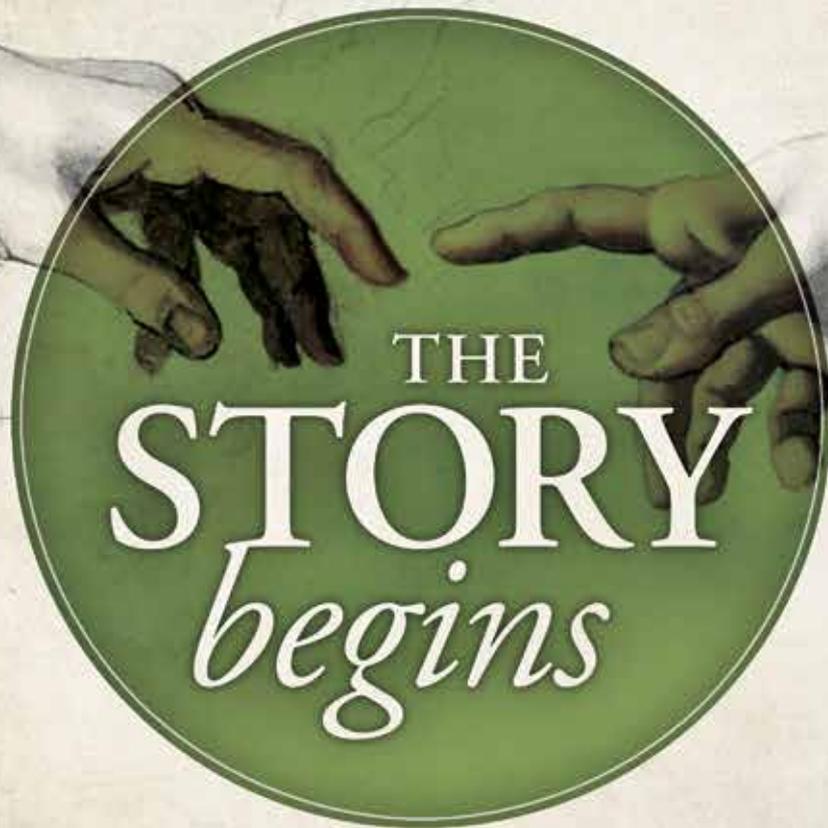


THE  
**GOSPEL**  
PROJECT<sup>®</sup>  
CHRONOLOGICAL



B.C.

A.D.

Volume 1

FALL 2015: *Leader Guide ESV*

*Ed Stetzer* GENERAL EDITOR

*Trevin Wax* MANAGING EDITOR

LifeWay | Adults



# God's Word to You



## A Summary of the Bible

In the beginning, the all-powerful, personal God created the universe. This God created human beings in His image to live joyfully in His presence, in humble submission to His gracious authority. But all of us have rebelled against God and, in consequence, must suffer the punishment of our rebellion: physical death and the wrath of God.

Thankfully, God initiated a rescue plan, which began with His choosing the nation of Israel to display His glory in a fallen world. The Bible describes how God acted mightily on Israel's behalf, rescuing His people from slavery and then giving them His holy law. But God's people—like all of us—failed to rightly reflect the glory of God.

Then, in the fullness of time, in the Person of Jesus Christ, God Himself came to renew the world and restore His people. Jesus perfectly obeyed the law given to Israel. Though innocent, He suffered the consequences of human rebellion by His death on a cross. But three days later, God raised Him from the dead.

Now the church of Jesus Christ has been commissioned by God to take the news of Christ's work to the world. Empowered by God's Spirit, the church calls all people everywhere to repent of sin and to trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness. Repentance and faith restores our relationship with God and results in a life of ongoing transformation.

The Bible promises that Jesus Christ will return to this earth as the conquering King. Only those who live in repentant faith in Christ will escape God's judgment and live joyfully in God's presence for all eternity. God's message is the same to all of us: repent and believe, before it is too late. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe with your heart that God raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved.



## Ed Stetzer

General Editor—*The Gospel Project*  
PRESIDENT, LIFEWAY RESEARCH



“The Story Begins”—sounds epic, doesn’t it? As if you are about to embark on a great journey; as if from this moment forward, things will never be the same. I, for one, hope that is true, because we are not about to dive into a study of some ancient work that is dead but into the living Word of God. This isn’t just any story; this is *the* story that God Himself has been telling since the beginning of time.

*The Gospel Project Chronological* is going to take us through the storyline of Scripture in three years. From the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation, we will see that God’s Word is not a series of disconnected writings and stories but one grand narrative with a beginning, an eternal end, and a purpose—to reveal Jesus Christ as God’s Son, our Savior and Lord.

In the Old Testament, Jesus is the promised One; in the New Testament, He has come and will come again. All of life and all of history revolve around this One to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). And to those who are called by His name, this is our mission—our part of the story—to proclaim to the whole world Jesus as Lord, the Savior of all who believe in Him, that they would hear and give glory to the Creator of all.

## Trevin Wax

Managing Editor—*The Gospel Project*  
AUTHOR OF MULTIPLE BOOKS, INCLUDING *Gospel-Centered Teaching*, *Counterfeit Gospels*, AND *Clear Winter Nights: A Young Man’s Journey into Truth, Doubt, and What Comes After*



For a story to be great, it must include a great beginning. The story of the Bible, which tells the true story of our world, is no exception.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God the Creator in all His majesty and goodness as He spins the world into motion and lavishes His image-bearers with love. We have an “inciting incident” that introduces conflict into this good world, as the first humans raise their fists in defiance toward their loving Father and bring havoc into this peaceful paradise. But even here, we have a promise—God will make things right again. God will cover His people’s sins and crush their adversary. The rest of Genesis shows how even though sin spread throughout the world, God remained faithful to His promise to Eve, His promise to Noah, and His promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

The Book of Genesis is a glorious and earthy tale of rebellion and redemption, of sin and salvation, of failings and faith. Here is a book that shows us who we are in our sin and who God is in His grace. May this study lead you to express gratitude for God’s love toward you and then extend His love to everyone who inhabits this world He has promised to restore.

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salvation for its end; and truth, without any  
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Suggested for  
the week of

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**Unit 1: God the Creator (Genesis 1–11)**

|              |                         |                                      |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| September 6  | <b><i>Session 1</i></b> | In the Beginning, God...             |
| September 13 | <b><i>Session 2</i></b> | In God's Image                       |
| September 20 | <b><i>Session 3</i></b> | Human Rebellion                      |
| September 27 | <b><i>Session 4</i></b> | The Spread of Sin                    |
| October 4    | <b><i>Session 5</i></b> | The Creator Destroys and Redeems     |
| October 11   | <b><i>Session 6</i></b> | The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil |

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**Unit 2: God the Covenant-Maker (Genesis 12–50)**

|             |                          |                                       |
|-------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| October 18  | <b><i>Session 7</i></b>  | God's Covenant with Abraham           |
| October 25  | <b><i>Session 8</i></b>  | The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham |
| November 1  | <b><i>Session 9</i></b>  | God Reaffirms the Covenant            |
| November 8  | <b><i>Session 10</i></b> | God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family   |
| November 15 | <b><i>Session 11</i></b> | The God Who Gives New Names           |
| November 22 | <b><i>Session 12</i></b> | The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering |
| November 29 | <b><i>Session 13</i></b> | God Is Faithful to His Covenant       |

### Tips from Trevin on how best to use this Leader Guide

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*! Think of yourself as a guide leading your group on a tour of God's Word, journeying through the Bible's grand story and encountering the riches of Christ's redemption. We hope *The Gospel Project* will provide you with the tools and resources you need as you prayerfully seek to apply the truth of the gospel to the people God has placed in your group. Here are some things to remember as you use this Leader Guide:

**Pray.** Pray for your group. Don't lead in your own strength.

**Adapt.** You know the style of your group. If more discussion-oriented, then encourage group members to read the session ahead of time. Use the "Further Discussion" questions in the Session Plan to facilitate discussion that stays grounded in the session. If you take a more master-teacher approach, then spend time familiarizing yourself with the Expanded Session Content. Select questions that make the most strategic sense for moving the session along.

**Cut.** If it seems to you that *The Gospel Project* provides too much material for one session, you're right. We chose to deliver more than you need and to include the bulk of the content in the Personal Study Guide (PSG) so you don't feel pressed to get all the content delivered in the session time itself. Refer your group members to the PSG.

**Add.** The PSG has the bulk of the content from the Leader Guide, but not all of it. Throughout the Expanded Session Content, you will see portions of leader-only content marked off in the margin, as this portion is. These sections might be transitions between points, illustrations, answers to questions, content for interactive portions in the PSG, and even theological connections. The Teaching Plan will reference the more vital sections, but as you shape each session, consider how these leader-only sections can benefit your group.

**Personalize.** Take the truths in *The Gospel Project* and enhance them. Add personal stories. Ask penetrating questions that go to the heart of the people you know and love.

**Resource yourself.** (Encourage your group to take advantage of these resources too.)

Make use of the additional resources suggested at the end of each session.

- Read a suggested chapter or section in a book.
- Learn from the "Tip of the Week" to grow as a teacher and a group in spiritual maturity.

Visit [GospelProject.com/Blog](http://GospelProject.com/Blog) for the following:

- Read blog posts related to the overall study theme and specific sessions.
- Listen to a brief video as I point out the highlights to focus on for the upcoming session.

Visit [GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources](http://GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources) to access these resources:

- Read online articles and blog posts related to the session content.
- Listen to helpful podcasts from pastors and church leaders.
- Download suggestions for interactive options to help address a variety of learning styles.

**Overflow.** Remember...*The Gospel Project* is not just a curriculum. WE are the project. As we immerse ourselves in the great story of redemption, God's Spirit uses the gospel to change us. Don't prepare simply for the content you're going to deliver. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. A great leader is not a dispenser of information but an overflowing river of gospel passion. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the people He has entrusted to your care.

## SESSION 1

# In the Beginning, God...

## Summary and Goal

The beginning of the story of Scripture does what beginnings should—it sets the stage for all that follows. In the beginning, God created everything, and He created everything good. And vitally important for grasping the scope of the gospel, we will see that God created everything through His Son.

### ***Main Passages***

Genesis 1:1-25

1 Corinthians 8:5-6

### ***Session Outline***

1. God created everything (Gen. 1:1-2).
2. God created everything good (Gen. 1:3-25).
3. God created everything through His Son (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

---

### ***Theological Theme***

God created everything good through His Son.

### ***Christ Connection***

By the Son and for the Son and through the Son, all things exist and hold together.

### ***Missional Application***

Because we exist by God and for God, we must seek to discover our role in the overarching plan and purpose of God to manifest His glory and love to the world.

Date of My Bible Study: \_\_\_\_\_

## Session Plan

# In the Beginning, God...

## Session 1

### Pack Item 1: The Story Begins

Display this poster in a place that will help group members follow the storyline of Scripture, to remember where we've been and where we are going.

### Introduction Option

As people arrive, ask them to group up and share the beginnings of the stories of their lives. After a few minutes, ask a couple of members to share what they heard from someone in their group.

Follow up by pointing out that we all have a beginning and that others preceded us (parents). Our lives have a context, and so does the beginning of creation, which was preceded by God.

### ? For Further Discussion

Why are beginnings of stories important?

What does an author hope to accomplish through the beginning of a story?

## Introduction

Begin with the concept of beginnings in stories. Cite a few from literature. Then ask the following question, making sure you have an answer of your own to share to encourage responses (leader p. 10; personal study guide [PSG] p. 10).

- ? What is your favorite opening line or scene from a book or movie that captured your attention and didn't let go?

Point to the session title as the beginning of the Book authored by God Himself. Then summarize the session (leader pp. 10-11; PSG pp. 10-11). *If helpful for your group, address the simple assumption of Scripture that God exists because He wrote it—God alone is dependent on no one* (leader p. 10).

## 1. God created everything (Gen. 1:1-2).

Note the point of Genesis 1:1—Someone preceded and created everything. Then read Genesis 1:1-2. *Remembering the context*, discuss why **the Israelites** and **we** need to know God created everything (leader pp. 11-12; PSG pp. 11-12).

- ? In what ways should knowing that God created everything affect our thoughts and our emotions regarding God?

*Summarize responses to the question as love for and wonder of God* (leader p. 12).

## 2. God created everything good (Gen. 1:3-25).

Explain what it means that God created everything *good—morally good, beautiful, and usable*. God's creation fulfills its purpose of revealing things about God that are invisible to us (leader p. 12; PSG pp. 12-13).

- ? In what ways have you experienced the goodness of God's creation even today?
- ? What do these experiences tell you about God?

Introduce the two types of revelation from God—*general revelation* and *special revelation*. Then describe **general revelation's** content and scope, and note that *creation is one of the main avenues of general revelation* (leader p. 13; PSG p. 13).

Frame the creation account in Genesis 1 as divided into two sets of three days. The first set addresses the creation's *darkness* and *formlessness* (v. 2). Read Genesis 1:3-13, asking the group to circle the names God gives to the spheres He creates. These reveal some things about God (leader pp. 13-14; PSG pp. 13-14).

- Why do you think these created spheres are good (moral, beautiful, usable)? What do these created spheres reveal about God?

The second set of days addresses creation's *emptiness*. Read Genesis 1:14-25, asking the group to mark the bodies and beings God creates to fill the spheres. These also reveal things about God (leader pp. 14-15; PSG pp. 14-15).

- How are these created things good (moral, beautiful, usable)? What do these created things reveal about God?

*Use Pack Item 2: Matter Matters to help members wrestle with the theological implications of God creating everything and creating everything good (see sidebar).*

Transition to point 3 by showing how we all suppress the knowledge from creation and choose not to glorify God. We need something greater than general revelation—special revelation through God's Son, Jesus (leader p. 15; PSG p. 15).

### 3. God created everything through His Son (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

Ask a volunteer to read 1 Corinthians 8:5-6. Then explain that every time we see God speak things into existence, the Son is there (leader pp. 15-16; PSG p. 16).

- In what ways should knowing that God created everything through His Son affect our thoughts and our emotions regarding Jesus?

Distinguish between the content and scope of general and **special revelation**. Show how God creating everything through the Son means the Son is greater than creation (leader p. 16; PSG p. 16). *Note that this special revelation involves words* (leader p. 16). Demonstrate how the believer is a convergence of the two lights of general and special revelation (leader pp. 16-17; PSG pp. 16-17).

- What are some ways we can be the light of the world and point people to the Light of the world—Jesus?

### Conclusion

Use the *tree illustration* (leader p. 17) to show that our “good” actions function like general revelation in pointing to God, but we must use words to point people to the special revelation of the Son (leader p. 17; PSG p. 17). *Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission”* (PSG p. 18).

### Pack Item 2: Matter Matters

Display this poster before the group meeting.

Ask groups of 3-4 to read the two “Essential Christian Doctrines” in this session and discuss how they relate to the statement on the poster:

- *Creation out of Nothing* (leader p. 12; PSG p. 12)
- *The Goodness of Creation* (leader p. 15; PSG p. 15)

Then ask groups to discuss how we should respond if the statement is false and if the statement is true.

Allow 3-5 minutes; then call for groups to share their reflections and responses.

### Conclusion Option

Consider concluding this session by singing “Fairrest Lord Jesus” as a group.

(A printable PDF of this hymn is available on the DVD in *The Gospel Project Leader Pack for Adults*. Make as many copies as needed.)

**Christ Connection:** By the Son and for the Son and through the Son, all things exist and hold together.

**Missional Application:** Because we exist by God and for God, we must seek to discover our role in the overarching plan and purpose of God to manifest His glory and love to the world.

## Expanded Session Content

# In the Beginning, God...

## Session 1

### Voices from the Church

“Man does not have to wander around in darkness wondering what kind of God he serves or owes allegiance to; Yahweh has communicated, and the traits He communicates are worthy of worship.”<sup>1</sup>

—Timothy M. Pierce

### Voices from the Church

“God is the Ruler of His mighty creation. There is no reason to despair, because He holds in His hands the whole world, while His Spirit is able to fill the void in man’s heart.”<sup>2</sup>

—Billy Graham

## Introduction

I love beginnings. A good beginning sets the tone, gives the context, draws you in, and makes you want to know more. Take these beginnings, for example, from some of the most enduring works of literature:

- “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”  
—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*
- “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.” —C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
- “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” —Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*



What is your favorite opening line or scene from a book or movie that captured your attention and didn't let go?

But what if a book exists that hasn't just endured the test of a hundred years but of thousands? Countless are the books written by men and women, but what if we had a book authored by God Himself? What would be the beginning line of this book? Well, let me tell you: “In the beginning, God...”

The Bible opens simply yet dramatically as we're introduced to the greatest reality ever to exist—God. In Genesis 1:1, we meet a God who is simply there. The Bible doesn't open up with a long list of arguments for God's existence because the Bible is God's revelation of Himself. It simply assumes His existence because He wrote it. He is not dependent on anything or anyone else. And the rest of Genesis 1 describes this God creating everything else, showing the nature of His holiness, His set-apartness. While everything that exists owes its existence to God alone, God alone owes His existence to no one.

Consider this: If someone were to ask you the question “Who are you?” what would you say? We always describe ourselves in relation to some other person or thing that exists, right? But later in the storyline of Scripture, when God was asked for His name, He answered, “I AM WHO I AM.” You see, while everything in creation has to be described in relation to another, only of God can it properly be said that He simply is.

## Session Summary

As we dive into God’s story revealed through Scripture, we recognize that the beginning of the story does what beginnings should—it sets the stage for all that follows. In the beginning, God created everything, and He created everything good. And vitally important for grasping the scope of the gospel, we will see that God created everything through His Son.

## 1. God created everything (Gen. 1:1-2).

How else could you describe the creation of everything unless you’re first introduced to Someone who preceded everything? That’s the whole point of Genesis 1:1. The God who simply is, who preceded everything and is not dependent on anything, He created everything.

*<sup>1</sup> In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

When you’re studying the Bible, one of the most basic and fundamental rules you have to follow to interpret Scripture properly is *remember the context*: Who was the intended audience? What was the purpose of the author? This is vital information to know so that when we come to the text, we are able to ask the questions it was intended to answer.

The original audience of the Book of Genesis was the ancient Israelites on their way to the promised land (a story for a later time). They likely would not have been asking some of the questions that pique our interest, such as the age of the earth or the science behind the creation. So what, then, was the original purpose for the creation account in Genesis?

### Why did the Israelites need to know God created everything?

The Israelites would have wrestled with questions such as “Is our God the real God?” “Is He the best God?” “Is He the most powerful God?” Having lived so long among the gods of the Egyptians and being introduced to the gods of the foreign nations that surrounded them, the Israelites struggled to believe that their God was *the* God.

To remedy such wandering hearts, God wrote Genesis 1:1 to help His people understand that the God of their bedtime stories—the God of their fathers—was the very same God who created the world. The God of Israel, not the gods of the Canaanites or the Philistines, was the Creator of everything. “For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (Ps. 96:4-5).

## Further Commentary

“This opening verse of the Bible, seven words in the Hebrew, establishes seven key truths upon which the rest of the Bible is based. First, God exists. The essential first step in pleasing God is recognizing His existence (Heb. 11:6). Second, God existed before there was a universe and will exist after the universe perishes (Heb. 1:10-12). Third, God is the main character in the Bible. He is the subject of the first verb in the Bible (in fact, He is the subject of more verbs than any other character) and performs a wider variety of activities than any other being in the Bible. Fourth, as Creator God has done what no human being could ever do; in its active form the Hebrew verb *bara*, meaning ‘to create,’ never has a human subject. Thus *bara* signifies a work that is uniquely God’s. Fifth, God is mysterious; though the Hebrew word for God is plural, the verb form of which ‘God’ is the subject is singular. This is perhaps a subtle allusion to God’s Trinitarian nature: He is three divine persons in one divine essence. Sixth, God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He doesn’t just modify pre-existing matter but calls matter into being out of nothing (Ps. 33:6,9; Heb. 11:3). Seventh, God is not dependent on the universe, but the universe is totally dependent on God (Heb. 1:3).”<sup>3</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

## Voices from Church History

“Why does it proceed, first heaven then earth? The temple’s roof made before its pavement? God is not subject to nature’s demands nor to the rules of technique. God is the creator and master technician of nature, and art, and everything made or imagined.”<sup>4</sup>

—Chrysostom  
(circa 347-407)

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 26. Creation out of Nothing

The Bible teaches that God created the universe—everything both visible and invisible—out of nothing (sometimes expressed in the Latin phrase, “creation *ex nihilo*”). This means that before God created anything, nothing else existed except God Himself. God alone is eternal; every created thing has a beginning. Therefore, the eternal God rules over all of His creation and He alone is worthy of worship. Denial of this doctrine has implications for God’s sovereignty over and providence in creation. Because God created out of nothing, creation has meaning and purpose and points us to the Creator.

[Note to the Leader:  
The “99 Essential Christian Doctrines” sidebars serve to show how Christian theology is woven into God’s big story of redemption. You can find the full numbered list at [GospelProject.com/Doctrines](http://GospelProject.com/Doctrines).]

