shores.

“Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again” (46:4).

DAY 47

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

Genesis 48:1-49:28

As Jacob's life draws to a close, he blesses Joseph's two sons, and then his own. Though these blessings are directed toward individuals, they apply to the entire clan that will descend from each. So they carry predictive and political implications, even if some of the details escape us at this distance. The blessings are also theologically significant, in broad strokes.

What God said to them. The two blessings form a pair:

a	48:1-22	Jacob blesses Joseph's two sons.
a'	49:1-28	Jacob blesses his own sons.

While the passages could be treated separately, the similarities in structure, content, and significance are conducive to a single reading.

The first blessing is embedded within an inclusion, integrating the episode with the overall thrust of Genesis. In the opening paragraph, Jacob reviews the blessings God promised him: descendants, nations, and land (48:1-4). In the closing paragraph, Jacob passes the same blessings to his grandsons (48:15-22). The narrator misses no opportunity to drive home his central theme.

In the blessing, Jacob elevates two grandsons into the ranks of his immediate heirs, on a par with his sons. Consistent with the reversal pattern operative throughout Genesis, the second-born Ephraim receives the greater (right-hand) blessing, over the first-born Manasseh. Joseph protests, but Jacob insists: Manasseh will become a great people; Ephraim, multiple nations (48:5-20).

In his second speech, Jacob blesses (and occasionally curses) his sons, mostly in order of birth (49:1-28). The blessings typically include: puns on the patriarch's name, animal imagery, episodes from his life, and predictions regarding the individual's future.

Reuben forfeits his place as first-born, because in lust for sex and power, he slept with his father's concubine (cf. 35:22). Simeon and Levi fall under curse because of their massacre of the Hivites, after the rape of their sister Dinah (cf. 34:1-31). So leadership falls to the fourth-born Judah. Despite him initiating the enslavement of Joseph (cf. 37:26-28), and committing incest with Tamar (cf. 38:1-26), his clan will rule the nation of Israel.

The next several patriarchs receive brief treatment: Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, and Naphtali. Joseph receives the fullest treatment of all, referencing his personal history of surmounting obstacles and betrayal, under the blessing of God (cf. chapters 37-41). Benjamin comes last, as befits his birth order: his blessing predicts the warriors that will spring from his clan.



What God is saying to us. Both speeches serve a political purpose: they legitimize future generations of national leadership. The clan of Benjamin produces the first king, Saul. After that, the line of Judah becomes the perpetual dynasty, beginning with David. During the divided monarchy, the clan of Ephraim ascends to prominence in the north. The divided country takes on the names of its dominant clans: Judah and Ephraim.

Both clans face obvious challenges to their claim of authority: Judah was Jacob's fourth-born son, not his first, and morally corrupt. Ephraim was not even a son, but the younger of two grandsons, and born to a foreign mother. What legitimizes their dominance in national leadership? Jacob's death-bed blessing, articulating God's will.

How does any of this apply to us? First, by contrast, it highlights the magnificent character of Christ, and in two respects. He is driven by service, not by status: the preincarnate Son surrendered his rightful glory, to take up human form, and submitted to crucifixion (Philippians 2:5-8). Moreover, he is a leader without flaw or sin (Hebrews 7:26-28). This passage also assures us that God directs history. He has already appointed Christ ruler, and promises that one day, all will recognize his rule.

On a secondary level, the patriarchal narrative remains relevant for Christian leadership, especially in an era of celebrity pastors. We find here at least three applications.

First, unlike our current tendency toward hero worship and hagiography, Genesis is breathtakingly frank about the flaws and sins of Israel's founding fathers.

Secondly, we learn from Israel's patriarchs not to idealize our human leaders. Especially in a large church, we may not have enough contact to know their flaws and sins, but see only their carefully cultivated public image. Yet we can be sure that they – like these patriarchs – have struggles and failings. We can legitimately idealize Christ; we do well to stop there.