### Why do we need to know God created everything?

We are no different than the original audience of the Book of Genesis. Though perhaps not tempted to bow down to wooden statues, our hearts are just as prone to wander. Lazy Sundays instead of early Sunday worship sure sound nice. You dream about all the things you could’ve bought with your tithe money by the end of the year. There’s an ever-present guilt each time your eyes steal a glimpse of your attractive coworker.

Obedience, at times, seems too costly, and our hearts wonder, *Is God real? Does He love me? Is He worth it?* When we have these questions and struggle to believe in the realness and goodness of God, He wants us to recount Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God...” When there was nothing but nothing, God was, and that ought to create in us a sense of wonder about Him that trumps all our other wonderings.

? In what ways should knowing that God created everything affect our thoughts and our emotions regarding God?

This God who owes His existence to no one and is in need of nothing decided to create everything, including you. This truth ought to overwhelm you with a feeling of love to such an extent that you’re able to reject any other suitors coming after your heart. *God created everything.* Guard this truth and cherish it because every threat against it is trying to rob you of your wonder of God and the love of God for you.

## 2. God created everything good (Gen. 1:3-25).

The next critical thing we need to see from the creation account is that not only did God create everything, but God created everything *good*.

What does that mean? Why does God call each step of His creation good?

- *Is it morally good?* Yes. When God created everything, certainly there was no sin in it.
- *Is it beautiful and pleasant to the eyes?* Yes. You don’t have to stare at the Grand Canyon or a sunset for long to realize that the work of creation is beautiful.
- *Is it usable?* Yes. When we say a knife is good, we’re saying something about its ability to perform its intended purpose and design. A knife that doesn’t cut is not a good knife. When God created something and called it good, He was saying it was doing well at performing its intended purpose and design.

So what is the purpose and design of creation? To declare God’s glory and proclaim the work of His hands (Ps. 19:1). To reveal things about God that are invisible to us (Rom. 1:20). Creation reveals God’s eternal power and divine nature in a way that we can clearly see and understand them.

? In what ways have you experienced the goodness of God’s creation even today?

? What do these experiences tell you about God?

In Genesis 1:3, when God said, “Let there be light,” what we’re seeing is God beginning the good work of revealing Himself. He didn’t have to speak or make Himself known, but He did, and He still does. The creation of the world and much more are fully dependent upon God’s willingness to reveal Himself. One of God’s greatest acts of kindness toward the world and humankind is that He spoke.

Now, theologically speaking, there are two types of revelation from God—*general revelation* and *special revelation*. Let’s first look at God’s general revelation.

### General Revelation

General revelation is the revealing of God that is general both in terms of its content and its scope. In content, it offers broad and common knowledge of God rather than specific, finely tuned truths about God. General revelation can reveal truths such as “God is powerful,” but it can’t reveal specific information such as “God sent His Son, Jesus, to save the world.” And it is also general in scope, that is, it addresses *all* people. Its focus is not revealing something to a specific group of people but revealing something to everyone. *Creation is one of the main avenues of general revelation.*

The creation account in Genesis 1 is divided into two sets of three days. Before God speaks in verse 3, we see that the earth was formless, empty, and dark (v. 2). The first set of days (Gen. 1:3-13) addresses the creation’s *darkness* and *formlessness*.

*<sup>3</sup> And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup> And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

*<sup>6</sup> And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”<sup>7</sup> And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. <sup>8</sup> And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.*

*<sup>9</sup> And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

*<sup>11</sup> And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*

### Voices from Church History

“While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point preeminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence.”<sup>5</sup>

—Irenaeus (circa 125-202)

### Further Commentary

“Water plays a crucial role in ancient Near Eastern creation literature. In Egypt, for example, the creator-god Ptah uses the preexistent waters (personified as the god Nun) to create the universe. The same is true in Mesopotamian belief: it is out of the gods of watery chaos—Apsu, Tiamat, and Mummu—that creation comes...In the biblical account, water at creation is no deity; it is simply something God created, and it serves as material in the hands of the sole sovereign Creator...[I]t is difficult to find a single English word that accurately conveys the precise sense of the Hebrew term *shamayim*, ‘heaven/heavens.’ In this context, it refers to what humans see above them, i.e., the region that contains both celestial lights (vv. 14-17) and birds (v. 20).”<sup>6</sup>

—T. Desmond Alexander, *ESV Study Bible*

## Voices from the Church

“Matter matters because God made it; it is ‘good.’ He is interested not just in our souls but also in our bodies and the world we live in.”<sup>7</sup>

—Vaughan Roberts

## Further Commentary

“Three days reveal the filling of creation with the potentiality of life. The sun, moon, and constellations are created. They are not objects of worship but function to maintain God’s order and to provide light for the world, above all for humanity. Light on planet Earth is distinctive as it enables vegetation to grow, and through vegetation all life forms, from the smallest to the largest, have the potential of vitality. Light also marks the rhythms of nature and the cycles of time. Nature has its own calendar apart from humans. The order of nature (days 1-3) regulates the potentiality of life for animals and humans. By creating all this, God demonstrates his fatherly care for his creation.”<sup>8</sup>

—Willem VanGemeren,  
*Gospel Transformation Bible*

- God created light in the midst of darkness, separated the two, and gave them names: the light “Day” and the darkness “Night.”
- God created the expanse in the midst of the waters, separated the two, and gave a name to the expanse: “Heaven.”
- God created boundaries for the waters beneath the sky, caused dry land to appear, and gave them names: the dry land “Earth” and the water “Seas.”

Do you see God bringing light, form, and order to the chaos? And keep in mind why He’s doing it—He created day and night, sky, land, and sea to reveal Himself.

-  Why do you think these created spheres are good (moral, beautiful, usable)? What do these created spheres reveal about God?

In the second set of days (Gen. 1:14-25), God addresses creation’s *emptiness*.

*<sup>14</sup> And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, <sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. <sup>16</sup> And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. <sup>17</sup> And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, <sup>18</sup> to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.*

*<sup>20</sup> And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.”<sup>21</sup> So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>22</sup> And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”<sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

*<sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. <sup>25</sup> And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.*

All the spheres that God created by bringing form to His creation—the spheres of the heavens, the sky, sea, and land—He now fills.

- God fills the heavens with lights—the sun, moon, and stars.
- God fills the seas with fish and the sky with birds.
- God fills the land with living creatures.

And again, all of these things He's creating to display who He is to the world.

 How are these created things good (moral, beautiful, usable)? What do these created things reveal about God?

The purpose and design of creation is to tell the glory of God, to plainly display His power and His divine nature. When God created the heavens, the stars, the trees, the mountains, the birds, and the animals, they did their job well, and God called them good. They're still doing their job well.

Ever since these first six days, creation has been fulfilling its purpose such that *everyone* knows God. Did you know that? Romans 1 says there is not a single person out there who doesn't know God (vv. 20-21). That's good news, but there is also bad news.

Romans 1:18 says that even though everyone knows the truth about God, fallen humankind suppresses that truth in unrighteousness. No matter how good the mountains and the heavens are, no matter how plainly they display the truth about God's glory, humanity will always suppress this knowledge and choose not to glorify God. (We'll speak more about the fall of humankind soon.)

It is a disheartening reality to face that all people suppress the knowledge of God, but we can also see in this the hope of evangelism and missions. There is a profound common ground between you and everyone you will ever meet because the truth about God is in them. It may be suppressed, buried, and distorted, but it's there. You're not trying to convince people that God exists; they already know! You're just trying to help them stop suppressing what they already know. God accomplishes this work through us with something greater than just general revelation; this work calls for special revelation through God's Son, Jesus.

### 3. God created everything through His Son (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

First Corinthians 8:5-6 tells us that God not only created everything but that He created everything through His Son:

*<sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth— as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— <sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 27. The Goodness of Creation

In Genesis 1, God repeatedly affirmed that all of His creation was good, even “very good” (1:31). It is good, in God's judgment, because He created it for a purpose that it fulfilled—to reflect and display the good character of the Creator. Therefore, sin and evil should not be seen as a foundational part of the creation but rather as a corruption of it. While the creation has been marred and distorted as a result of sin, it is still good in the hands of God and serves His purpose of proclaiming His glory in the world. God's people should affirm and seek to preserve the goodness of God's creation (2:15).

### Further Commentary

“Paul's point is that over against the many gods and the many lords of the heathen world stands the Christian acclamation of one God and one Lord (8:6). Further the language of ‘gods’ and ‘lords’ paves the way for 8:6, which takes up the terms ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ in a remarkable reformulation of the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4...[T]he assertion distinguishes between the one God, who is the Father, and the one Lord, who is Jesus Christ. The end result is a strong monotheism that incorporates Christ into the definition of God...Jesus, the one Lord, is the agent of creation and the means by which believers exist in new creation.”<sup>9</sup>

—Mark Taylor



## Voices from Church History

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”<sup>10</sup>

—Abraham Kuyper  
(1837-1920)



## Voices from Church History

“Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature, O Thou of God and man the Son; Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor, Thou my soul’s glory, joy, and crown.”

—Anonymous German hymn

In light of this passage, you might reread the creation account and say, “I see the Holy Spirit hovering and God the Father speaking, but where is the Son?” John 1:1-3 answers: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Every time we see God speak things into existence, the Son is there. All things exist and hold together because of Him.



In what ways should knowing that God created everything through His Son affect our thoughts and our emotions regarding Jesus?

### Special Revelation

Why is it so important that God created everything through the Son? Because through the Son, God gives us special revelation. Special revelation is specific in content and scope. In content, it reveals not just general things about God’s power and nature but specifically reveals the God of the gospel with words. It reveals the redemption plan of God to save people through the cross and resurrection of His Son. In scope, it is given to specific people at specific times in specific places.

You see, the light of God’s general revelation, beginning in Genesis 1:3, as good as it is, it is suppressible (Rom. 1:18). We need a display of God’s light that is insuppressible—the light of God’s special revelation. And this insuppressible light isn’t merely electromagnetic radiation; this light is a person and His name is Jesus. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

God revealed Himself “out there”—and it was good—but it isn’t enough. So God also reveals Himself “in here.” God created everything (general revelation) through His Son, but He later did a greater work of special revelation in His Son. This Light, through whom all other lights exist, not only casts out physical darkness but can cast out the spiritual darkness in people’s hearts. This revelation isn’t simply the general display of creation, this revelation involves *words*—the very Word of God in the person of Jesus and the Word of God as written in the Bible.

There is a place in which these two revelations, these two lights, collide and converge, a place in which God can reveal Himself to the world not only generally but also specially. That place is within the believer.

First, a believer is a representative of humanity, the apex of all of God’s creation (day 6 holds one more creation of God—the focus of session 2). No other creation of God can tell the glory of God like a human being because no other creation bears the image of God. The heavens, the mountains, and the oceans are proclaiming the glory of God, but every single person we see and encounter is, by nature, showing us something of God Himself.

We carry the greatest light of God’s general revelation, but even greater than that, we as believers also bear the light of God’s special revelation. God has commanded to shine in our hearts the light of Jesus Christ. So we are stewards of the light of God’s special revelation. This is why the Bible not only says that Jesus is the light but that we are light:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:14-16)

 What are some ways we can be the light of the world and point people to the Light of the world—Jesus?

## Conclusion

If we have been created by God and He has commanded the light of Jesus to shine in our hearts, then we are doubly His. Therefore, we must now seek to discover our role in the overarching plan and purpose of God to manifest His glory and love to the world. We have to be a light to this world, and by nature, we are a light to this world.

But we can’t just shine with our actions; we have to shine the light of God’s special revelation with words. No matter how much “good” we do in this world with our actions, simply by observing our actions, people will never come to a saving knowledge of God.

Trees are good. But no matter how long you stare at a tree, observe its beauty, and even come to the conclusion that there must be a God who designed such a beautiful thing, the tree will never be able to tell you the gospel. God is absolutely holy and righteous, and you are His enemy because of your disobedience, but God sent His Son to die on your behalf on the cross and to rise again on the third day so that you too may rise with Him. No matter how much we seek to love our neighbors with our actions, if we don’t speak the gospel to them with words, we’re no better than trees.

This is what God is telling us from the beginning. *God created everything*, so don’t worry about anything. It’s in His hands. *God also created everything good*. Everything surrounding you—the sun, moon, stars, and everything else in creation—is God saying He wants to know you and be known by you. And *God created everything through His Son*. Because God has revealed all that He is to us through His Son, we now live to reveal Jesus to the world.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** By the Son and for the Son and through the Son, all things exist and hold together.

### A Word on Creation vs. Evolution

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Imagine all the different ways God could’ve opened the first book of the Bible. Out of anything and everything that He could’ve written, the first and foremost thing He wanted His people to know was that He created everything. And so it’s no wonder that this is one of the truths most debated and attacked in our world today. If you can attack and disprove the first line of the Bible, you can discount the whole thing, right?

The creation account can raise many disputed issues: from young-earth theory to old-earth theory, from theistic evolution to the denial of intelligent design altogether. If interested, here are some books that address these issues:

- *Three Views of Creation and Evolution* by J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds
- *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* by Michael J. Behe
- *Nature’s Destiny: How the Laws of Biology Reveal Purpose in the Universe* by Michael J. Denton
- *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance Through Small Probabilities* by William A. Dembski
- *Science & Faith: Friends or Foes?* by C. John Collins
- *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* by Stephen C. Meyer
- *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* by Vern S. Poythress

## Additional Resources

# In the Beginning, God...

## References

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2. Billy Graham, in *Billy Graham in Quotes*, eds. Franklin Graham with Donna Lee Toney (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 89.
3. Robert D. Bergen, in *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 7, n. 1:1.
4. Chrysostom, Sermon 1.3, quoted in *Genesis 1–11*, ed. Andrew Louth, vol. 1 in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 4.
5. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.10.4, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1885, reprinted 2004), 370.
6. T. Desmond Alexander, in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 50, n. 1:6-8.
7. Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 28.
8. Willem VanGemeren, in *Gospel Transformation Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 5, n. 1:14-31.
9. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 205-206.
10. Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.
11. Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 207.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "The Story Begins"—Episode 1, Act 1 from *Telling God's Story* by Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter
- "Light of the World"—Article by Jill Carattini; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "In the Beginning: A Comparison of Genesis 1 and John 1," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Video

D. A. Carson: "The God Who Made Everything"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### A Tool, Not a Taskmaster

"Creative teaching is a process in which [group members] are vitally involved. Often in this process, ideas are developed and needs revealed that no writer can plan for, nor teacher predict. The teacher has to feel free in such cases to respond to the lead of his class and, when appropriate, modify his plan in order to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This may mean shortening some learning activities, adding unplanned ones, and eliminating some that were planned. This kind of freedom just isn't possible for the teacher who relies completely on printed materials."<sup>11</sup>

# In God's Image

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we will explore the biblical truth that God created humans in His image with the purpose of glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever. The way we reflect God is by ruling wisely over the world, relating rightly to Him and to others, and reflecting His goodness in our rhythm of work and rest.

### ***Main Passage***

Genesis 1:26–2:25

### ***Session Outline***

1. We reflect God in how we rule wisely over the world (Gen. 1:26-31).
2. We reflect God in how we relate to Him and others (Gen. 2:4-9,16-25).
3. We reflect God in our rhythm of work and rest (Gen. 2:1-3,15).

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### ***Theological Theme***

God created us in His image to rule wisely over the world, to relate to Him and others, and to follow the rhythm of work and rest.

### ***Christ Connection***

Jesus is the perfect image of the invisible God—the only One who rules wisely over the world, relates perfectly to God and others, and through His work earns our everlasting rest.

### ***Missional Application***

God calls us to actively cultivate our relationships with Him and with others in order to fulfill our role as stewards over the earth.

## Session Plan

# In God's Image

## Session 2

### Introduction Option

In place of sharing the writer's experience of his first words when holding his first child, invite parents in your group to share their experiences of first words and thoughts when holding their first child. Ask how their responses might connect with God's creation of human beings.

*[Be sensitive to those in your group who may be hurting over not having children.]*

### Point 1 Option

Revisit **Pack Item 2: Matter Matters**. Ask groups of 3-4 to discuss the following questions (write them on a board or paper):

- How have you ruled wisely (or not) over God's good creation in the past week?
- What should it mean for us that God created human beings and then declared all that He had made as "very good"?

Allow 2-3 minutes; then call for groups to share their reflections and responses.

*This option would work well as a transition between points 1 and 2.*

### Introduction

Begin with the writer's account of the birth of his first child and his words to express his feelings—*Everything I have is yours*. Connect this to God's creation of humankind in His image and giving them everything He had created (leader p. 22; personal study guide [PSG] p. 19).

- ❓ What comes to mind when you think of humanity being made "in the image of God"?
- ❓ What does this truth teach us about the distinctiveness of human beings in comparison with the rest of God's creation?

Summarize this session on how we are to reflect God (leader p. 22; PSG p. 20).

### 1. We reflect God in how we rule wisely over the world (Gen. 1:26-31).

*Recap the previous session on God's creation* (leader p. 23). Then transition to the creation of human beings; read Genesis 1:26-31. Say that bearing God's image means ruling over God's creation wisely (leader p. 23; PSG p. 20).

- ❓ What are some areas of authority you have been given?
- ❓ How can we make sure our exercising authority over creation brings order and peace, not chaos and distress?

Highlight that all of creation has been entrusted to our care and we are to rule wisely to reflect God rightly. But note that because of our sinfulness (we'll address the fall of humankind in the next session), we tend either to worship or abuse God's creation; we also either abuse or abandon our spheres of authority. In these we distort the image of God in us (leader p. 24; PSG p. 21).

- ❓ Consider a sphere of influence in which you have authority. Do you struggle more with abusing authority or with abandoning authority? Why?
- ❓ How have you experienced someone else abusing or abandoning their authority over you?

## 2. We reflect God in how we relate to Him and others (Gen. 2:4-9,16-25).

Read Genesis 2:4-9. Show how God’s hands-on approach to creating the first man reveals our purpose of relationship with Him (leader p. 25; PSG p. 22). *Ask groups of 2-3 to discuss some specific ways we can image God rightly through our close relationship with Him. After 2-3 minutes, allow groups to share their responses. Use the leader content to spark ideas or supplement responses as needed* (leader p. 26).

- ❓ In what ways can your life demonstrate the priority of your relationship with God?
- ❓ What are some signs that your relationship with God is not your priority?

Say that God created us in His image as “male and female,” so relationships with others are also in view; then read Genesis 2:16-25. Explain that relationship with God requires obedience and community (leader pp. 26-27; PSG pp. 23-24).

- ❓ Do you think it is possible to be in right relationship with God if you are not pursuing a right relationship with others? Why or why not?

## 3. We reflect God in our rhythm of work and rest (Gen. 2:1-3,15).

Read Genesis 2:15. Emphasize that work is not a part of the fall into sin but part of God’s good world, a way for us to reflect and image God (leader pp. 27-28; PSG p. 25). *Show how this should help us view work properly* (leader p. 28).

- ❓ In what ways does our culture demean and diminish the value of work?
- ❓ In what ways does the church sometimes diminish the value of work that is seen as secular, or “non-religious”?

Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 2:1-3. Explain that through resting, we demonstrate that we are not God (leader pp. 28-29; PSG pp. 25-26).

- ❓ Why do you think it is difficult for many people to lay down their work?
- ❓ What makes rest difficult for you?

## Conclusion

Emphasize the bad news of our sin in bearing God’s image and the good news of Jesus. Our mission is always to point people to Jesus (leader p. 29; PSG p. 26). *Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission”* (PSG p. 27).

### ❓ For Further Discussion

In what ways should the truth about the image of God in human beings affect the way we treat others?

### ❓ For Further Discussion

What kinds of jobs ought a Christian NOT be involved in?

**Christ Connection:** Jesus is the perfect image of the invisible God—the only One who rules wisely over the world, relates perfectly to God and others, and through His work earns our everlasting rest.

.....  
**Missional Application:** God calls us to actively cultivate our relationships with Him and with others in order to fulfill our role as stewards over the earth.

## Expanded Session Content

# In God's Image

## Session 2

### Voices from Church History

"The most distinctive feature of the biblical understanding of man is the teaching that man has been created in the image of God."<sup>1</sup>

—Anthony Hoekema (1913–1988)

### Introduction

When my wife and I were expecting our first child, we spent a good deal of time and money in preparation. We cleared out a room and gave the walls a fresh coat of paint. We shopped for things we'd never heard of before, things like bumbo chairs and aspirators. We bought a crib, a supply of diapers and wipes, and made sure everything was ready for the new addition to our family. Then the moment arrived. The first time I held our son in my arms, the only words I could find to express my feelings toward him were these: *Everything I have is yours*.

These were the words Jesus placed in the mouth of the father in His famous story of the prodigal son, when the father spoke tenderly to his estranged older son (Luke 15:31). But I wonder if they don't also express the Creator's heart at the beginning of time, after His creative work for six days served to ready a place and to establish a dwelling and a home for the arrival of His most precious creation—humankind.

"Let us make man in our image," He said (Gen. 1:26), and after creating human beings, He made a wondrous declaration over His children in Genesis 1:28-30, communicating the special value held by humans in His sight: "Everything I have created is yours!" And like a father looking down on his newborn child, God sees in us His own image and reflection.

-  What comes to mind when you think of humanity being made "in the image of God"?
-  What does this truth teach us about the distinctiveness of human beings in comparison with the rest of God's creation?

### Session Summary

In this session, we will explore the biblical truth that God created humans in His image with the purpose of glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever. The way we reflect God is by ruling wisely over the world, relating rightly to Him and to others, and reflecting His goodness in our rhythm of work and rest.

## 1. We reflect God in how we rule wisely over the world (Gen. 1:26-31).

In the previous session, we saw how God created the world. In the first three days of creation, God dealt with its formlessness by giving boundaries, separating, and organizing in order to make the heavens, the seas, and the land. Then, in the second set of three days, God dealt with the emptiness of the world by filling the spheres that He created in the first three days. He filled the expanse with the sun, moon, and stars, and He filled the sky, seas, and land with living creatures.

Next, God created the first human beings, and He commanded them to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the creatures of the land. His command for humans to fill and to subdue the earth is an invitation to bear His image, to reflect Him by doing what He has just done in creating the heavens and the earth. Just as He filled the world with stars, vegetation, and living creatures, we are called to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth with life. And just as He brought order from chaos in separating the land from the seas, we are called to subdue the world in such a way that brings harmony and accord. Take a look:

*<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*

*<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

*<sup>28</sup> And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”<sup>29</sup> And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.”<sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.<sup>31</sup> And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

Fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it. “This world is for you!” God said. In this passage, we see that God is the Ruler and that bearing His image means we too must rule. But to reflect Him properly, we must rule wisely.

### Further Commentary

“The term ‘subdue’ (Hb. *kabash*) elsewhere means to bring a people or a land into subjection so that it will yield service to the one subduing it (Num. 32:22,29). Here the idea is that the man and woman are to make the earth’s resources beneficial for themselves, which implies that they would investigate and develop the earth’s resources to make them useful for human beings generally. This command provides a foundation for wise scientific and technological development; the evil uses to which people have put their dominion come as a result of Genesis 3... As God’s representatives, human beings are to rule over every living thing on the earth. These commands are not, however, a mandate to exploit the earth and its creatures to satisfy human greed, for the fact that Adam and Eve were ‘in the image of God’ implies God’s expectation that human beings will use the earth wisely and govern it with the same sense of responsibility and care that God has toward the whole of his creation.”<sup>2</sup>

—T. Desmond Alexander, *ESV Study Bible*

### Voices from the Church

“Human dominion over the rest of creation is to be an exercise of kingship that reflects God’s own kingship. The image of God is not a license for arrogant abuse, but a pattern that commits us to humble reflection of the character of God.”<sup>3</sup>

—Christopher Wright

## Further Commentary

“Nature is not ‘bad’ and needs to be beaten down, but it is undifferentiated, undeveloped, uncultivated. When we take a piece of land and garden/farm it, or preserve it so it can produce its peculiar life-splendors, when we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom to clean up a place, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject, when we take unprocessed material and turn it into a poignant work of art, when we take undifferentiated tones and pitches (noise) and separate them out and arrange them to create music, (even when we pass a comb through our hair)—whenever we bring order out of chaos, whenever we draw out creative potential, whenever we elaborate and ‘unfold’ creation further than where it was when we found it—we are continuing God’s work of creative, cultural development. Just as he ‘subdued’ the earth in his work of creation, so he calls us now to labor as his representatives in a continuation and extension of that work.”<sup>4</sup>

—Tim Keller

## Voices from the Church

“We are God’s royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God’s creation so that the whole of it may celebrate his glory.”<sup>5</sup>

—Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen

-  What are some areas of authority you have been given?
-  How can we make sure our exercising authority over creation brings order and peace, not chaos and distress?

When was the last time you thought of the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and even the worms that crawl on the land as living creatures that God has entrusted to your care? God intends for humanity to take care of the creation He has given us. We are called to rule wisely. He cares deeply about what He has created, and He calls us to cultivate and steward the world, to make something of it. One of the ways we bear God’s image is by ruling over creation in the wisest way possible.

Unfortunately, because of our sinfulness (we’ll address the fall of humankind in the next session), we tend either to worship creation or to abuse it. We either hold it up as if it were a god or trample it as if it had no value.

God’s call to care for creation, however, should lead us to worship Him for the good things He has given us, not lead us to worship the good things themselves. And His call to care for creation should keep us from abusing or neglecting the world He has made and placed in our charge.

The same holds true for the spheres of authority we have been given. We disobey God whenever we abuse our authority or whenever we abandon our authority. The image of God is seen most clearly in us when we are exercising our authority in loving and wise ways.

-  Consider a sphere of influence in which you have authority. Do you struggle more with abusing authority or with abandoning authority? Why?
-  How have you experienced someone else abusing or abandoning their authority over you?



## 2. We reflect God in how we relate to Him and others (Gen. 2:4-9,16-25).



In Genesis 1, we see that one of the ways we reflect the goodness and glory of God is through our wise ruling over His good world. In the following chapter, we see that another way we reflect Him is through our relationships—both with Him and with others. Here we see God not just displaying His power by commanding, “Let there be human beings,” as He did

with all the other elements of creation, but He displayed His closeness toward humanity in fashioning the first people. He began by forming Adam from the dirt, shaping him, and breathing life into his nostrils.

*<sup>4</sup> These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.*

*<sup>5</sup> When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground,<sup>6</sup> and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—<sup>7</sup> then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.<sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.<sup>9</sup> And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

To bear God’s image means to have a relationship with Him. We are not merely spoken into existence by God’s power but are formed by His hands to hold His very breath. We were created not just by power but by intimacy—for the purpose of relationship.

Our image-bearing relationship started when God created us. The account in Genesis 2 shows how powerful a scene this was, when God’s face was toward us, when He breathed into the first man the breath of life. Just as a mirror best reflects an image when the mirror is in perfect “relationship” with, or directly in front of, the object that it’s imaging, we reflect God best—we *image* Him best—when we are in close relationship with Him.

### Further Commentary

“The human alone, of all of the creatures, knows and is consciously related to God. The portrayals of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden suggest that God and they customarily communed together. Humans were not created merely to be a work of art, statues displaying God’s creativity and wisdom, but to fulfill God’s special intention for them. It is significant that both in the Old Testament law (the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20) and in Jesus’ statement of the two great commandments (Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:26-27), the thrust of God’s will for humans concerns relationship to God and to other humans.”<sup>6</sup>

—Millard Erickson

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 34. Image of God in Humanity

The image of God in humanity is understood as mirroring God’s attributes in our nature, actions, and relational capacities. In Jesus, we see the true image of God. He perfectly mirrors God’s attributes, fulfills God’s will, and enjoys a perfect relationship with the Father. The Bible continues to speak of the image of God in humanity even after our fall into sin, even though our ability to rightly reflect God has been marred.

## Further Commentary

“We may find the following emphases here. First, man is prior to woman (1 Cor. 11:8,9; 1 Tim. 2:13). Secondly, the sexes are complementary: the true partnership is expounded by the terms that are used (*a helper fit for him*, 18,20, RSV; literally ‘a help as opposite him’, i.e. ‘corresponding to him’), by the fruitless search elsewhere, as man discerns the natures (expressing them in the *names*, 20) of other creatures, and by the fact that Eve is of the very stuff of Adam and yet a wholly new being. Adam’s joyful ‘at last...’ (23, RSV) grows into the first poetic couplet in the Bible, and his work of naming is triumphantly concluded in a title that echoes his own. Thirdly, the union of the two in marriage is to be an exclusive (*a man leaves...*, 24, RSV), permanent (*...and cleaves*), God-sealed bond (*one flesh*: cf. Mark 10:8f.); for ‘God himself, like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man’ (G. von Rad). Fourthly, there is, in God’s true pattern, perfect ease between them (25). But it is the fruit of perfect love, which has no alloy of greed, distrust or dishonour; it was understandably an immediate casualty of the Fall...and the chapter ends with a pointed reminder of our vanished concord.”<sup>7</sup>

—Derek Kidner

In other words, we are best able to show to the world who our God is and what He is like when we walk closely with Him, meeting with Him daily through His Word and prayer. We show what a relationship with God looks like whenever we confess our sins to Him so that our shame will not drive us further and further away from Him. We show the world what it means to live in obedience to His Word as we forgive, encourage, and love. In this way, we reflect to the world the God who forgives, the God who encourages, the God who loves.

- ❓ In what ways can your life demonstrate the priority of your relationship with God?
- ❓ What are some signs that your relationship with God is not your priority?

To bear God’s image doesn’t point only to the relationship we have with God; we also have relationships with each other. God created us “male and female.” The God who exists in community—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—created human beings to live in community as well. Genesis 2 continues:

*<sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*

*<sup>18</sup> Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” <sup>19</sup> Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.*

*<sup>20</sup> The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. <sup>21</sup> So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.*

*<sup>22</sup> And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup> Then the man said,*

*“This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of Man.”*

*<sup>24</sup> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. <sup>25</sup> And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.*

Two things to notice here. First, our relationship with God has an element of obedience that comes with it. The God who commanded Adam to rule wisely over the earth is the God who warned Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A relationship with God must be built on trust, and God gave Adam the choice of trusting Him or not trusting Him by forbidding one particular tree.

Second, we must not think of our relationship with God as something private and isolated, as if the best way to cultivate this relationship is “just between me and God.” Sometimes we think that gathering with God’s people for worship is good but being alone with God is always better. But that wasn’t the case for Adam.

After multiple statements of God seeing His creation and saying it was “good,” then came the first moment when something was described as “not good,” for the man whom God had formed was alone. We were not created to bear God’s image on our own, to have an isolated relationship with God. We reflect God best when we are in community with one another, relating to others in the love and grace of God.

Reflecting God’s image means we are to relate rightly to Him (a relationship of trust and obedience) and relate rightly to others. Because of our sin, our relationships are broken, both with God and with others, but redemption for all of our relationships is found in Jesus—the One who restores us to God and to one another.

 Do you think it is possible to be in right relationship with God if you are not pursuing a right relationship with others? Why or why not?

### 3. We reflect God in our rhythm of work and rest (Gen. 2:1-3,15).

Let’s look briefly at one more way in which we are commanded to reflect God to the world: our rhythm of work and rest. First, we see the appointment of work in Genesis 2:15:

*<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*

For the longest time I thought the command to work was a result of man’s sinning and rebelling against God. But the creation narrative shows us that God established work for man as part of His good world. Work is just as beautiful as the sunset, it’s just as good as sexuality, and it’s just as purposeful as the rain.

## Voices from the Church

“What brings a person value, significance, and hope is not what he *does*, but *with whom* he does it. The call to live in continual communion with God means that every person’s life, no matter how mundane, is elevated to sacred heights.”<sup>8</sup>

—Skye Jethani

## Further Commentary

“Creation, it seems, was not a tableau, a static scene. It was designed as a project, created in order to go somewhere. The creator has a future in mind for it; and Human—this strange creature, full of mystery and glory—is the means by which the creator is going to take his project forward. The garden, and all the living creatures, plants, and animals, within it, are designed to become what they were meant to be through the work of God’s image-bearing creatures in their midst. The point of the project is that the garden be extended, colonizing the rest of creation; and Human is the creature put in charge of that plan. Human is thus a kind of midway creature: reflecting God into the world, and reflecting the world back to God. That is the basis for the ‘truly human’ vocation. And that, as the New Testament declares, is also the goal for which we are aiming—indeed the goal of all human existence.”<sup>9</sup>

—N. T. Wright

## Voices from the Church

“Work, whether it involves plumbing a sink or plumbing the depths of the cosmos, in the hands of a Christian is ministry.”<sup>10</sup>

—Ben Witherington III

## Further Commentary

“[Genesis 2:1] serves as a complement to 1:1. Together, the two set the first six days of creation apart from the sacred seventh day... This is the first use of the number seven in the Bible, a number that will play an especially significant role in the religious and social life of ancient Israel (4:15; 7:2-4,10; 21:28-31; 29:18-20). On the seventh day God rested, thus setting an example for people—who are made in His image—to follow (Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-14). Though God rested from all His work that He had done, this is not to say that God has abandoned the universe. In the NT Jesus affirmed that God is still at work in the world, even on the Sabbath (John 5:16-17)...This is the only instance during the creation process when God blessed a unit of time. The term ‘holy’ is applied in the Bible to something set aside for service to God.”<sup>11</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

Work isn't something that God gave humanity as a curse after the fall into sin; the toil of work is what came with sin, but work itself is designed to give us fulfillment and to provide us an environment to reflect and image God.

If you view work as something you have to do because of the fall, you're not reflecting God properly. If you view work as something you have to do just to make money so you can live, you're not imaging God well. In the work that God has called you to do, ask yourself: *What are the raw materials with which I'm being entrusted? And how can I creatively form, shape, and rearrange them for the purpose of universal flourishing, for the purpose of reflecting God to the world?*

-  In what ways does our culture demean and diminish the value of work?
-  In what ways does the church sometimes diminish the value of work that is seen as secular, or “non-religious”?

One other aspect is involved in our bearing the image of God. He commands us to rest:

*<sup>1</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. <sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.*

God did not rest because He needed it, as if He were tired or worn out. Rather, He gave us an example of rest to show us that even though we are unlike any other creature in that we are the most “like” God, nevertheless, we are not God. There is an unbridgeable difference between God and us. And one of the most critical ways that we can reflect Him to the world is by showing that we are not God.

God gave us His image and commanded that one of the ways we can properly reflect that image is by resting, by taking a Sabbath. The point of resting is not just to have a day of complete inactivity but a day where you stop what is “necessary”—stop what is “required”; stop all your “have to’s”—so that you can engage in what restores you and renews you physically. It's a day where you focus on re-centering and re-calibrating your heart back toward God.

Are you tired? Are you exhausted in both body and soul? If that's you, receive this rest as a precious gift from God. Resist the chaotic rhythms of this world, but live according to the rhythm of God's wisdom and blessing that He has planned for you from the beginning of this world.

- ❓ Why do you think it is difficult for many people to lay down their work?
- ❓ What makes rest difficult for you?

## Conclusion

Bearing God's image is a daunting task. Consider what we've studied and how you measure up. How are you doing at reflecting God's image? How are you doing at wisely ruling the world? Relating with Him and with others? Reflecting Him properly through the rhythm of work and rest? What would the world conclude about God by looking at the image you're reflecting?

Here's the bad news—It's no small sin for you and I to fail at properly reflecting God to the world. An assault on God's image is an assault on God Himself. In all the ways that you and I fail at properly reflecting His image to the world, we are telling the world lies about God and what He's like.

But here's the glorious good news—Jesus came to be for us the perfect image of the invisible God. If it were solely up to our reflecting to show the world what God is like, everyone would reject such a God. That's why it's important for us, because of all the ways that we fail to properly reflect God, to point people to Jesus.

He is the only One who rules wisely over the world. He upholds all things by the word of His power, and all of creation waits in eager anticipation for His return. He is the only One who perfectly relates to God and others. He not only has a face-to-face relationship with God, but His face is the very face of God. And because of Jesus' good work on our behalf—His perfect life and His death in our place and His glorious resurrection—we are invited into His rest, no longer striving for salvation but resting in His finished work.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Jesus is the perfect image of the invisible God—the only One who rules wisely over the world, relates perfectly to God and others, and through His work earns our everlasting rest.

## Voices from Church History

"For you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you."<sup>12</sup>

—Augustine (354-430)

## Additional Resources

# In God's Image

## References

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6. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 467-68.
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12. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Albert C. Outler, rev. Mark Vessey (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 3.
13. Leroy Gainey, "Excels in Multicultural Community," in *Sunday School That Really Excels*, ed. Steve R. Parr (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 146.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "The Pattern of the Kingdom"—Chapter 1 from *God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts
- "Human Nature"—Chapter 7 by John S. Hammett from *A Theology for the Church*, edited by Daniel L. Akin
- "The Image of God and Jesus the Christ"—Article by Glenn Sunshine; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "To Have Dominion: The Meaning," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

W. A. Criswell: "In the Image of God"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Respect for Other Cultures

Increasingly, our communities are becoming multicultural, and hopefully this will be reflected in our churches and groups as a testimony to the unifying power of the gospel. As teachers, we must respect diversity, discover new ways to help all people groups find their worth in Christ, and bring all believers together in one spirit, faith, and common confession.<sup>13</sup>

# Human Rebellion

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we will look at humanity's "fall into sin." We will see that our rebellion against God begins by distrusting the goodness of His Word. Sin ruptures our relationship with God and with others and then leads to devastating consequences in the world around us. Only God can save us from our sin and its consequences and empower us to battle sin as we live in His kingdom.

### ***Main Passage***

Genesis 3:1-24

### ***Session Outline***

1. Human rebellion leads us to distrust the goodness of God's Word (Gen. 3:1-7).
2. Human rebellion ruptures our relationships with God and others (Gen. 3:8-16).
3. Human rebellion results in the shattering of God's good world (Gen. 3:17-24).

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### ***Theological Theme***

Sin ruptures our relationships with God, others, and the world.

### ***Christ Connection***

Jesus is the Son of Eve who will crush the head of the serpent.

### ***Missional Application***

God calls us to trust His Word and to fight against sin in all its forms and effects as we live on mission for His kingdom.

# Human Rebellion

## Session 3

### Introduction

Recap the previous sessions on God's creative work (leader p. 34). Then recall God's one prohibition not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this, God demonstrated His desire for human beings to trust His heart and obey His Word (leader p. 34; personal study guide [PSG] p. 28).

- ? When was the last time you wrestled with obeying a certain rule at work, school, or in the community, and why?
- ? What motivated your final obedience or disobedience?

Summarize this session on humanity's "fall into sin" (leader p. 34; PSG p. 29).

### 1. Human rebellion leads us to distrust the goodness of God's Word (Gen. 3:1-7).

Identify the heart of human sinfulness—distrust of the goodness of God and His Word; then ask a volunteer to read Genesis 3:1-7. Show how the serpent introduced doubt about and twisted God's word, thus magnifying the one prohibition and ignoring all the freedom (leader p. 35; PSG p. 29).

- ? Have you ever heard a whining child say to a parent, "You never give me anything!"? In what ways might this statement reflect the serpent's line of attack in the garden of Eden?
- ? What happens when we see God more in light of His prohibitions than the freedom He offers?

Illustrate from the passage, with the serpent's outright lie, how sin begins with doubting God's goodness and ends up with denying God's Word (leader p. 36; PSG p. 30). *Share some examples of what this might look like in our hearts; invite group members to share some of their own examples* (leader p. 36). Identify Adam and Eve's sin as a rebellion against their infinitely wise and loving Creator (leader p. 36; PSG p. 30).

- ? Are you more likely to see your sin as a mistake and a failure or as an act of rebellion? What is the difference and how does it impact our perspective?

#### ? For Further Discussion

Why is shame a universal emotion?

Do you think feelings of shame are positive or negative? Why?

#### ? For Further Discussion

What are some examples of times in your life when you were forced to answer the question "Did God really say...?"

How did you respond to the temptation not to trust God?

## 2. Human rebellion ruptures our relationships with God and others (Gen. 3:8-16).

Read Genesis 3:8-16. Distinguish between the no-shame vs. ruptured relationship Adam and Eve had with God before and after their sin. Explain why we now hide from God and each other as a result of sin (leader pp. 36-37; PSG pp. 31-32).

- What are signs that our relationship with God has been broken?
- What are some ways we hide from God, things we invent to cover our sense of shame?

Use Adam's two statements about Eve (before and after sin) to show how our relationships with others are also shattered by sin. Emphasize the glimmer of hope in God's judgment of this sin—the *protoevangelium* (Gen. 3:15). A Son of Eve—Jesus—will one day crush the serpent's head and eradicate all evil (leader p. 38; PSG p. 32). *Draw attention to Pack Item 3: Seeing Jesus in Genesis to help group members begin looking for ways that God is already foreshadowing the coming of Christ to defeat sin.*

## 3. Human rebellion results in the shattering of God's good world (Gen. 3:17-24).

Read Genesis 3:17-24. Show how the curse of the fall impacts our original calling in the world and leads to death, but God still shows mercy in providing animal skins to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness (leader pp. 39-40; PSG pp. 33-34).

- When have you felt like the world was in some sense "against you"? What makes work particularly toilsome for you?

*Show how Romans 1:21-23 illustrates the reversal of God's intention as a result of our sin* (leader p. 40). Provide group members with the following to fill in the chart in the PSG: **God** ruling over **Man** ruling over **Creation**; **Creation** ruling over **Man** ruling over **God** (leader p. 40; PSG p. 34).

Explain that sin dehumanizes us and mocks the glory of our God, but Jesus frees us from the bondage of sin to fight against it and to witness to this One who will restore this broken world (leader pp. 40-41; PSG p. 35).

- How has sin affected the different spheres of society: family, government, church, the environment?
- How can we as Christians battle the effects of sin in these spheres?