Thirdly, the fact that God condescended to use such scoundrels and miscreants to lead Israel does not condone such flaws and sins among our leaders. In the aftermath of the resurrection of Christ, we have the Spirit who transforms and empowers us to live for God. We also have clear criteria for Christian leaders in the New Testament. While Judah made the cut in the Old Testament, his spiritual and moral successors do not, in the New.

“All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him” (49:28).

DAY 48

THE END OF AN ERA

Genesis 49:29-50:26

This reading combines two sections. The former recounts the death and burial of Jacob (49:23-50:14), and the latter draws the Joseph narrative, and the book of Genesis, to a close (50:15-26). Because the two sections are comparable in content, and make the same basic point, we consider them together.

What God said to them. Jacob ends his deathbed blessings by asking his sons to bury him in the family plot in Canaan, alongside Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah. (Rachel died in childbirth on the journey from Bethel to Bethlehem, and was buried en route.) With that, he dies (49:29-33).

Out of respect for Joseph's stature in the government, Jacob receives a state funeral. Then, with Pharaoh's permission, Joseph honors his father's wishes, repatriating his remains to the family tomb in Canaan (50:1-14).

With their father no longer a restraining influence, Joseph's brothers fear that he will take revenge for their earlier betrayal. They launch a multi-faceted appeal for forgiveness, invoking their dead father, acknowledging their guilt, and humiliating themselves. Joseph admirably renounces revenge. Justice is God's prerogative, not his.

Besides, behind their betrayal, he sees the hand of God placing him in a position where he could save many lives (50:15-21).

As Genesis closes, Joseph's adult children give birth to the next generation. The only sub-optimum is that he remains in Egypt. One day, he foresees, God will return them to their promised land. They promise to repatriate his remains. Then he, too, dies (50:22-26).

So God's progressive (albeit, still partial) fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, in the face of all obstacles, remains in the forefront of the narrative, from chapter 12 until the final paragraph. Through the most unlikely of circumstances and people, God's plan for the redemption of the world advances. Abraham's lineage prospers. The fourth generation consists of twelve sons, patriarchs of a future nation. Though currently off the land, God will bring them back one day. Through adversarial circumstances – slavery, false accusation, and prison – Joseph rises to international influence, from which he blesses the nations.

Genesis was not written to stand alone. It is the first volume of a story too long to fit on one scroll, the first in a series of five interconnected books known as the Pentateuch. The expectation of a return to Canaan anticipates the next chapter of the story, God's deliverance from Egypt, recounted in Exodus.



What God is saying to us. This passage presents the recurring challenge to contemporary application: Do we yet again apply the central theme of God fulfilling his promises and achieving his purposes in the face of the obstacles resulting from sin and the Fall? Or do we cast around for some moral that we can squeeze from the details of the text?

In this instance, we need not look hard to find a moralistic application. Joseph's brothers illustrate repentance (even if they may be motivated as much by self-interest as by genuine remorse). Joseph models forgiveness, and the theology that motivates it. The supreme illustration of this, of course, is Jesus forgiving those who crucified him. Moralistic application is legitimate in this instance, though the brothers' repentance and Joseph's forgiveness are secondary themes of the passage.

Which brings us back to the question: Do we pass over the central theme because by this point it is unmistakable, even unforgettable? The answer may vary by context. In a preaching schedule or Bible study that moves one chapter per week, fifty times focusing on this central theme could be overkill. If, on the other hand, a congregation reads through Genesis, one chapter a day, with only seven sermons on the theme, then this may provide the repetition needed for the truth to penetrate minds, settle in hearts, and influence behavior.

Regarding the central theme, we note for a final time in Genesis, that God does not make the same patriarchal

promises to us today. He does not guarantee that I will have children, own land, or achieve international fame. Instead he invites us to participate in the third stage of his promises, blessing the nations. As we take our place in this great endeavor, his promise to the ancestors of Israel become ours. God will faithfully, albeit incrementally, advance his purposes in the face of all obstacles. The main difference between their era and ours being that, forgiven by Christ and transformed by the Spirit, we will more often work with him, than against him, so that he can more often work through us, rather than despite us.

“God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (50:24).