## Conclusion

Clarify how Jesus is the answer to humanity's fall into sin (leader p. 41; PSG p. 35). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission" (PSG p. 36).*

### Point 2 Option

Ask group members, for one minute, to list in their PSG as many ways as possible that we can see the rupture of human relationships in our world (leader p. 38; PSG p. 33).

Then ask them in groups of 2-3 to share their responses and to answer the following question: How does the gospel provide an answer for these realities?

Conclude with a moment for groups to share their responses.

If you don't use this option in the group meeting, encourage group members to think through the activity on their own time.

**Christ Connection:** Jesus is the Son of Eve who will crush the head of the serpent.

**Missional Application:** God calls us to trust His Word and to fight against sin in all its forms and effects as we live on mission for His kingdom.

## Expanded Session Content

# Human Rebellion

## Session 3

### Voices from the Church

“A lot of people think that ‘sin’ is: just breaking a rule. What is at stake here is something deeper, bigger, sadder, uglier, more heinous. It is a revolution. It makes me god and thus de-gods God.”<sup>1</sup>

—D. A. Carson

### Introduction

In the previous sessions, we learned that God created the world, and He created human beings, both male and female, in His image. As a Father providing good things for His children, God gave Adam and Eve a good world to take care of and to enjoy. Everything He made—sun, moon, stars, trees and their fruit, sea creatures and birds and land animals—all of it was good and all of it was for them. More importantly, God gave Himself to the first people in relationship and fellowship.

In the garden of Eden, God gave only one prohibition: “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” There’s no further explanation, just a brief warning of the personal consequences of disobeying.

God could have said: “You will lead yourselves and the entire human race into banishment from Me and into death. There will be suffering, chaos, oppression, and wars. Your children will murder each other and watch their parents die of disease.” Had God given them this amount of detail, perhaps they would have chosen differently. But would they have been obeying from a heart of trust toward God? Perhaps God was teaching Adam and Eve something by not going into great detail. He wanted their obedience to be rooted not in weighing risks or in their wisdom and logic but in childlike faith in His fatherly love toward them.

The same is true for us today. God wants us to trust His heart. He wants us to trust the goodness of His Word.

-  When was the last time you wrestled with obeying a certain rule at work, school, or in the community, and why?
-  What motivated your final obedience or disobedience?

### Session Summary

In this session, we will look at humanity’s “fall into sin.” We will see that our rebellion against God begins by distrusting the goodness of His Word. Sin ruptures our relationship with God and with others and then leads to devastating consequences in the world around us. Only God can save us from our sin and its consequences and empower us to battle sin as we live in His kingdom.

## 1. Human rebellion leads us to distrust the goodness of God's Word (Gen. 3:1-7).

Distrust of the goodness of God and His Word—this is at the heart of human sinfulness, so it's no surprise that Satan (in the form of a serpent) chose this line of temptation in the garden of Eden. Let's read:

*<sup>1</sup> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.*

*He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'"<sup>2</sup> And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,<sup>3</sup> but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.<sup>5</sup> For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."<sup>6</sup> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.<sup>7</sup> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

The passage begins with a comment about the serpent's cunning nature and craftiness. When you encounter a crafty person, you don't merely consider what the person is saying; you also consider the intentions.

The serpent began by introducing doubt: "Did God actually say...?" He was not denying what God had said, of course, but he was making God's word up for debate. "Are you serious? Did He really, truly say that to you?"

Notice also how the serpent twisted God's word. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat from any tree in the garden except one, but the serpent changed the prohibition: "So God told you not to eat from any tree?" In other words, "If God is withholding anything from you, He must be withholding everything from you." The serpent magnified the one prohibition and ignored all the freedom.

 Have you ever heard a whining child say to a parent, "You never give me anything!"? In what ways might this statement reflect the serpent's line of attack in the garden of Eden?

 What happens when we see God more in light of His prohibitions than the freedom He offers?

### Further Commentary

"Sin lives in a costume; that's why it's so hard to recognize. The fact that sin looks so good is one of the things that make it so bad. In order for it to do its evil work, it must present itself as something that is anything but evil. Life in a fallen world is like attending the ultimate masquerade party. Impatient yelling wears the costume of a zeal for truth. Lust can masquerade as a love for beauty. Gossip does its evil work by living in the costume of concern and prayer. Craving for power and control wears the mask of biblical leadership. Fear of man gets dressed up as a servant heart. The pride of always being right masquerades as a love for biblical wisdom. Evil simply doesn't present itself as evil, which is part of its draw. You'll never understand sin's sleight of hand until you acknowledge that the DNA of sin is deception. Now, what this means personally is that as sinners we are all very committed and gifted self-swindlers...We're all too skilled at looking at our own wrong and seeing good."<sup>2</sup>

—Paul David Tripp

## Voices from Church History

“Let me never forget that the heinousness of sin lies not so much in the nature of the sin committed, as in the greatness of the person sinned against.”<sup>3</sup>

—A Puritan prayer

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 37. Sin as Rebellion

Because the Bible portrays people as responsible beings, called to respond in faith and obedience to God’s revelation, the Bible often portrays sin in terms of defiance and rebellion toward God the King. Isaiah 1:2 is one of many passages that describes sin in terms of rebellion against God: “Children I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.” Seen in this light, sin is personal and willful disobedience, the raising of a clinched fist toward the One who made us.

The serpent didn’t attack first with a statement but with a question. His goal was to lead Adam and Eve to doubt God’s goodness. Next, however, he followed up with an outright lie: “You will not surely die.” Sin begins with doubting God’s goodness and ends with denying God’s Word.

This distrust and denial of God’s Word is the same lie that slithers into our hearts today. It’s what leads us to dismiss the prohibitions and commands of God’s Word as if they were optional, as if they were from a tyrannical deity, as if they were impossible.

- “I know the Bible says I should fight for my marriage and not get a divorce, but did God really say...?”
- “I know the Bible says I should forgive and not seek revenge, but did God really mean...?”
- “I know the Bible says I should be generous and give cheerfully, but surely God wouldn’t want me to go without...”

At the heart of temptation is the lie that we cannot trust the goodness of God or the reliability of His Word. The serpent wanted Adam and Eve to think they were missing out, that God was withholding happiness from them. And so Eve took the fruit, and Adam followed.

This was a simple act of disobedience that carried with it unimaginable consequences. What happened in the garden was not merely a mistake. It was a rebellion. It was deception that led to defiance as human beings looked at their infinitely wise and loving Creator and said, “You are not good.”



Are you more likely to see your sin as a mistake and a failure or as an act of rebellion? What is the difference and how does it impact our perspective?

## 2. Human rebellion ruptures our relationships with God and others (Gen. 3:8-16).

The fallout from Adam and Eve’s sin began immediately. Their eyes were opened. Their rebellion caused them to have a new consciousness of their nakedness. Shame entered God’s good world. The first couple realized that they were naked, so they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. Let’s read on to see how their relationship with God and each other was affected:

*<sup>8</sup> And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” <sup>10</sup> And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” <sup>11</sup> He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” <sup>12</sup> The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me,*

*she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”*

*<sup>14</sup> The LORD God said to the serpent,  
“Because you have done this,  
cursed are you above all livestock  
and above all beasts of the field;  
on your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.*

*<sup>15</sup> I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.”*

*<sup>16</sup> To the woman he said,  
“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children.  
Your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you.”*

Before they exchanged the goodness of God’s Word for lies, even though they were naked, Adam and Eve felt clothed. They were clothed with God’s favor; they were unashamed, secure, and provided for. But when they questioned and doubted the goodness of God, they lost their covering of glory. And with this covering gone, they felt naked.

Before their sin, Adam and Eve felt no shame, there was nothing to hide, and they could be completely vulnerable before God and with each other in complete safety. They were fully known and fully loved. But now, the face-to-face relationship between humanity and God, the intimate relationship of walking together in the garden, had been ruptured through their rebellious deed.

Even now, we long to be known and loved. But shame has infected all of our relationships, so we wonder: *What if someone I deeply care for learned who I really am deep down inside? What if they knew the secret thoughts running through my mind every day? Would they still love me or would they abandon me?*

God created us to be fully known and fully loved. But in our fallen state, we’ve convinced ourselves that the only way we can be loved is if we’re not fully known. We believe it would be impossible for anyone to know the depths of who we are and still love us. That’s why we hide.

Hiding from God and hiding from each other is the everyday exercise of humanity. It is the sign that our relationship with God has been ruptured, that we are at war with the Creator. And whenever that pang in our hearts gives us a sense of loss and shame, a sense that something is deeply wrong and that we need to hide, we are mourning the glory, greatness, and paradise we lost long ago.

## Further Commentary

“Why did the man fear God because of nakedness? Public nakedness in the ancient Near East and in the Bible was a terrible disgrace (see...Noah, Gen. 9:22-25). Here that shame is explained as the consequence of the guilt of sin. Before human disobedience there was no shame (2:25), but with sin the man’s self-consciousness had changed. His sense of humiliation impacts his covering up before the woman as well as before God. By this Adam admits his sense of shame, which has been motivated by his guilt. Two follow-up questions sharpen the fact of the crime (v. 11). Both questions are rhetorical. The first shows that no one is required to tell the man of his shame because he experiences guilt for his crime. This was not the consequence of false guilt imposed by parent or social convention; it was true guilt arising from a violated conscience. By the second question Adam’s nakedness is linked to his transgression concerning the tree. Here ‘tree’ is no longer identified as the tree of knowledge but the tree ‘that I commanded you not to eat from’... Together these questions explain to the man that his sense of shame arose from his defiance of God’s command.”<sup>4</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews

## Voices from the Church

“Sin is a revolt against God.”<sup>5</sup>  
—Billy Graham

## Further Commentary

“God took the initiative in reaching out to sinful humanity. This pattern—humanity sinning, then God seeking out sinners—becomes the primary theme of the rest of the Bible. Its ultimate expression is found in Jesus Christ, who came to seek and to save people alienated from God because of their sin (Luke 19:10); in Him God once again walked on the earth in search of sinners. The all-knowing God asked Adam, ‘Where are you?’ for Adam’s benefit, to encourage Adam to face his sin...When Adam heard God, he was afraid. Rather than walking with God as righteous men of later generations would do (Enoch, 5:22; Noah, 6:9), Adam hid from Him.”<sup>6</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
HCSB Study Bible

## Voices from Church History

“Because human beings did not remain in this original state of creation and lost the image of God through their disobedience, human beings had to be recreated by God through Jesus Christ. That is why the son of God was promised to Adam. This son appeared to all people and destroyed the work of the devil.”<sup>7</sup>

—Dirk Philips (1504-1568)

- ❓ What are signs that our relationship with God has been broken?
- ❓ What are some ways we hide from God, things we invent to cover our sense of shame?

It’s not just our relationship with God that has been ruptured. Our relationship with others has been shattered as well. The expression of sheer joy and excitement we saw in the previous chapter when Adam first saw Eve (“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”) has been transformed into blame and enmity (“This woman You gave me made me sin”). The raised fist toward God becomes a clenched fist toward others. Our relationship with each other and the communal image of God that we bore has now become marred and distorted.

This passage reveals the degradation of the community that God created for us, particularly in the husband and wife relationship. In Genesis 1, the husband and wife were charged to rule over creation together, but now as a result of sin, abuse of authority will take place as the humans try to rule over each other. Enmity between male and female will be the norm. God’s good design of how we are to be in relationship with Him and with others has been broken by human rebellion.

This passage is stark in its presentation of our broken relationships with God and with each other. But there is a glimmer of hope even as God issued His righteous judgment on our sin. Some have called this glimmer the *protoevangelium*—the first presentation of the gospel. In Genesis 3:15, God told the serpent that the day was coming when a Son would be born through Eve, and even though the serpent would strike His heel, this Son of Eve will crush the serpent’s head. A Savior will come, and the serpent will be defeated. The evil unleashed in the garden will be eradicated through the “offspring” of the woman.

List different ways we can see the rupture of human relationships in our world.

How does the gospel provide an answer for these realities?

### 3. Human rebellion results in the shattering of God's good world (Gen. 3:17-24).

In order for us to feel the preciousness of the gospel, we must come to grips with the utter destruction that our sin brought into the world. Our rebelling against God not only destroyed our relationship with God and each other, but it also shattered the perfect peace of God's good world.

*<sup>17</sup> And to Adam he said,  
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you,  
'You shall not eat of it,'  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
<sup>18</sup> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
<sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread,  
till you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

*<sup>20</sup> The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. <sup>21</sup> And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.*

*<sup>22</sup> Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" <sup>23</sup> therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. <sup>24</sup> He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.*

God called humanity to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). But now this task will come through a woman's pain and anguish (3:16). God called us to subdue the earth. But now this task will come through toilsome work, fighting thorns and thistles. Only by the sweat of our brow will we be able to eat bread (3:17-19). The work God gave us has been invaded by toil, and the beauty of childbirth has been wracked with pain.

Choosing to separate ourselves from God—the source of life—is the choice of death. God created us out of the dust of the ground, but now to dust we will return. Death is the punishment for rebelling against our life-giving Creator.

This passage ends with the reality of exile. God's good world has been marred by human sin, and we are now separated from the perfection of the garden. The angel with his flaming and whirling sword stands between us and what once was.

#### Further Commentary

"The expulsion is by decree; it could also be expressed as by logical necessity, since eternal life is fellowship with God (John 17:3), which man has now repudiated. The point is re-emphasized in the phrase *the ground from which he was taken*, an echo of [verse] 19; it is that half of the truth about him (2:7) by which he has chosen to live; and he must end where he belongs (cf. Phil. 3:19-21)... Every detail of [verse 24], with its *flame* and *sword* and the turning *every way*, actively excludes the sinner. His way back is more than hard, it is resisted: he cannot save himself. The *cherubim*, God's multiform and awesome thronebearers in Ezekiel's visions (cf. Ezek. 1:5 with Ezek. 10:15), are seen elsewhere as symbolic guardians of the holy of holies, their forms embroidered on the veil that barred access to it, and modelled above the ark (Ex. 36:35; 37:7-9). At the death of Christ this veil was rent in two (Matt. 27:51) and the way to God thrown open (Heb. 10:19-22) in fact as well as symbol."<sup>8</sup>

—Derek Kidner

 **Voices from Church History**

“Somewhere in the paradise of Eden the ground drank the blood of the first offering for sin, and from that harmless and blameless creature a coat was made to cover up the shame and the nakedness of the man and his wife. It is a picture of the covering, the atonement, the washing away of our sins in the sacrificial victim on the cross of Calvary.”<sup>9</sup>

—W. A. Criswell (1909-2002)

But even in this sad scene of judgment, there is a thread of mercy. Before casting Adam and Eve out of paradise, God clothed them with animal skins. God provided the covering for Adam and Eve’s nakedness. God’s initiative here points forward to His Son’s atoning work, when through His own sacrifice, Jesus will take away the guilt of our sin and cover our shame with His righteousness.

For now, however, we see the lasting and destructive results of sin. We were once authentically human, with an astoundingly pure, joyful, naked-and-unashamed kind of relationship with God the Father, with other people, and with creation, but sin has marred and distorted all these relationships. And even creation groans because of the fallout from the fall (Rom. 8:22).

 When have you felt like the world was in some sense “against you”? What makes work particularly toilsome for you?

At the heart of sin is a great exchange. In Romans 1:21-23, the apostle Paul summed up the way sin manifests itself: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” In this passage, Paul used language to create a great distance between God’s intention and the result of our fall. Watch the descent:

- We exchanged the glory of the immortal God...
- ...for images in the form of...
- ...mortal man...
- ...and birds...
- ...and animals...
- ...and creeping things.

The fact that Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation from the lowest of all creatures (the serpent) shows how we have flipped upside down the created order. Instead of God ruling over humanity, who reflects Him by ruling over creation, we have reversed the order. Now it’s creation rebelling against humans, who are rebelling against God. We subjected ourselves to creation and sought to establish our authority over God’s authority.

It’s interesting to note that Satan chose the form of a serpent when he tempted Eve. The created order established by God in the beginning looked like this:

But when we sinned, that created order, in our minds, was turned upside-down, a complete distortion and reversal of what God intended:

**God**  
RULING OVER  
**Man**  
RULING OVER  
**Creation**

**Creation**  
RULING OVER  
**Man**  
RULING OVER  
**God**

Sin dehumanized everything authentically human about us and made a mockery of the glory of our immortal God.

When I think of *dehumanization*, the images of Jewish people held in concentration camps come to mind. When I was in Israel, I went to the Holocaust museum and could hardly stomach the horrifying pictures of what took place. I left with a renewed gratitude for how the Allied forces marched into Germany and freed these prisoners and restored their dignity once again.

In a similar way, the story of God's salvation is that He sent the Son of Eve to liberate us along with all of creation from the bondage of sin. Everything that dehumanizes us will be destroyed, and God promises to make us into the image of His Son.

The reason we fight sin is because we have redemption through God's Son. Whenever we as Christians return to our sin, it is as if we are a freed prisoner returning to our concentration camp. This is why, having been freed from the bondage of sin by the Son of Eve, we are called to trust in the goodness of God's Word and to fight against sin in all its forms. Our mission is to witness to the One who will restore this broken world.

-  How has sin affected the different spheres of society: family, government, church, the environment?
-  How can we as Christians battle the effects of sin in these spheres?

## Conclusion

Because of sin, Adam and Eve were banished from paradise. Their sin separated them, and us, from God's presence with no way back except through the angel's sword. But the day would come when the sword would fall on the Son of Eve on the cross. The Son would be banished by the Father so that we might be reunited with Him. Jesus would face the sword so that we could return from our exile.

When God's own Son was born into this world, He undid everything that went wrong in Genesis 3. He answered the questions that Satan has put in our hearts: "Is God good? Does He intend good for us? Can we trust Him?" He answered those questions with the nails in His hands and a spear through His side, with His becoming sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Jesus is the Son of Eve who will crush the head of the serpent.

## Voices from the Church

"The fallout from the fall is as intensive as it is extensive. The cancer of sin not only ripples out until it ruins the entire world—proceeding from individuals through society to the rest of creation—but it also wreaks near total devastation on each level."<sup>10</sup>

—Michael Wittmer

## Additional Resources

# Human Rebellion

## References

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2. Paul David Tripp, *Whiter Than Snow* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 32.
3. Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, reprinted 2005), 79.
4. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 240–41.
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7. Dirk Philips, *Concerning Spiritual Restitution*, in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Liechty (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 221.
8. Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, vol. 1 in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1967), 72–73.
9. W. A. Criswell, *Basic Bible Sermons on the Cross* (Nashville: B&H, 1990), 60.
10. Michael E. Wittmer, *Heaven Is a Place on Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 180.
11. Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 243–45.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- “Humans Reject God’s Plan”—Episode 1, Act 2 from *Telling God’s Story* by Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter
- “How to Overcome Temptation”—Article by Adrian Rogers; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “Curses and Blessings in the Old Testament,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

John Onwuchekwa: “EPIC: Beauty from Chaos”

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Patterns of Adult Learning

Adults follow a consistent pattern when it comes to needs that facilitate learning. It is wise for the adult Bible teacher to keep these patterns in mind:

- **Desire for a safe environment.** Maximize the freedom to explore.
- **Desire to be emotionally engaged.** The learning experience must engage their affections.
- **Desire to meet a challenge.**
- **Desire for a reflective opportunity.** Learners need time to take what is being taught and apply it to their lives.
- **Desire to feel like they are being stretched.** Learning must challenge old patterns and perspectives in order to make way for new ones.
- **Desire for a learning community.** Small groups provide support for learners and a sense of belonging that encourages learning.<sup>11</sup>

# The Spread of Sin

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we will see how sin spread from Adam and Eve to their descendants—Cain and Abel. Sin begins with evil desires that lead to actions against God and our neighbors, actions that deserve God's condemnation. Thankfully, God offers a merciful promise powerful enough to overcome our sin, and through His grace, we are rescued.

### **Main Passages**

Genesis 4:1-16,25-26

### **Session Outline**

1. The spread of sin begins with evil desires (Gen. 4:1-7).
2. The spread of sin results in condemnable actions against others (Gen. 4:8-12).
3. The spread of sin is overcome only by God's mercy and promise (Gen. 4:13-16,25-26).

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### **Theological Theme**

Sin is defiance toward God, often expressed in hateful actions toward people made in His image.

### **Christ Connection**

The blood of Abel speaks to us of the martyrs who have given their lives for the faith. But the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24) because it is able to cleanse us from sin (1 John 1:7).

### **Missional Application**

God calls us to slow the spread of sin by being salt and light in our world and by proclaiming the peace and joy of His kingdom.

## Session Plan

# The Spread of Sin

## Session 4

### Introduction Option

List a number of sinful actions (emphasis on *actions*) on a board or paper for all to see. As group members arrive, pass out pieces of paper and pens. Ask them to choose one of the sinful actions and to record an inner dialogue of someone struggling to resist the sin but ultimately giving in.

Encourage group members to share what they wrote in small groups. Then begin the session by having a couple of people read aloud their inner dialogue. Pick up with the importance of understanding our sin in order to resist it.

### ? For Further Discussion

What words would you use to describe *sin*?

How are these descriptions on display in the story of Cain and Abel?

## Introduction

Describe the experience of trying to resist sin but doing it anyway. Point out that we are never in danger of understanding our sin too much, only too little (leader p. 46; personal study guide [PSG] p. 37).

- ? What might be some “incomplete remedies” the world recommends for dealing with sins like anger, lust, or lying? What makes these remedies incomplete?

Recall the previous session and summarize this one (leader p. 46; PSG p. 37).

## 1. The spread of sin begins with evil desires (Gen. 4:1-7).

Identify the hope initially seen in Genesis 4; then read verses 1-7. Explain from Hebrews 11:4 that Abel’s offering was accepted because of faith. Cain’s rejection led to evil desires, but God offered a way out (leader p. 47; PSG p. 38).

- ? When have you experienced God’s gracious hand of restraint before falling into sin? What truths did God bring to your mind? What was the result?

*Point out that God’s intervention with Cain shows He takes sin seriously and has not given up on humanity* (leader p. 48). Emphasize God’s counsel to master the sinful desire because evil desires give birth to evil deeds (leader p. 48; PSG p. 39). *Ask groups of 2-3 to take two minutes and work together on the activity in the PSG. If you used the Introduction Option, sinful actions will already be listed for group members to copy. Invite groups to share responses* (leader p. 48; PSG p. 39).

## 2. The spread of sin results in condemnable actions against others (Gen. 4:8-12).

Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 4:8-12. Explain that God came to Cain after his sin with questions that he should repent and turn back to God. Still, Cain had a hateful heart, shown by his lie and question (leader p. 49; PSG p. 40).

- ? What is the significance of Cain’s question about his brother Abel’s welfare?

 In what ways does sin keep us from fulfilling our responsibilities to those around us?

*Highlight that God's love does not eliminate His justice, as seen in Cain's curse (leader p. 50). Show how the curse penetrated to the core of his identity as a farmer, and our own sin leads to similar consequences (leader p. 50; PSG p. 41).*

 Why does God take so seriously how we treat other people?

Recall God's counsel to Cain before the sin, but what hope is there after we sin? It isn't enough to tell ourselves, "Don't fail!" We all need the gospel of Jesus (leader pp. 50-51; PSG pp. 41-42). *Point out how sin can even paralyze Christians from participating in the mission of God's kingdom (leader p. 50).*

### 3. The spread of sin is overcome only by God's mercy and promise (Gen. 4:13-16,25-26).

Read Genesis 4:13-16,25-26, and say that tears of regret are different from tears of repentance (leader p. 51; PSG p. 42).

 What are the signs in Cain's speech that his tears came from regret rather than repentance?

*If necessary, show how Cain demonstrated regret rather than repentance (leader p. 51). Identify God's justice in banishing Cain and also God's mercy in placing a mark on him. Emphasize that this passage points to a God who treated Cain better than he deserved (leader pp. 51-52; PSG p. 43).*

 A common response to being asked how we are doing is "Better than I deserve." In what ways might this statement be true of all human beings, even those who are unbelievers?

Also explain how God kept His promise of a Son of Eve to come—the birth of Seth, whose lineage led to Jesus. Use Hebrews 12:24 to show how Jesus' blood compares to Abel's (leader pp. 52-53; PSG pp. 43-44). *Draw attention again to **Pack Item 3: Seeing Jesus in Genesis.***

 How is our mission as God's people affected when we fail to grasp the reality of God's forgiving heart toward us?

## Conclusion

Highlight how God's mercy in Christ provides salvation and the power we need for our mission (leader p. 53; PSG p. 44). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission" (PSG p. 45).*

*Pass out cards from **Pack Item 4: Killing Sin** to help members recall the seriousness of sin and our hope for overcoming it—Jesus' blood shed for us.*

## For Further Discussion

How does our culture view a God of justice?

Why is it important that God be seen rightly as a God of both love and justice?

## For Further Discussion

When have you experienced tears of regret?

When have you experienced tears of repentance?

**Christ Connection:** The blood of Abel speaks to us of the martyrs who have given their lives for the faith. But the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24) because it is able to cleanse us from sin (1 John 1:7).

**Missional Application:** God calls us to slow the spread of sin by being salt and light in our world and by proclaiming the peace and joy of His kingdom.

# The Spread of Sin

## Session 4



### Voices from Church History

“No man can murder his brother who has not first murdered God in himself. Cain’s crime is more than murdering his brother; it is a deeper crime within that crime, viz., the putting up of his whole nature against God, and, finally, accusing God for his punishment.”<sup>1</sup>

—Oswald Chambers  
(1874–1917)

## Introduction

You can feel your heart in your throat. Your mind is so fixated, so focused, and at the same time it seems like it’s not working at all. Your conscience tells your wayward heart: “No! You should not do what you’re about to do!”

Perhaps you are with your friends, and you feel a word of gossip churning in the pit of your stomach. Perhaps you are alone and feel the lure of a pornographic website. Perhaps you are angry, and even though you know it’s wrong and hate when this happens, you can’t stop the volcanic rage bubbling up inside of you.

Whether it’s sexual sin, gossip, lying, anger, stealing, or something hidden, such as pride, covetousness, or idolatry of the heart, we understand the alluring and enticing power of sin. Knowing we should resist, we do it anyway.

The Bible exposes the ugliness of sin because the Bible magnifies the beauty of salvation. You see, when it comes to sin, we’re never in danger of understanding our sin too much; we’re always in danger of understanding our sin too little. A shallow diagnosis of a sickness doesn’t lead to a cure; it leaves us with incomplete remedies that provide no hope of getting well.



What might be some “incomplete remedies” the world recommends for dealing with sins like anger, lust, or lying? What makes these remedies incomplete?

## Session Summary

In the previous session, we saw how everything good that God created in Genesis 1–2 was affected by the sinful choice of the first human beings. But what happens when sin spreads? What happens when one choice becomes like a domino leading to sin after sin after sin—until everything has tilted and fallen over?

In this session, we will see how sin spread from Adam and Eve to their descendants—Cain and Abel. Sin begins with evil desires that lead to actions against God and our neighbors, actions that deserve God’s condemnation. Thankfully, God offers a merciful promise powerful enough to overcome our sin, and through His grace, we are rescued.

## 1. The spread of sin begins with evil desires (Gen. 4:1-7).

Though Genesis 3 ended with the banishment of Adam and Eve for their rebellion, Genesis 4 opens with hope: Eve gives birth to two sons and gives credit to the Lord's help. As we read, don't miss the hopeful note at the beginning of this chapter, that God is fulfilling His promise to give a Son to Eve who would defeat the serpent. Could one of these be the Son who will crush the serpent's head?

*<sup>1</sup> Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."<sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. <sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."*

In this passage, we see that sin is not something that can be contained. It's not a disease that stayed only in the heart of Adam and Eve; it was passed on. The lie that slithered into the hearts of Adam and Eve slithered into the hearts of their children.

We see the spread of sin in the story of Cain's jealousy. Both sons offered sacrifices to God from their respective areas of work—Cain gave produce, and Abel gave some of his flock—but God only accepted the sacrifice of Abel. Why? We find the answer in Hebrews 11:4: "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts."

Abel's offering was accepted by God because he offered it in faith. When Cain realized that his offering was rejected, something started brewing in his heart, something dark and consuming that led to fury and despondency. He was well on the way to following in his parents' footsteps.

However, before Cain ever acted on the evil desires brewing in his heart, God showed up and spoke truth into his life. God's grace preceded Cain's sin, offering a way out of the temptation.



When have you experienced God's gracious hand of restraint before falling into sin? What truths did God bring to your mind? What was the result?

### Further Commentary

"Cain's sacrifice marks the first mention of an offering to the Lord in the Bible. The Hebrew term used here suggests a freewill gift given to an authority... Ironically, the first recorded offering given to God was also the first one rejected by Him. Since cereal offerings were authorized in the law of Moses, the fact that Cain's offering was of vegetation rather than an animal is not why God did not have regard for it. Cain's furious reaction suggests that the offering was rejected because of sin in his heart, not the nature of his offering...The Bible makes it clear that God had rejected Cain's offering because of Cain's wicked lifestyle (1 John 3:12). The animal-like description of sin as crouching is reused in [Genesis] 49:9 to describe a lion. The parallel use of 'desire' in this verse and 3:16 suggests that sin wishes to be as intimate with humanity as a woman is with her husband. The only way to avoid this is to be its master, not its companion."<sup>2</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*



## Voices from Church History

“Whoever hates is a murderer. You may not have prepared any poison or committed a crime. You have only hated, and in doing so, you have killed yourself first of all.”<sup>3</sup>

—Augustine (354-430)



## Voices from Church History

“Always be killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>4</sup>

—John Owen (1616-1683)

God takes sin seriously. He encouraged Cain to kill the sinful desire within him before it killed him. If we were to hurry through this story, we might miss the beauty of God’s intervention. We might think that humanity is already a lost cause or that sin has irreparably harmed the human race to the point that God would throw in the towel and be indifferent to Cain’s temptation. But that’s not what God is like. God is not indifferent to sin because God is not indifferent to humanity. Love intervenes. And the intervention in this passage shows us that God cares deeply about each and every act of sin in this world. Every unjust act matters and will be accounted for. No good or evil deed escapes His notice.

God’s counsel to Cain was to reject the temptation, to master the sinful desire—Do right by ruling over it! Don’t obey its command! Resist and don’t tap out!

Many of us have heard the echo of God’s voice in our own hearts and minds as we’ve faced temptation. We shake our heads as we consider what Cain is going to do next, even in spite of God’s counsel. We are well acquainted with the way these evil desires war against us and lead us to sinful actions because there have been countless times we’ve not heeded God’s counsel either.

God cares deeply about every act of sin in our lives. And so He speaks truth to us in love. But in our sinfulness, we reject that counsel, and so did Cain. Evil desires give birth to evil deeds.

List a number of sinful actions; then match them to the sinful desires that precede them.

Why is it important to consider sinful desires, not just sinful actions, in our battle against sin?

## 2. The spread of sin results in condemnable actions against others (Gen. 4:8-12).



Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Cain heard God's counsel to flee sin's temptation, but he didn't heed it. His rage gave birth to sin, and when sin was fully grown in his heart, it brought forth death.

*<sup>8</sup> Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"<sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."<sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.<sup>12</sup> When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."*

Cain succumbed to his sinful desire, and he shed the blood of his innocent brother. Just as Satan waited to pounce on Cain like a roaring lion, Cain did so to Abel. Sin is when we do to others what the Enemy does to us. It begins with evil desires and then ends with evil actions toward others, actions that deserve God's condemnation.

But notice what happened next. Just as God came to counsel Cain before the sin, He came to talk with him after the sin. God was offering Cain the opportunity to repent—"Cain, where is your brother Abel? What have you done?"

Do these words sound familiar? After Adam and Eve sinned, God came with the question "Where are you, Adam?" God knew exactly where Adam was, just as He knew exactly where Abel was. His questions were not offered in order to discover information but as an invitation for Cain to respond with repentance.

The same is true with us. Whenever we sin, God doesn't come first with fierce accusations but with a gentle invitation to repent. In the moment of temptation, God calls us to resist sin, and in the moment of sin, God gives us the opportunity to repent and turn back to Him. Unfortunately, in Cain's case, he didn't respond with repentance but with a lie ("I do not know") and a question ("Am I my brother's keeper?") that revealed the indifference of his hateful heart.

### Further Commentary

"Cain replied, 'I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?' Think how evil this reply is. It contains the first lie and the first human question in the Bible. The lie was Cain's denial that he knew his brother's whereabouts. He knew perfectly well. But so greatly had sin mastered him at this point that he not only lied; he lied to God, no doubt thinking that he could get away with it. How greatly sin had worked in less than one generation! It is true that Adam and Eve had tried to shift the blame when God had confronted them with their sin on the occasion of the fall. But they did not lie; they told the truth even though they were trying to escape from under it. But now Cain lies, and the lie is to God. Second, he asks a question—the first human question in the Bible—and this is even worse than the lie. So hard is his heart that he now suggests that his brother, whom he killed, is not his responsibility. If something has happened to Abel, it is his own fault. In this world of dog-eat-dog, it is every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost."<sup>5</sup>

—James Montgomery Boice



## Voices from Church History

“Love is the great divide between the children of God and the children of the devil. Those who have love are children of God, and those who do not are children of the devil. Have anything else you like, but if you lack this one thing, then all the rest is of no use to you whatsoever. On the other hand, you may lack almost anything else, but if you have this one thing, you have fulfilled the law.”<sup>6</sup>

—Bede (circa 673-735)

- ❓ What is the significance of Cain’s question about his brother Abel’s welfare?
- ❓ In what ways does sin keep us from fulfilling our responsibilities to those around us?

If all we knew of God was that He asked questions of Cain, we would be unsatisfied. We would wonder, *Where is the justice?* In God’s words, the innocent blood of Abel was crying out from the ground, crying out for justice to the God of justice.

God’s love does not eliminate His justice. He displays grace and righteousness at the same time. That’s why God enacted His righteous justice upon Cain by cursing him for the murder of his brother.

God’s curse penetrated to the core of Cain’s identity. Cain had been a farmer, a cultivator of the ground, but not anymore. From this point forward, whenever Cain attempted to do what he had always done in the past, what he had known and excelled in, his efforts would be profitless.

Our own sin leads to similar consequences. When our hearts are hardened and indifferent toward the God who offers grace and mercy (and toward other people who are made in His image), we soon discover that the things we were meant to do and to find fulfillment in cease to produce life-giving fruit. Whatever we base our identity on leaves us empty and hopeless.

- ❓ Why does God take so seriously how we treat other people?

So what hope do we have in the depths of such sin and rebellion? Before the sin, when it was only temptation and the sinful desire had not yet been acted upon, God’s counsel was straightforward: Kill it! Do right by ruling over it! Don’t obey its command! Resist and don’t tap out!

But what’s the solution, what’s the counsel, what’s the hope after the sin? How do we face our countless failures? What do we do after we’ve traded God’s counsel for the empty promises of sin? How do we prevent the guilt and shame of sin from destroying us and paralyzing us from seeking God once again?

The great tragedy in the church is that Christians can become so paralyzed by sin that they give up living the lives God has called them to live. Your dreams of living out your faith with reckless abandon are replaced by the desire to fly under the radar, resigned to the sins that overtake you. All that remains of a once-vibrant faith is the hope that God will have mercy on you in the end because you can’t imagine you could ever be used for the kingdom now.

The sadness of this kind of life is almost too much to bear when considered in light of what Christ purchased on the cross. It is not enough to tell ourselves, “Don’t fail!” The gospel tells us what to do after we fail and how God rescues and uses flawed and sinful people for His kingdom.

### 3. The spread of sin is overcome only by God’s mercy and promise (Gen. 4:13-16,25-26).

How can the spread of sin be overcome? Watch what happened next with Cain’s example, and then notice God’s faithfulness to Adam and Eve:

<sup>13</sup> *Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear.*  
<sup>14</sup> *Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”*<sup>15</sup> *Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.*<sup>16</sup> *Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

.....

<sup>25</sup> *And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, “God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.”*<sup>26</sup> *To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.*

We see Cain crying and expressing sorrow. But tears of regret are different than tears of repentance.

 What are the signs in Cain’s speech that his tears came from regret rather than repentance?

Regret is not repentance. Regret leads us to weep, like Cain, because “the punishment is more than I can bear!” The reason for Cain’s sorrow is strikingly selfish. It’s not that he can’t bear the thought of his brother lying in his own blood or the thought of deeply offending God’s honor and glory. Cain’s focus is on himself and the consequences.<sup>7</sup>

Counterfeit repentance may include sorrow, tears, regret, and the promise never to sin this way again, but at the heart of counterfeit repentance is self-absorption. What causes this kind of tears is self-centeredness, a sorrow because of the consequences of our sin in our own lives, not the harm our sin has caused God and others.

#### Further Commentary

“That Cain founded a city does not contradict the Lord’s declaration that Cain will be a ‘restless wanderer.’ ‘Nod’ sounds similar to the word ‘wanderer’ (Hb. *nad*), creating a wordplay between the punishment of wandering and the region where he roamed. The point of the curse is that Cain could no longer live a settled life as a farmer. Therefore he developed the first urban center ‘east of,’ that is, no longer affiliated with, his parents and their descendants...Although the only other humans mentioned thus far are his parents, Cain’s fear of retaliation for the murder of Abel is understandable. Adam fathered many children during his 930 years (5:4-5), producing future generations that could exact revenge. That God marked to safeguard Cain does not contradict the divine provision of capital punishment (9:6). By this sign God declares that the taking of life is His prerogative, in contrast to Cain’s presumptuous murder of Abel.”<sup>8</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews, *The Apologetics Study Bible*

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 44. *Sin's Effects in the World*

Sin does not only impact our relationship with God; it is also the root of our broken relationships with the people around us. Human sinfulness is the reason the creation groans in anticipation for redemption and deliverance from its bondage to evil powers (Rom. 8:20-22). Sin has infected and redirected the social structures of society, leading to injustice and oppression. The distorting effects of sin are visible all around us, but the good news of the gospel is that the battle against these powers will be won through the work of Christ.

But notice how God responded to Cain's self-centered attitude. He enacted justice on behalf of Abel (in banishing Cain) even as He extended a measure of mercy to Cain (by putting a mark on him). God marked Cain in such a way that protected him from facing vengeful violence from others.

We don't know what this mark consisted of, but God's gracious provision here reminds us of what God did with Adam and Eve. He banished them from the garden of Eden but also clothed them with animal skins. In a mysterious way we cannot fully comprehend, God's actions here point forward to the day when we would receive mercy through the sacrifice of His Son. In the midst of enacting His justice, God marks us for mercy.

There's nothing in the passage that indicates Cain ever repented of his sin and received salvation. But everything in the passage points to a God who, in love, withheld the full extent of His just judgment toward Cain, at least for a time. God treated Cain better than he deserved.



A common response to being asked how we are doing is "Better than I deserve." In what ways might this statement be true of all human beings, even those who are unbelievers?

The God who shows mercy is the God who will keep His promise. God promised a Son to Eve who would crush the serpent's head. With Cain in rebellion and Abel dead, the situation seemed dire.

But God gave Adam and Eve another son, named Seth. And through the lineage of Seth, thousands of years later, the promised Son of Eve would be born. At the cross, blood would be shed once again, but this time the blood of the promised Son would not just be shed by sin; His blood would be shed for sin.

Hebrews 12:24 speaks to us of Jesus' blood in comparison to Abel's: "and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Abel's blood, the blood shed *by* sin, was crying out—crying out in angst because justice needed to be done. But Jesus' blood, the blood shed *for* sin, calmly speaks—and it speaks a better word than the blood of Abel because justice has now been served.

If you're in Christ today, all of your sins have been dealt with justly, all of God's wrath against your sins has been poured out on Jesus at the cross. God has been faithful to keep the promise that He made in Genesis 3. In sending His Son to crush the head of the serpent, we can now truly overcome our sins.

When God brings us back into His presence and we are able to see Him in a way we couldn't before, when we see with new eyes and feel with the heart of flesh that has replaced our heart of stone, that's when we know the beauty of true repentance. The regret of Cain was focused only on sin's consequences, but genuine repentance leads us into the arms of a rescuing Father.

 How is our mission as God's people affected when we fail to grasp the reality of God's forgiving heart toward us?

## Conclusion

The promised mercy of God is what overcomes sin, and this is why we look to God for salvation and for power for our mission. As Christians, we see ourselves in the person of Cain, but we also see ourselves in light of the cross. The cross is where God displayed the fullness of His justice by pouring out His wrath toward sin. The cross is where God displayed the fullness of His mercy by extending grace to us through His Son. And now, we seek to slow the spread of sin by pointing others to the God who forgives, the God who transforms, the God who grants repentance (2 Tim. 2:25).

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** The blood of Abel speaks to us of the martyrs who have given their lives for the faith. But the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24) because it is able to cleanse us from sin (1 John 1:7).

## Voices from the Church

"The ultimate Abel, the ultimate man of faith, the only true and literally innocent man came into the world and we—Cains all—killed him. But this was not a random accident. This one came into the world to be our substitute, to *bear the curse* that we Cains deserved."<sup>9</sup>

—Tim Keller

## Voices from the Church

"If [Genesis] 3 represents the fall of humankind, [Genesis] 4 represents the fall of the family."<sup>10</sup>

—John H. Walton

## Additional Resources

# The Spread of Sin

## References

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3. Augustine, Sermons 49.7, quoted in *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ed. Gerald Bray, vol. XI in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 203.
4. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, abridged by Richard Rushing (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 5.
5. James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 253.
6. Bede, *On 1 John*, quoted in *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ed. Gerald Bray, vol. XI in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament*, 201.
7. Timothy Keller, “A Tale of Two Cities,” *Gospel in Life* [online], 1 February 2009 [cited 25 November 2014]. Available from the Internet: [www.gospelinlife.com](http://www.gospelinlife.com).
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9. Timothy J. Keller, *What were we put in the world to do?* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2006), 62.
10. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, in *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 267.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- “Creation and Crisis: Who Am I and What Is Wrong?”—Chapter 1 from *Living God’s Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hayes
- “Raising Cain”—Article by Keith Krell; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “My Brother’s Keeper,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Tim Keller: “A Tale of Two Cities”

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### His Mission, Your Mission

*The Gospel Project* aims not to fill our heads with theological truth but to fuel our hearts with passion to join God on His mission to bring people to Himself. To this end, each session in the Personal Study Guide concludes with “His Mission, Your Mission” to help you lead your group to respond as a missionaries. These mission-oriented questions and directions will help your group apply the truths they have learned in ways appropriate for your context. Telling the story of the Bible is impossible without leading to mission, as the gospel reveals the heart of our missionary God and His desire to save people of every tribe, tongue, and nation.

## SESSION 5

# The Creator Destroys and Redeems

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we see how God responds to the rebelliousness of humanity. He grieves over the wickedness of the world even as He pronounces judgment upon humanity. But in this righteous judgment, God shows favor to Noah and his family, saving them from a great flood and then commissioning them to fulfill His good intentions for humanity. Like Noah, we are saved from God's judgment and called to obey God as His redeemed people.

### ***Main Passages***

Genesis 6:5-22

Genesis 9:1-11

### ***Session Outline***

1. God grieved as He judged the wickedness of the world (Gen. 6:5-7).
2. God showed favor to a righteous man's family (Gen. 6:8-22).
3. God commissioned Noah's family (Gen. 9:1-11).

### ***Theological Theme***

God's glory is revealed in salvation that comes through judgment.

### ***Christ Connection***

Just as God showed favor to righteous Noah and extended salvation to his family, so also God grants salvation to all who come by faith into the family of His righteous Son, Jesus Christ.

### ***Missional Application***

God calls us to proclaim the reality of His righteousness and grace so that others may join His family and be saved from the coming judgment.

## Session Plan

# The Creator Destroys and Redeems

## Session 5

### Introduction Option

Enlist three volunteers before the group meets to read a Scripture (Gen. 3:10; 4:9; 4:23-24). Explain the setting for each with the volunteer reading the corresponding sinner's response to his sin. Invite group members to characterize each response. Highlight the progression: *shame, indifference, boasting* (leader p. 58).

### ? For Further Discussion

Read the "Essential Christian Doctrine" *God's Glory* (leader p. 60; PSG p. 48) and ask the following question:

- How should we respond to our sin—falling short of God's glory—in light of God's judgment of sin through a worldwide flood in Genesis 6?

### Introduction

Recap our study of Genesis thus far, emphasizing the spread of sin and its manifestation in increasingly wicked ways (leader p. 58; PSG p. 46).

- ? What are some sins in society today that we still see as shameful? What are sins we treat with indifference? What sins does our society boast about?

Summarize the session (leader p. 59; PSG p. 46).

## 1. God grieved as He judged the wickedness of the world (Gen. 6:5-7).

Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 6:5-7. Explain God being "grieved" as it relates to His love for the people He created (leader p. 59; PSG p. 47).

- ? What is the significance of "grief" preceding God's judgment of sinful people?
- ? What does this description tell us about the character of God?

Connect God's decision to purge the world of its great wickedness to His grief over sin and His never-ending love for His people, by which He chooses to save one family (leader p. 60; PSG p. 48).

- ? What picture of God do we have when we consider His anger apart from His grief? What about when we think of God as grieving but never angry?
- ? Why is it important to hold these two truths together?

## 2. God showed favor to a righteous man's family (Gen. 6:8-22).

Read Genesis 6:8-22, asking your group to listen for whom God shows favor. Point out the two truths we must not miss. First, *grace precedes righteousness* (leader pp. 60-61; PSG p. 49).

? What are some of the signs in Noah's life that demonstrated his righteous character?

? Why is it important that we recognize that God's grace must precede our obedience?

Second, *the covenant God made with Noah benefited the members of his family*. Show how this is a pattern we will see fulfilled ultimately in Jesus—we're saved only if we belong to Him (leader p. 62; PSG p. 50).

*Use Pack Item 5: Salvation Through Judgment to help explain this pattern from the flood that points forward to the gospel of Jesus Christ* (leader p. 62).

? What lessons can we learn from Noah's example of faithfulness?

### 3. God commissioned Noah's family (Gen. 9:1-11).

Note that Noah's rescue involves a covenant and a commissioning of his family. Then read Genesis 9:1-11, asking the group to keep the following question in mind. *You might consider writing the Genesis 1 passage on a board or paper to help the group compare the passages* (leader p. 63; PSG p. 51).

? Compare Genesis 9:1-11 to the original mandate God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:26-28. What similarities do you see? What are the differences?

*After receiving some responses to the question, supplement as needed from the leader content* (leader p. 64). Emphasize that the flood didn't solve the sin problem, which is too deep and too wide, and this points us again to the need for the cross. Our salvation in Christ should lead us to join in the mission of making Him known (leader p. 64; PSG p. 52).

? Noah is described in the New Testament as "a herald of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). In what ways does our mission to call people to repentance and faith resemble Noah's example?

### Conclusion

Recap the session and our parallels with Noah's salvation, but note especially our parallel mission—a preacher of righteousness, to call others to turn from sin and accept God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ (leader p. 65; PSG p. 53). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission"* (PSG p. 54).

### Pack Item 5: Salvation Through Judgment

Display this chart before the group meeting.

Enlist volunteers prior to the meeting to prepare a short explanation of how the biblical examples on the chart demonstrate the pattern of salvation through judgment: *the exodus; the exile; the final judgment*.

Then explain *the cross*: God judges His enemies in order to save His people, but with the cross, we are the enemy, so Jesus took our sin upon Himself to face God's judgment against sin in our place. In this way, we are saved from sin.

Refer back to the "Essential Christian Doctrine" and ask groups of 3-4 to discuss these questions:

- How should God's righteous judgment cause us to praise His name?
- How should salvation through judgment encourage us to live on mission?

Allow 2-3 minutes; then call for groups to share their reflections and responses.

**Christ Connection:** Just as God showed favor to righteous Noah and extended salvation to his family, so also God grants salvation to all who come by faith into the family of His righteous Son, Jesus Christ.

**Missional Application:** God calls us to proclaim the reality of His righteousness and grace so that others may join His family and be saved from the coming judgment.

## Expanded Session Content

# The Creator Destroys and Redeems

## Session 5

### Voices from the Church

“The story of the flood reveals a God who is both a holy Judge and a gracious Redeemer.”<sup>1</sup>

—Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen

### Introduction

So far in our study of Genesis, we’ve seen how God created the heavens and the earth and then His most precious creation—human beings made in His image. We watched how Adam and Eve sinned by choosing not to believe and trust the goodness of God’s Word. In the previous session, we saw how sin became an epidemic, not something that could be quarantined in the hearts of our first parents. It was a sickness that spread to their children, and as it spread, it began to manifest itself in increasingly wicked ways.

We can see, as sin spreads through the world, the human response to sin begins to change.

- When Adam sinned, his response was: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself” (Gen. 3:10). Adam’s response was shame and hiding.
- When Cain sinned and the Lord asked him where his brother Abel was, he replied: “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). Cain’s response was indifference.
- Then, in Genesis 4:23-24, we see Lamech, the great great great grandson of Cain. After committing murder, his response was to celebrate his wickedness with song: “Lamech said to his wives: ‘Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.’” Lamech’s response was boasting and entitlement.

Do you see the progression? Within the span of two chapters and a few generations, we go from shame to indifference to boasting.



What are some sins in society today that we still see as shameful? What are sins we treat with indifference? What sins does our society boast about?

## Session Summary

In this session, we see how God responds to the rebelliousness of humanity. He grieves over the wickedness of the world even as He pronounces judgment upon humanity. But in this righteous judgment, God shows favor to Noah and his family, saving them from a great flood and then commissioning them to fulfill His good intentions for humanity. Like Noah, we are saved from God's judgment and called to obey God as His redeemed people.

## 1. God grieved as He judged the wickedness of the world (Gen. 6:5-7).

Sin spread wide and sin spread deep. By the time we get to Genesis 6, we may be wondering what God thinks about this situation and what He will do about it.

*<sup>5</sup> The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

*<sup>6</sup> And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. <sup>7</sup> So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them."*

Every thought was nothing but evil, we read. Imagine that kind of a world—a place where in every thought and deed people were in essence shouting at God: "I don't trust You! I don't believe You! I defy You!" Such is the essence of sin—a faithless defiance of God the Creator.

God's reaction was one of sorrow and grief. Consider the weight of the statement in verse 6. The Lord was grieved. He felt anguish in His heart. That word "grieved" in the Hebrew means "toil, languish, agony, to be injured in feeling."

How can this word be used of God? How can an infinitely powerful God who lacks in nothing be in toil, languish, or agony? How could He be injured in any way? The basis for this grief is love—love for the people He created. It's why, after reading in Genesis 3:7 about Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, God didn't simply step in and destroy them and the world in Genesis 3:8. He judged, but He judged with patience, longing to be in relationship again with His people.

 What is the significance of "grief" preceding God's judgment of sinful people?

 What does this description tell us about the character of God?

## Further Commentary

"For the first time in the Bible, the LORD regretted something that He had made. However, His regret did not stem from something He had done wrong, but rather what humanity was doing wrong. The fact that people had become totally preoccupied with evil grieved Him in His heart, much as Israel's sin would later grieve Him (Ps. 78:40-41; Isa. 63:10)."<sup>2</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

## Further Commentary

"Human regret arises from one's inability to foresee or alter the effects of one's actions. But because of God's perfect knowledge and unlimited power He is not subject to these human limitations. The correspondence between human emotions and the heart of God provides insight into the mystery of God's nature. Although the Bible describes God as responding with human emotions, the correspondence is not exact. People often act out of sinful, irrational, or uncontrolled emotion, but God's emotion is always consistent with His righteous character and eternal purposes."<sup>3</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews,  
*The Apologetics Study Bible*

## Voices from Church History

"[Man's] act was sinful, and it was hateful to God. He was guilty and corrupt in consequence of his deed. But the resources of love were equal to the occasion."<sup>4</sup>

—E. Y. Mullins (1860-1928)

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 24. God's Glory

The glory of God is His manifest work, the way He represents His perfect character through His activity. It also refers to His excellent reputation and is given as one of the reasons we are to praise His name. Another sense of the word is the inherent beauty of God, the unbearable brightness and beauty of His being as He radiates His own attributes and characteristics for all to witness. The Scriptures speak of humanity as having "fallen short" of God's glory (Rom. 3:23) because we have rejected the purpose for which God created us—to glorify Him.

God could have annihilated His world and all its inhabitants, but instead, He chose to purge the world of its great wickedness. Yet He would save one family. He chose not to give up on all humanity, not to turn His back and start over completely. Even though He knew Noah and his descendants would again disappoint Him, defy Him, and walk in faithlessness, God decided to preserve this remnant. Why? Because like a father who will not stop loving his children no matter how often they disobey, God bound His heart to His people.

We see God's judgment and anger accompanied by grief throughout the Scriptures. This is why the biblical writers often invoked the imagery of a parent mourning the waywardness of a child. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" God asked in Isaiah 49:15. "Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." In other words, God's love for us is even greater than that of a nursing mother for her infant.

What this means is that God willingly and happily bound up His heart and His life with us. He simply loved us. He didn't have to love us, and He didn't need to, but in His great love, He extended grace to us. He is our Father, and He has tied His own joys with our joys, and He tied His own pains with our pains.

The flood story is certainly one of judgment—the declaration of a holy and righteous Judge against all that is evil. And yet, it is also one of grief—the tears of a loving Father who will not give up on His people.

-  What picture of God do we have when we consider His anger apart from His grief? What about when we think of God as grieving but never angry?
-  Why is it important to hold these two truths together?

## 2. God showed favor to a righteous man's family (Gen. 6:8-22).

We've seen that God was grieved by the sin of the world, and in His holy judgment, He decided to wipe everything off the face of the earth and start again. But here is where the story takes a turn. God demonstrated His commitment to humanity by choosing to preserve a righteous man's family.

<sup>8</sup> *But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

<sup>9</sup> *These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.* <sup>10</sup> *And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*

<sup>11</sup> Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. <sup>12</sup> And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. <sup>13</sup> And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. <sup>14</sup> Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. <sup>15</sup> This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. <sup>16</sup> Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks. <sup>17</sup> For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. <sup>18</sup> But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. <sup>19</sup> And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. <sup>20</sup> Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you to keep them alive. <sup>21</sup> Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up. It shall serve as food for you and for them." <sup>22</sup> Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Take a look at verse 8 and then verse 18. Noah alone found favor in God's eyes, right? But then notice how it says that God would establish His covenant not with Noah alone but also with those who belonged to him. Watch the progression: Noah received God's favor, was declared righteous, and then his family benefited from his righteousness. The same truth is reiterated in Genesis 7:1: "Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation.'" Noah found favor. Noah was the only righteous one, yet Noah's family was saved.

There are two truths here we must not miss. First, *grace precedes righteousness*. It's no accident that the text specifies Noah receiving favor from the Lord before being declared righteous. Grace came first. It wasn't that Noah obeyed and that's why he was saved. It was that Noah received grace, and that's why he obeyed.

-  What are some of the signs in Noah's life that demonstrated his righteous character?
-  Why is it important that we recognize that God's grace must precede our obedience?

### Further Commentary

"Only after He commanded Noah to make the ark did God tell him why it was to be built: God was *bringing a flood*—a term used only in connection with the massive, all-destroying flood in Noah's day. The biblical language here and elsewhere in Genesis 6–8 most naturally indicates that Noah's flood covered the entire globe."<sup>5</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
HCSB Study Bible

### Further Commentary

"It is true that Scripture speaks of certain individuals as 'blameless' or 'upright' (Gen. 6:9; Job 1:1; Luke 1:6; Phil. 3:6). Nevertheless, the narrative contexts of such statements make clear that these individuals, although their integrity and piety stood out from those of their contemporaries, were by no means free from sin and guilt."<sup>6</sup>

—Dennis E. Johnson

## Further Commentary

“Noah’s entire obedience expressed entirety of faith; it is this that Hebrews 11:7 finds significant. It is also significant that God gave so crucial a task not to an angel but to a man, and one man at that; it agrees with his greater deliverance ‘through the obedience of the one’ (Rom. 5:19, RV). The initiative throughout is God’s; hence the reiterated ‘God commanded’ (cf. 7:5,9,16), and the eventual ‘God remembered’ (8:1).”<sup>7</sup>

—Derek Kidner

## Voices from Church History

“For Christ Jesus is the true and spiritual Noah, the preacher of righteousness, and the children of God, the true Christians, are his household.”<sup>8</sup>

—Dirk Philips (1504-1568)

## Voices from the Church

“The story of Noah and the ark shouts to all those who persist in living apart from God about what is to come. It invites all to accept God’s offer of protection and safety found only by being united to Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

—Nancy Guthrie

The second truth is that *the covenant God made with Noah benefited the members of his family*. The righteousness of Noah was the foundation of the preservation of the rest of his family.

Does that sound like anyone else whom you know? The story of Noah points us ahead to Jesus. In Noah we see a pattern for how God is going to offer ultimate salvation. Jesus is the One in whom God was truly pleased, the One God truly favored. Though all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, though none are righteous, not even one, based upon the sole person of Jesus and His righteousness, God offers us salvation.

Noah’s family is saved from the flood not on the basis of their righteousness but on the basis of Noah’s righteousness. They’re saved because they belong to Noah. In salvation from sin, we’re not saved by our own works but by the work of Jesus alone, and we’re saved only if we belong to Him.

Through the story of the flood, we see the introduction to the gospel as salvation through judgment. What does this mean? While the entire world was looking up at God and rejecting Him, telling Him that they didn’t trust Him, just as their parents before them did, Noah was building an ark. He was demonstrating with his life that he believed God. He had faith that God was going to do what He had said. And the waters of judgment did come.

Here’s what I mean by salvation through judgment. The same water that swallowed up everyone who didn’t believe in the word of God actually lifted Noah up. As the waters increased, everyone else was pressed down and crushed. But at the same time, Noah and his family were lifted up and saved. The waters of judgment actually saved him; it was salvation through judgment. And Peter confirmed this for us later in the Bible: “when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through the water” (1 Pet. 3:20).

Surprisingly, the waters were actually salvation for some and death for others. In the biblical storyline, the reality of salvation through judgment will be seen most gloriously in the cross of Jesus Christ. As Jesus was judged on the cross for our sin, we were being saved. Salvation came to us through the very instrument by which death came to Jesus. God judges sin and wickedness, but He brings salvation out of this judgment.



What lessons can we learn from Noah’s example of faithfulness?

### 3. God commissioned Noah's family (Gen. 9:1-11).

The story of the flood doesn't end with Noah's rescue but with God making a covenant with Noah and then commissioning his family to fulfill the original mandate He gave to Adam and Eve.



*<sup>1</sup> And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup> The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered.*

*<sup>3</sup> Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. <sup>4</sup> But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. <sup>5</sup> And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.*

*<sup>6</sup> "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.*

*<sup>7</sup> And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."*

*<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup> "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."*



Compare Genesis 9:1-11 to the original mandate God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:26-28. What similarities do you see? What are the differences?

#### Further Commentary

"The Noachic covenant is God's gracious commitment to preserve creation till the final judgment. Amid the flood of judgment God preserved humans and animals, but all this did not change the nature of humans. Noah took his sin nature with him into the ark, and he and his sons passed that sin nature on to their descendants, just as they had received it from Adam... The sign of the covenant with Noah is the rainbow. Every rainbow is a reminder of God's ongoing common-grace mercy, down through the generations since Noah, indicating that he will never flood the earth again (9:13-15). The rainbow should also remind us that God was providing special grace through Noah, preserving through him the promised Seed of deliverance for sinful people."<sup>10</sup>

—Willem VanGemenen, *Gospel Transformation Bible*



## Voices from Church History

"God's purpose...was to eliminate all apprehension from Noah's thinking...He said, remember, 'Just as I brought on the deluge out of love, so as to put a stop to their wickedness and prevent their going to further extremes, so in this case too it is out of my love that I promise never to do it again.'"<sup>11</sup>

—Chrysostom  
(circa 347-407)

This passage resembles the original mandate God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1. We see a blessing, a charge to be fruitful and multiply, and the responsibility to steward well God's created world.

So was the flood the solution that the problem of sin needed? Did the flood fix everything and restore everything back to its proper order and place? No. Because even though there are echoes of Eden here, they are still only echoes. Sin has darkened this scene. There is fear here—"the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth"—and there is a warning against murder given—"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed."

The flood's inability to solve the sin problem points us back to the beginning of this session. The sin of man has spread wide and deep. How wide and how deep? So wide and deep that even the destruction of most of the world and starting over with one righteous man and his family was not sufficient to redeem and restore humanity back to God.

A greater solution than the flood was needed. And the good news of the gospel is that a greater solution was given to us at the cross. At the cross we see the true extent to which God was willing to be grieved so that we might be saved. The Son of God was willing to drink the cup of God's judgment in order that we might be spared eternal death.

And just as Noah's story ends with a reaffirmation of God's covenant with humanity and a commissioning to follow God in obedience, so also our salvation is not an end in itself but what precedes our own obedience. God has commissioned us not only to be fruitful and multiply but also to take the good news of this holy and merciful God to the rest of the world. Noah could only save seven members of his family, but God has given to Jesus people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Just as Noah spent his life in faith building an ark while the world rejected his message (Heb. 11:7; 2 Pet. 2:5), we should spend our lives faithfully telling people about the coming judgment and the good news of the provision God has made for our salvation—Jesus Christ.

-  Noah is described in the New Testament as "a herald of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). In what ways does our mission to call people to repentance and faith resemble Noah's example?

## Conclusion

In this session, we've seen the grief of a good God, who in righteousness judged the world during the days of Noah. We've explored the parallels between Noah's salvation and ours so that we can have our hearts filled with gratitude for the great salvation God has given us through Christ.

But the parallels between Noah's mission and our mission are also notable. Noah walked with God. His life of obedience was a testimony to the God who showed favor to him. Noah believed God when he was told a day of judgment was coming, and he preached righteousness to the rest of the world, even though they rejected his message.

We should see in Noah a figure who points us to Christ and who remains an example of faithful mission. We are to walk with God, allowing His grace to shape our obedience so that others see a testimony to His goodness. We are to believe God regarding the coming day of judgment—hell for the unrepentant after they die and final judgment upon this world when Christ returns. No matter how unpopular or unlikely such a message seems in our age of tolerance, we are to take God at His Word. Believing in a God who grieves over our sin and has promised to purge this world of evil in the future, we call others to turn from sin and accept God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Judgment is coming. May we be known as preachers of righteousness.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Just as God showed favor to righteous Noah and extended salvation to his family, so also God grants salvation to all who come by faith into the family of His righteous Son, Jesus Christ.

## Further Commentary

"Four different extrabiblical flood stories from the ancient Near East (ANE) have survived...Throughout the flood narratives, despite the similarities in some details, Genesis presents a strong contrast to the ANE accounts. God is all-powerful, and He does not share His power with any other god. He is in control of Himself and all creation. Yahweh is not annoyed or irritated by the noise and number of humanity, only by their continued iniquity. Throughout Genesis, God reveals that He is not only transcendent, but also immanent and personal. God gave Noah specific survival instructions, brought the animals to Noah, sealed Noah and his family in the ark, protected them throughout the flood, and spoke to Noah throughout the entire event. The God of the Bible is not jealous, gluttonous, ignorant, or capricious. He is just, and He is the Savior of all humanity."<sup>12</sup>

—Francis X. Kimmitt,  
*Biblical Illustrator*

## Additional Resources

# The Creator Destroys and Redeems

## References

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2. Robert D. Bergen, in *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 18-19, n. 6:6.
3. Kenneth A. Mathews, in *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 15-16, n. 6:6-7.
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9. Nancy Guthrie, *The Promised One* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 104.
10. Willem VanGemeren, in *Gospel Transformation Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 13-14, n. 6:9-9:29.
11. Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 28.4, quoted in *Genesis 1-11*, ed. Andrew Louth, vol. I in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 154.
12. Francis X. Kimmitt, "Ancient Near Eastern Flood Stories," *Biblical Illustrator* (Fall 2002): 70, 72.



For help on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "How Do We Interpret Historical Narratives?"—Question 22 from *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* by Robert L. Plummer
- "The Grace of Wrath"—Article by Carolyn Arends; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "Ancient Near-Eastern Flood Stories," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Kent Hughes: "Genesis Grace"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### *The Gospel Project Resources for Parents*

One of the Core Values of *The Gospel Project* is to unite every age in Christ-centered study of the Scriptures. So our sessions are aligned across all age groups, babies through adults. This provides a great opportunity for parents to interact with their kids and students about what they are learning in their groups since parents will be studying the same stories. To aid parents in their primary role of discipling their children, we have some resources designed to facilitate such discussions:

- For Students—Parents can download a "One Conversation" guide for each session at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources), or you as a leader can print and make copies available for parents.
- For Kids—Parents can use their child's *Activity Page* for the session and find "Family Discussion Starters" to prompt a conversation. Available resources also include *The Big Picture Cards for Families* and the *Family App*.

# The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

## Summary and Goal

In this session we see humanity's propensity for inventing ways to build up our own prestige and bring honor to ourselves. As we build our kingdoms and lift up our own name, God sees our plans. He judges our attempts to increase our power, and in His judgment of our idolatrous desires, He shows mercy by slowing the spread of evil. And after He saves us, He gives us the mission of scattering throughout the world to praise the name of His Son.

### ***Main Passage***

Genesis 11:1-9

### ***Session Outline***

1. God sees our prideful plans and disobedience (Gen. 11:1-5).
2. God judges our attempts to build our own kingdom (Gen. 11:6-7).
3. God causes our idolatrous plans to fail (Gen. 11:8-9).

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### ***Theological Theme***

God judges and thwarts human attempts to thwart His glory.

### ***Christ Connection***

God confused the language of those who sought to make known the greatness of their own name. Thousands of years later, at Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier so that His people would scatter across the world and make known the great name of His Son.

### ***Missional Application***

God calls us to give up our personal kingdom-building and to devote our lives to making known the great name of His Son.

## Session Plan

# The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

## Session 6

### Introduction Option

Before the group meets, post some signs around the room for areas of life in which people might want a reset (ex. *Childhood; College; Work; Parenting; Spiritual*).

As the group members arrive, ask them to gather by a sign that captures a time or situation they wish they could do over. Encourage group members to share within this small group their “reset” scenario if comfortable doing so.

Allow 1-2 minutes and then proceed with the Introduction.

### Introduction

Begin with a discussion on the desire for a “reset” button in life (leader p. 70; PSG p. 55).

- What event in your past do you wish you could change? What is a choice in your past you would make differently with hindsight?

Recap the previous sessions and reference the flood as something of a reset for the world, but ultimately not an effective one—sin still remains. Then summarize this session (leader pp. 70-71; PSG pp. 55-56).

### 1. God sees our prideful plans and disobedience (Gen. 11:1-5).

Read Genesis 11:1-5 and point out how skyscrapers in our context are not inherently evil (leader p. 71; PSG p. 56). *Then use the leader content to explain phrase by phrase how the people demonstrated hearts far from God in building their tower. Group members can take notes in their PSG (leader pp. 71-72; PSG pp. 56-57).*

- In Genesis 11, we see people gathering together, united in their disobedience toward God. What role does “gathering together” play in affirming their rebellious direction?
- What role does “gathering together” play in a Christian’s desire to obey?

*Ask groups of 3-4 to consider the phrases above and to discuss how the events of Genesis 11 might provide a window into human thought and behavior, even our thoughts and behavior. After 2-3 minutes, call for responses and supplement as needed from the leader content (leader pp. 72-73; PSG p. 57). Conclude this section on a note from verse 5 that God sees and cares about our plans (leader p. 73; PSG p. 58).*

- What are some ways we as Christians seek to “make a name for ourselves”?

## 2. God judges our attempts to build our own kingdom (Gen. 11:6-7).

Emphasize the point that God “came down” to look at the tower; use this as an opportunity to explain that *God Is Transcendent* (“99 Essential Christian Doctrines”). God was not threatened, but He did want to slow the spread of sin. Read Genesis 11:6-7 (leader pp. 73-74; PSG p. 58).

- ? What surprises you about the action God took to stop the people’s building plans?
- ? Do you see an element of mercy in God’s judgment?

Show that God’s judgment came against the people but was marked with mercy in stunting their progress in evil (leader pp. 74-75; PSG p. 59). *Reinforce this pattern of God’s judgment with mercy by asking the group to identify God’s mercy in judgment that we’ve seen thus far in Genesis: Adam and Eve, Cain, the flood. Use Hebrews 12:5-11 if necessary to further explain this concept* (leader p. 74).

- ? What elements of mercy have you experienced while undergoing God’s discipline in your life?

## 3. God causes our idolatrous plans to fail (Gen. 11:8-9).

Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 11:8-9. Then explain how failing plans can be difficult but should be viewed in perspective (leader p. 75; PSG p. 60).

- ? When has God judged your attempts to build your own personal kingdom? Why might it be better for our plans to fail rather than have them succeed without God?

*Suggest some possible ways to see God’s loving discipline through our failed plans* (leader p. 76). Then reinforce God’s kindness in removing all of our idols so we can see Him (leader p. 76; PSG pp. 60-61).

- ? What are some signs that can help us identify an idolatrous plan?
- ? How can we tell if we are pursuing success apart from a relationship with God?

## Conclusion

Make it clear how the theme of judgment with mercy points forward to the cross of Christ. And show how our mission as Christians is “anti-Babel” in that we are united in the Spirit and strengthened so that nothing shall be impossible for us according to God’s will (leader p. 77; PSG p. 62). *Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission”* (PSG p. 63).

### ? For Further Discussion

What downward spiral of consequences have you experienced as a result of your own sin?

What do these consequences tell us about God? About ourselves? About the nature of sin?

### ? For Further Discussion

How do our evangelistic efforts demonstrate our desire to make the name of God known to those around us?

**Christ Connection:** God confused the language of those who sought to make known the greatness of their own name. Thousands of years later, at Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier so that His people would scatter across the world and make known the great name of His Son.

**Missional Application:** God calls us to give up our personal kingdom-building and to devote our lives to making known the great name of His Son.

## Expanded Session Content

# The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

## Session 6

### Voices from the Church

“God’s mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22.”<sup>1</sup>

—Christopher Wright

## Introduction

Have you ever wished for a fresh start? A re-do at something? You look at that purchase you made and realize that it was unwise, and now that the luster has worn off, you wish you could take it back. Or perhaps you look at what you studied in college and wish you had chosen another path. Perhaps it’s something you did wrong, a moment you can pinpoint when everything changed. You wish you could go back in time. If only there were a “reset” button!

-  What event in your past do you wish you could change? What is a choice in your past you would make differently with hindsight?

As we reenter the Genesis narrative, we see that God has essentially given humanity a “reset.” We’ve seen how, through Adam and Eve’s disobedience, sin was birthed into the world. Their initial act of disobedience and distrust became a human predisposition in the hearts of their children, an inclination of a sinful nature, the desire to disobey and not trust God. We saw in the previous session how God grieved over the fallen state of humanity and then judged the world through the flood and showed grace to Noah and his family.

What if you were a part of Noah’s family after the floodwaters had subsided? Perhaps you think that after witnessing such an intense display of God’s judgment toward sin and His mercy in preserving your family, you’d be inclined toward “revival” or a new commitment toward obedience. Unfortunately, the next scene shows Noah drunk, and as a result, the object of mockery from one of his sons. And generations later, sin extends to the point that the people of the world join together to create a tower that would reach the skies for the sake of their own glory.

## Session Summary

In this session we see humanity's propensity for inventing ways to build up our own prestige and bring honor to ourselves. As we build our kingdoms and lift up our own name, God sees our plans. He judges our attempts to increase our power, and in His judgment of our idolatrous desires, He shows mercy by slowing the spread of evil. And after He saves us, He gives us the mission of scattering throughout the world to praise the name of His Son.

## 1. God sees our prideful plans and disobedience (Gen. 11:1-5).

The descendants of Noah settled in the land of Shinar, and there they decided to build for themselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Watch how the story unfolds:

*<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." <sup>5</sup> And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.*

At first glance, we might read this and think, *What's wrong with these plans? The world is filled with cities and skyscrapers. Why is there anything wrong with the people deciding to build this particular city and its tower?* But look carefully at how the author of Genesis tells the story.

**"As people migrated from the east..."** This geographical reference has a moral aspect to it. In journeying "from the east," the people, in the words of Arthur W. Pink, "turned their backs upon the sunrise,"<sup>2</sup> much like Cain went out from the Lord's presence and settled "east of Eden" (Gen. 4:16). Some translations read "eastward," but the point is the same either way—the people were physically walking away from the garden of Eden, and in their hearts, moving further away from God.

**"They said to one another..."** Before taking on such a massive undertaking, there was no consulting God. They didn't have Noah's consciousness of God, and they weren't interested in the task God gave Noah's descendants. In this situation, there's an utter absence of God in their minds.

## Further Commentary

There is a recurring pattern in Genesis 1–11 of a positive incident being followed by a negative. The creation of the earth, which was very good (Gen. 1), is followed by the rejection of that goodness by Adam and Eve (Gen. 3). The mercy displayed to humanity after the fall when God provided clothing through sacrifice and the gift of a long life (Gen. 5) is followed not by repentance but by every intention of the thoughts of humanity only being evil continually (Gen. 6–8). The compassion of God as He renewed covenant with Noah and gave humanity a fresh start is succeeded by humans rejecting His commandment to fill the earth in order to build for themselves a great tower and make for themselves a great name. Genesis 1–11 shows us God's repeated goodness and our repeated rejection of Him.

## Further Commentary

“The account of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden (chap. 3) and the Tower of Babylon share many similarities in plot, vocabulary, and theme. Both show people acting with sinful pride to try to make themselves godlike, and both show God expelling sinners from the their homes as punishment for their sin...The people’s pride and ambition is expressed in three different ways: (1) the fivefold use of the first-person pronouns—‘us’ (twice), ‘ourselves’ (twice), and ‘we’; (2) their desire to ‘build... a tower’ into ‘the sky,’ thus giving them access to ‘the heavens,’ the domain of God; and (3) their attempt at self-glorification—‘let us make a name for ourselves.’ Because they did it to avoid being ‘scattered over the face of the whole earth,’ all their efforts amounted to a rebellion against God and His command to fill the earth (9:1)...In spite of their best efforts to elevate themselves to God’s domain, the Lord still had to ‘come down to look over the city and the tower.’ Human attempts to achieve glory, which belongs to God alone, always fall pitifully short.”<sup>3</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

**“Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.”** Building a tower with its top in the sky seems like an audacious undertaking, but why does Genesis imply it was sacrilegious? Because the sky represented heaven, the place where God dwells. This reference ought to remind us of Genesis 3; it is another human attempt to become like God.

**“Let us make a name for ourselves.”** They would build for themselves a city so that they could make a name for themselves. Feel the arrogance of this statement, the grand exercise in self-sufficiency. They stood in direct contrast to what we will see in Genesis 12, where God promised to give Abram a great name. Here in Genesis 11, the people wanted to achieve greatness for themselves.

**“Lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”** Wait a minute! Didn’t God tell the people to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1)? Yes, and here’s where we see humanity’s blatant refusal to obey God’s command to Noah and his descendants. Instead of giving God glory, they sought their own by huddling together to build their own kingdom, in refusal of God’s command.

We see that these were not benign actions but humanity’s attempt once again to cast aside God’s goodness and choose for themselves what they define as good.

-  In Genesis 11, we see people gathering together, united in their disobedience toward God. What role does “gathering together” play in affirming their rebellious direction?
-  What role does “gathering together” play in a Christian’s desire to obey?

The events of Genesis 11 provide a window into human thought and behavior. We too are a people who travel farther and farther “from the east,” turning our backs to the sunrise of God’s goodness. Instead of being in awe of what God has done for us already, we take on the attitude of entitlement toward God.

We too are a people who often live with an utter absence of God in our minds. In making decisions big and small, “we say to each other,” but we don’t “say to God.” We’re content to live, act, speak, and make life’s decisions without God as a factor at all.

Every day, we’re building something. And we’re tempted to build up our treasures and our careers in a way that communicates to the world that this is where we find our identity, our joy, and our life. The temptation to “make a name for ourselves” leads us to believe that we are at the center of the universe and that we can accomplish salvation for ourselves. We can work our way up to the heavens; we can be like God, or so we think.

Even as Christians, we stray from God's will. We are men and women called by God to fill the earth, not just through biological reproduction but through taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, everywhere Christ has not been named. But instead of obeying to scatter abroad with the gospel, we often huddle in one place, keeping this treasure to ourselves.

We must not pass over this story as if it were an obscure historical event with little relevance to our lives. Genesis 11 is an opportunity for us to see that we also have turned our backs to God's goodness, we have lived as if He were not there, we have built our own kingdoms instead of witnessing to His, and we have disobeyed His commands.

Look at verse 5 once more. We may think that God doesn't see us make such plans or that He doesn't care. But God did see, and He still sees. God did care, and He still cares.



What are some ways we as Christians seek to "make a name for ourselves"?

## 2. God judges our attempts to build our own kingdom (Gen. 11:6-7).

Because God sees and because God cares, there will be judgment. We'll see in a moment what form this judgment would take for the people, but note first of all how the story describes God's action. These men were building something they hoped would reach the heavens, but it was merely a speck in the eyes of God, such a speck that He had to "come down to look" at it (v. 5).

Humanity's great "achievement" was no threat to God. So why would He judge the people? God's judgment of sin does not come from being intimidated by human accomplishment. The same is true of a petulant child striking a parent. If my three-year-old son looks at me with anger in his eyes and takes a swing, he will be disciplined. He will have to answer for his actions, but it's not because I am threatened by his little hand; it's because I care deeply about the condition of his heart.

Thousands of years later, the prophet Isaiah described an earthly king, but the description fits the natural human heart of everyone and our desire for our own glory: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit" (Isa. 14:13-15).

So God decided to judge the people in Shinar, not because He was threatened by their actions but because He cared deeply about their hearts. He wanted to slow the spread of sin. Take a look:



### Voices from Church History

"Notice how the human race, instead of managing to keep to their own boundaries, always longs for more and reaches out for greater things. This is what the human race has lost in particular, not being prepared to recognize the limitations of their own condition but always lusting after more and entertaining ambitions beyond their capacity."<sup>4</sup>

—Chrysostom  
(circa 347-407)

### 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

#### 13. God Is Transcendent

God's transcendence refers to the fact that He is distinct from and independent of His created world. He is transcendent over us in regards to His greatness and power as well as His goodness and purity. The implication of this doctrine is that God is inherently superior to humanity; His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). When God saves us, He restores us so we can fulfill our human purpose; this does not mean that we become God or that distinctions between God and humanity are obliterated. Understanding God's transcendence evokes awe and wonder at His goodness and power.

## Further Commentary

“The second interesting feature of this part of the story is that God *came* down to see the tower the men of Babylon were building. This is an anthropomorphism, that is, God being described as if he were a man. (We are not to think that God actually had to get off the throne of the universe and come down to earth to determine what the builders were doing. All things are known to God always.) But it is not a ‘crude anthropomorphism,’ as some have chosen to call it. It is used with effect. Here were men attempting to build a great tower. The top was to reach to the heavens. It was to be so great that it and the religion and defiance of God it represented would make a reputation for these citizens of Shinar. There it stood, lofty in its unequaled grandeur. But when God wants to look at it he comes down. He has to stoop low to see this puny extravagance.”<sup>5</sup>

—James Montgomery Boice

## Voices from Church History

“Whenever [man] aspires to be self-sufficing, he retreats from the One who is truly sufficient for him.”<sup>6</sup>

—Augustine (354-430)

<sup>6</sup> *And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”* <sup>7</sup> *Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.”*

- ❓ What surprises you about the action God took to stop the people’s building plans?
- ❓ Do you see an element of mercy in God’s judgment?

The text informs us that God put an end to the building of this tower by confusing the people’s language. He could have destroyed the tower, struck the builders with lightning, or caused a massive earthquake. Instead, He confused their language so that their progress in this evil was stunted.

Yet there’s an element of mercy in this act of judgment, and that’s a theme we’ve seen again and again in Genesis:

- Genesis 3: Because Adam and Eve sinned, they were judged and banished from paradise. But was this action only judgment? No. You see, God could have annihilated Adam and Eve right then and there, but instead, He showed them mercy. He sacrificed an animal in order to clothe them, and He promised that through the seed of Eve, a Messiah would be born who would crush the head of the serpent.
- Genesis 4: When Cain killed Abel, Cain was judged and forced to wander. But even here God showed an element of mercy. When Cain expressed his fear of being killed in vengeance, God placed upon him a mark of protection.
- Genesis 6–9: When the state of humanity was described as creating new evils with their every thought and intent, God brought judgment through the flood. But it wasn’t just judgment; He saved a remnant of humanity in the ark.

And this is still true even today. Hebrews 12:5-11 tells us that God disciplines His children when we sin, but the discipline is good because it is what proves we are His children. The discipline is merciful because even if it isn’t enjoyable at the time, it later yields the fruit of peace and righteousness.

Here in Genesis 11, God’s judgment comes, but it’s marked with mercy. In verse 6, God says that because they “have all one language... nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” In other words, because they were a people united in one language, they would be able to accomplish anything that they set their hearts to do.

What's the problem? Their hearts. The flood did not solve the sin problem. Sin still remained in the heart of man after the flood; so what did the flood accomplish? The flood slowed down the progression of sin in the world. In a similar manner, God's confusing of the people's language was an act of judgment that would slow down the spread of evil in this world. We couldn't imagine the type of world we would be living in today if, for thousands of years, human beings were united in heart and language to accomplish one evil deed after another.

 What elements of mercy have you experienced while undergoing God's discipline in your life?

### 3. God causes our idolatrous plans to fail (Gen. 11:8-9).



*<sup>8</sup> So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*

“And they left off building the city.” God confused their

language, and in merciful judgment, He caused humanity's idolatrous plans to fail.

There is, of course, a sense of loss and sadness when our plans fail. Whenever we are committed to our own personal kingdoms and our own prestige, we are wounded when events take place that stop us in our tracks. When God has been absent in your mind, in your planning, and in your decision-making for too long and all that you planned and all the decisions you've made end up failing, you may be sensing God's judgment of your plans. But do you also see a measure of God's mercy in stripping away all the idolatries of your heart, all the man-made plans we conceive of?

 When has God judged your attempts to build your own personal kingdom? Why might it be better for our plans to fail rather than have them succeed without God?

#### Voices from Church History

“The real attitude of sin in the heart towards God is that of being without God; it is pride, the worship of myself, that is the great atheistic fact in human life.”<sup>7</sup>

—Oswald Chambers (1874-1917)

#### Further Commentary

“Babel (Babylon) called itself Bab-ili, ‘gate of God’ (which may have been a flattering reinterpretation of its original meaning); but by a play of words Scripture superimposes the truer label *balal* (‘he confused’). In the Bible this city increasingly came to symbolize the godless society, with its pretensions (Gen. 11), persecutions (Dan. 3), pleasures, sins and superstitions (Isa. 47:8-13), its riches and eventual doom (Rev. 17, 18). One of its glories was its huge *ziggurat*, a temple-crowned artificial mountain whose name, Etemenanki, suggested the linking of heaven and earth. But it was her sins that ‘reached... unto heaven’ (Rev. 18:5). In Revelation she is contrasted with the holy city which comes ‘down out of heaven,’ whose open gates unite the nations (Rev. 21:10,24-27).”<sup>8</sup>

—Derek Kidner

## Voices from the Church

“This was not merely an act of God’s judgment. God worked in this event to thwart the sinful intention of the human heart and providentially advanced his purpose for creation.”<sup>9</sup>

—Keith Whitfield

## Further Commentary

“Many similarities exist between the ziggurats of Mesopotamia and the tower of Babel. Apparent differences especially in purpose, however, must be considered by any interpreter of Scripture. Many theories have been advanced for the purpose of these imposing towers in Mesopotamia...Abundant evidence suggests the Mesopotamian ziggurats served a religious function. A sanctuary probably existed at the top of the ziggurat. No biblical evidence exists for concluding that the builders of the tower of Babel ever considered using the tower for religious purposes or to somehow climb into heaven via the tower. Genesis 11 contains no description of a stairway of any kind. The tower of Babel was not a monument to God or for God. If anything, the tower of Babel was a monument to people’s disobedience because of their attempt to make a name for themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

—Phillip J. Swanson,  
*Biblical Illustrator*

It’s good news that God causes idolatrous plans to fail. Time after time, the God who is committed to our good, the God who wants us to find our satisfaction in Him, will slowly strip away everything else in which we try to find joy.

Perhaps you’ve spent years and years building a career, a bank account, a reputation, or success that would reach to the heavens. What would it look like for God, in His mercy, to strip away some of the things in which you find your security?

Perhaps you’ve been creating a résumé of your own righteousness, a list of all the good things you’ve done, things you believe merit God’s favor. What would it look like for God to give you such a glimpse of Himself and His holiness that you realize that all your righteousness is but filthy rags (Isa. 64:6)? What would it look like for God to let you come to the end of your attempts to win His favor?

Perhaps you’ve been lulled into apathy by the prosperity and the success you’ve had in this world. What would it look like for God to shake you awake by means of a lost job, a broken relationship, or a health crisis?

When failure comes into our lives, we often interpret it as disaster or a sign of God’s judgment. Genesis 11 reminds us that our plans often fail because they were our plans, not God’s plan. Our plans are too often birthed out of self-consultation, not prayer. Carried out in independence, not dependence. Rooted in disobedience, not faith. Idolatrous and glory-seeking, not worshipful and glory-giving.

And God, in His goodness and grace, often causes these plans to fail. His goal is to turn us toward Himself. He wants us to see that nothing can satisfy us like He can. Without the failure of our idolatrous plans, we would continue on in our rejection of God without ever noticing that something was wrong.

It is the kindness of God to us when He causes our idols to disappoint us. When our cities and towers and names fall, maybe then we will finally see the God who has been there waiting to satisfy us all along.

-  What are some signs that can help us identify an idolatrous plan?
-  How can we tell if we are pursuing success apart from a relationship with God?

## Conclusion

This theme of judgment combined with mercy found throughout Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament points forward to the cross of Jesus. The cross is the ultimate display of both God's judgment and mercy being poured out. At the cross, God fully poured out His wrath and judgment against our sin, but He also poured out the fullness of His mercy and grace, because instead of pouring out the judgment on those who deserved it, He poured it out on His Son.

On this side of the cross, we have been given the responsibility to take the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. It seems like a daunting task—more daunting than building a tower reaching to the skies! And yet, this is God's plan, not ours. And if we feel the task is too big, just consider how the original disciples must have felt. How in the world would they take the gospel to the ends of the earth, especially in the face of persecution and the threat of death?

Jesus promised a Helper, the Holy Spirit, upon whose arrival in Acts 2, the “anti-Babel” happened. The Holy Spirit filled the believers to be able to speak the gospel in such a way that every person who heard it, no matter their language, understood it.

Of a people with unredeemed and sinful hearts, bent on building their own kingdom and accomplishing their own mission, God said, “they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” But what of us? We have new and redeemed hearts. We are to be about the spread of God's kingdom and accomplishing His mission. We have the Holy Spirit! Fulfilling the Great Commission may seem daunting, but make no mistake, as a redeemed people of God, united as one and filled with the Holy Spirit, nothing that we plan to do according to God's will shall be impossible for us.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** God confused the language of those who sought to make known the greatness of their own name. Thousands of years later, at Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier so that His people would scatter across the world and make known the great name of His Son.

### Voices from the Church

“A great part of the glory of the gospel is that it is not provincial. It is not a tribal religion. It breaks into every language and every people.”<sup>11</sup>

—John Piper

## Additional Resources

# The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

## References

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11. John Piper, "The Pride of Babel and the Praise of Christ," *Desiring God* [online], 2 September 2007 [cited 13 January 2015]. Available from the Internet: [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org).



For help on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "The Perished Kingdom"—Chapter 2 from *God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts
- "Babel and the Beauty of a Thousand Tongues"—Blog post by Trevin Wax; find a link to this blog post at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "Reaching the Heavens: A Study of Ancient Towers," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Gene Fant: "The Confusion of Towering Egos"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Know What Your Room Communicates

The way your room is set up has a significant effect on members' participation and their ability to connect during the session.

- Rows of chairs with a lectern in front communicates the leader will do most of the talking and the learners will sit and listen. The use of small groups during the session is an effective way to stimulate participation in a larger group.
- A semicircle with the leader in the open end communicates that there will be some level of participation, but the leader is still clearly in charge.
- A full circle communicates that the leader is a fellow learner and the group has lots of interaction. It is also efficient, allowing use of every wall in the room.
- Tables almost always communicate that this is a closed, academic sort of group. In addition, tables are an incredibly inefficient use of valuable space.

# God's Covenant with Abraham

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we will learn that God is a covenant-making God. Because of sin, the people on earth had been separated from God (Eden) and each other (Babel), but God chose one man, one family, through whom He promised to reverse this separation. This promise was later fulfilled through Abraham's descendant—Jesus of Nazareth. And this promise continues to be fulfilled today through the mission of Jesus' church as peoples from all over the world become part of God's family through faith in the gospel.

### **Main Passages**

Genesis 12:1-4

Genesis 15:1-6

Genesis 17:1-14

### **Session Outline**

1. God initiated a renewed relationship with human beings (Gen. 12:1-4).
2. God commands us to trust that He will keep His promises (Gen. 15:1-6).
3. God desires for His people to be set apart for His glory (Gen. 17:1-14).

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### **Theological Theme**

God chooses a nation through which He will reverse the curse of sin and reclaim the world as His kingdom.

### **Christ Connection**

God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus Christ is the promised descendant of Abraham through whom salvation flows to the rest of the world.

### **Missional Application**

God has chosen to make us part of Abraham's family of faith, and therefore, we are called to be the people through whom blessing flows to the world.

## Session Plan

# God's Covenant with Abraham

## Session 7

### Pack Item 1: The Story Begins

Refer to this poster for Unit 2 to help group members follow the storyline of Scripture, to remember where we've been and where we are going.

### Pack Item 6: Genesis Map

Display this map before the group meeting. Reference it as needed throughout Unit 2 to help group members orient themselves to the people, places, and events written about in the Book of Genesis.

*For example, Genesis 12 notes that Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran according to God's call and promise.*

### Point 2 Option

Share the writer's story about the difficulty of trusting in some promises (leader p. 85), or share one of your own. Then encourage groups of 2-3 to share their own experiences of doubts and how they responded.

## Introduction

Open with a discussion of marriage in popular culture. Contrast the ideas of marriage as a covenant and a contract, and note how these affect the view of our relationship with God (leader p. 82; PSG p. 65).

- ❓ Have you or someone you know ever made a deal with God? What was it?
- ❓ Why do you think we have a contractual attitude toward relationships rather than a covenantal one?

Summarize the session (leader p. 83; PSG p. 66).

## 1. God initiated a renewed relationship with human beings (Gen. 12:1-4).

*Recap previous sessions* (leader p. 83). Then ask a volunteer to read Genesis 12:1-4 (leader p. 83; PSG p. 66).

- ❓ Circle the uses of the pronoun "I" as it appears in the Lord's speech to Abram. What does this tell us about God's commitment to His glory and His plan of redemption?

God narrows His promise of the seed now to come through one man, Abram, and his family. Identify and explain the three promises associated with God's covenant with Abram: **land**, **offspring**, and **blessing** (leader p. 84; PSG p. 67).

- ❓ God's initiation of relationship with Abram required Abram's obedience to the call. Why do you think Abram obeyed God by leaving his land?
- ❓ What would it take for you to obey God if He called you to do something that made no sense from the world's perspective?

## 2. God commands us to trust that He will keep His promises (Gen. 15:1-6).

Introduce and read Genesis 15:1-3. Connect Abram's suggestion with our own responses to doubting God's promises (leader p. 85; PSG p. 68).

- ❓ In what areas of your life do you often struggle with trusting the promises of God (financial, marital, parental, relational, etc.)? In what ways have you taken matters into your own hands to ensure the outcome you want?
- ❓ How can we resist this tendency?

Continue reading Genesis 15:4-6. Point out the importance of faith in God’s promise—Jesus—as discussed in Galatians 3 (leader pp. 85-86; PSG p. 69).

- ❓ In what ways do we imagine our relationship with God is dependent on how well we keep His rules?
- ❓ What kind of person will a rules-focused life cause us to become?

Also note that Galatians helps us see that faith in Christ is the means by which God continues to fulfill His promise to Abram (leader p. 86; PSG p. 69).  
*Summarize the rest of Genesis 15 and its implications* (leader p. 86).

### 3. God desires for His people to be set apart for His glory (Gen. 17:1-14).

Introduce and read Genesis 17:1-14. Highlight the name change from Abram to Abraham. Then call attention to Abraham’s responsibility to be blameless before God, which ultimately Jesus would fulfill (leader pp. 87-88; PSG pp. 70-71).

- ❓ What does the fact that we are part of God’s chosen people teach us about the nature of God’s love for us?
- ❓ If we are part of His chosen people by faith in Jesus, then how does God relate to us?

Next, explain male circumcision as the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, marking his family off as God’s people. In a similar way, our lives should bear the marks of God’s redeeming grace (leader pp. 88-89; PSG p. 71).

- ❓ Can we be on mission with God and yet fail to pursue holiness? Why or why not?

### Conclusion

Connect God’s covenant with Abram to the blessing that comes through Jesus and all who are in Him. We carry forth that blessing by proclaiming the gospel to all the people groups on Planet Earth (leader p. 89; PSG p. 72).  
*Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission”* (PSG p. 73).

### ❓ For Further Discussion

What are some mission efforts in which our church is currently involved?

Are there unreached peoples who have come to our community? How can we begin to reach them with the gospel?

**Christ Connection:** God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus Christ is the promised descendant of Abraham through whom salvation flows to the rest of the world.

**Missional Application:** God has chosen to make us part of Abraham’s family of faith, and therefore, we are called to be the people through whom blessing flows to the world.

# God's Covenant with Abraham

## Session 7

### Voices from the Church

“The call of Abram is the beginning of God’s answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations, and the groaning brokenness of his whole creation.”<sup>1</sup>

—Christopher Wright

### 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

#### 66. Election

Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

## Introduction

The trends show that people wait longer to get married and that fewer people get married today than in times past. But even though the culture is changing, Americans are still fascinated with marriage. How else can you explain the popularity of shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*? The contestants on these shows are not just looking for a relationship but for a person to marry. And viewers keep tuning in to see what happens.

People are still captivated by the idea of marriage, and for good reason. Marriage is a covenant relationship where a man and a woman make promises that bind them to one another—commitments to love each other in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, till death do them part. A covenant is an arrangement where both parties agree to keep their commitments regardless of what the other party does.

Unfortunately, many people now approach marriage not so much as a covenant but more as a contract—if one party breaks their side of the deal, then the contract becomes null and void. So, husbands and wives experience trouble in the relationship whenever their expectations are not met.

This new reality changes our view not just of marriage but also of our relationship with God. Why? Because the Bible describes God’s relationship with His people as a covenant. Yet people often think of their relationship with God as a contract: “I have to do my part and be a good person, and if I do, then God will uphold His end of the deal by blessing me right now and taking me to heaven when I die. But if I do good and God doesn’t give me what I want, then I’m outta here!”

I once heard an athlete speaking to a crowd of youth about a deal he had made with God when he was a boy: If God would make him famous, then he would tell people about God. That’s a contract arrangement. People like to make deals and bargain with God all the time. They will say things like, “God, if You get me out of this jam, I promise I will serve You in return.”

-  Have you or someone you know ever made a deal with God? What was it?
-  Why do you think we have a contractual attitude toward relationships rather than a covenantal one?

## Session Summary

In this session, we will learn that God is a covenant-making God. Because of sin, the people on earth had been separated from God (Eden) and each other (Babel), but God chose one man, one family, through whom He promised to reverse this separation. This promise was later fulfilled through Abraham's descendant—Jesus of Nazareth. And this promise continues to be fulfilled today through the mission of Jesus' church as peoples from all over the world become part of God's family through faith in the gospel.

## 1. God initiated a renewed relationship with human beings (Gen. 12:1-4).

As we saw in the previous session, Genesis 11 tells the story of the generations who came out of the global flood and settled in a valley in the land of Shinar and built the Tower of Babel with its top in the sky. The Lord came down to judge their self-exaltation, and He did so by confusing their language and scattering them over the face of the earth.

The problem of sin and separation from God that began in the garden in Genesis 3 had not gotten better; it had only gotten worse. People were not only separated from God, but they were now separated from one another. The birth of the nations and foreign languages at Babel only served to increase tensions, hatred, and wars.

What can be done about these barriers in the way of human relations both to God and each other? How will God fix this problem? He had already promised that a "seed," a descendant, from Eve would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). In Genesis 12, God narrowed the line of that seed to one man, one family. Watch how God initiated a renewed relationship with His image bearers:

*<sup>1</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

*<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.*



Circle the uses of the pronoun "I" as it appears in the Lord's speech to Abram. What does this tell us about God's commitment to His glory and His plan of redemption?

## Further Commentary

"This promissory call is the first recorded speech since God's word of judgment at the Tower of Babel, resulting in the creation of the nations (11:5-6,9). This new word to Abram counters the old since it provides for the redemptive plan of 'all peoples' (v. 3)."<sup>2</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews

## Further Commentary

"Remember that Adam and later Noah are commanded to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.' The same words are repeated when the Lord appears to Abram and other patriarchs, but instead of being a command ('be fruitful'), it is a promise ('I will make you fruitful'). Adam is told to build himself a large household, but the Lord promises Abram, the head of a new human race, that He will build a house for him (Gen. 17:2,6)."<sup>3</sup>

—Peter Leithart

## Further Commentary

Right after God promised the land to Abram in Genesis 12, there is a mini-exodus story. Famine threatened Abram's family in the land, so they had to go to Egypt to find food. Pharaoh took Sarai for himself, and God unleashed plagues on him. Pharaoh then sent Abram back to Canaan a rich man. That's similar to what would happen to Abram's offspring generations later. God keeps His promises to save His people.

## Voices from the Church

"To Abraham, [God's] message was very moving. Literally. He told Abraham to follow Him to a place that He would show Abraham. God was establishing a people who would both hear His message and be His message unto all the world."<sup>4</sup>

—Jason C Dukes

Through Abram's descendants, God will reverse the misfortunes of Eden (separation from God) and Babel (separation from each other). The specific promises that God made to Abram make this connection with the events of Babel clear. The people of Babel wanted to "make a name" for themselves (Gen. 11:4), but God promised to make Abram's name great (12:2). The rebels at Babel were scattered over the earth under God's judgment, but God promised to and through Abram to bless "all the families of the earth" (12:3).

God will reverse this tragedy by means of a covenant relationship with Abram in which He made three promises to him. God promised Abram land, offspring, and blessing.

### **Promised Land**

First, He promised Abram land, and in connection with that, He commanded Abram to leave his land and travel to another land. This text ends with Abram obeying God's command and leaving Haran for Canaan—the promised land. Abram's obedience was an expression of his faith in God's promise.

### **Promised Offspring**

Second, He promised offspring when He said that He would make Abram into a great nation. This promise continued the promise of Genesis 3:15. At several key points, God refers to Abram's "seed" (15:5; 17:8), and this promise becomes the primary focus of the stories about Abram in Genesis because of his wife Sarai's difficulty having children.

### **Promised Blessing**

Finally, God promised to bless all the peoples on earth through Abram and his offspring. These verses are key because they set the stage for the rest of history. God's plan is to seek out and save all the peoples of the earth, not just a few. He wants to be the covenant Lord of a people made up of all nations on earth. From Abram would come the Israelites, who were called to be a light to the nations, drawing them to worship the one true, living God.



God's initiation of relationship with Abram required Abram's obedience to the call. Why do you think Abram obeyed God by leaving his land?



What would it take for you to obey God if He called you to do something that made no sense from the world's perspective?

## 2. God commands us to trust that He will keep His promises (Gen. 15:1-6).

When I was a child, I played numerous sports, and my parents were always very gracious to bus four boys around to practices and games. My dad would often wait until the last minute to leave, and I remember saying often, “Dad, we are running out of time!” He would reply, “I promise we will make it on time.” I would be looking at the clock, the street we were driving on, and listening to the words of my dad, thinking, *There’s no way he’s getting us there on time.* He promised me, but I had a hard time believing his promise because the evidence seemed to be stacked against him. (By the way, more often than not, he got us there in plenty of time.)

Sometimes evidence seems to stack up against promises. God made wonderful promises to Abram, but Abram and Sarai did not have any children. Both of them were old, and Sarai was well past the years of being able to conceive. So Abram began to question and even to take matters into his own hands.

*<sup>1</sup> After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”*

*<sup>2</sup> But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”<sup>3</sup> And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”*

Abram experienced great doubt despite God’s great promises. He looked at the promises and his situation, and he thought that he would try to help God along by pointing out his servant Eliezer. If we’re honest, we’ll admit this kind of doubt is understandable. There are times in our lives when the promises of God do not look so promising.

 In what areas of your life do you often struggle with trusting the promises of God (financial, marital, parental, relational, etc.)? In what ways have you taken matters into your own hands to ensure the outcome you want?

 How can we resist this tendency?

In the midst of Abram’s doubt, God came to him and restated the promises and even added to them. And Abram believed!

*<sup>4</sup> And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”<sup>5</sup> And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

*<sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*

### Further Commentary

In Genesis 12:7 (also 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 22:18; 24:7), the Lord made a promise to Abram’s seed, or offspring (Heb., *zera*). This word can be understood as a collective (ex. Gen. 13:16) or singular (ex. Gen. 3:15; 4:25 [“child”]). Indeed, it could be said that Abram’s collective offspring benefited from the promise only through the singular promised offspring of Isaac. In Galatians 3, Paul picked up on this peculiarity of the word “seed.” Paul emphasized that God’s promise was not to “seeds” but to one “seed,” and ultimately the “seed” of Abraham is Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). Yet those who belong to Jesus—the one “seed”—are then collectively considered “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (3:29).

The people of Babel tried to lift themselves up from the earth, and they were scattered, but the seed of Abraham—Jesus—promised, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). In the cross of Jesus Christ, God reverses Babel. Through the gospel of Jesus, people are not only reconciled to God but are also reconciled to one another because Christ has broken down “the dividing wall” between them (Eph. 2:14).

## Further Commentary

“Abram’s action is part of a covenant ceremony that guarantees the promise made by means of an oath. In such a ritual animals are slaughtered, their carcasses are divided and the parties of the covenant swear to a pledge between the dismembered animals, which graphically illustrate the consequences of covenant violation... Consequently, God curses himself if the descendants do not possess the land.”<sup>5</sup>

—Stephen G. Dempster

## Voices from the Church

“Saving faith is faith in God’s provision, not our performance.”<sup>6</sup>

—Tim Keller

## Voices from Church History

“As long as a man is thinking of God as an examiner who has set him a sort of paper to do, or as the opposite party in some sort of bargain—as long as he is thinking of claims and counter-claims between himself and God—he is not yet in right relation to Him. He is misunderstanding what he is and what God is. And he cannot get into the right relation until he has discovered the fact of our bankruptcy.”<sup>7</sup>

—C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

God reassured Abram that he would have children of his own. He would give him offspring—seed—as numerous as the stars in the sky. Not only did God restate this promise to Abram and his children repeatedly (see Gen. 22:17; 26:4; also 28:14), but He also brought it to fruition. In Deuteronomy 1:10, Moses said, “The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven,” and again in Deuteronomy 10:22, “Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.”

So Abram believed the promise of God, and God counted it to him as righteousness. In Galatians 3, the apostle Paul pointed to Abram’s faith as a model of saving faith. Paul argued that we are not justified (i.e., declared righteous before God) by trying to keep the rules (Gal. 3:11). Those who break God’s law are cursed, and we’re all law-breakers. But the good news is that Christ became that curse for us on the cross (3:13). Justification only comes through faith in Jesus, and just as with Abram, God credits His righteousness to our account (3:6-7). Today, we too are called to trust the promises of God.

- ❓ In what ways do we imagine our relationship with God is dependent on how well we keep His rules?
- ❓ What kind of person will a rules-focused life cause us to become?

Paul’s argument in Galatians also helps us see how God will continue to fulfill His promise to make Abram’s offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Paul made it clear in Romans and Galatians that being the offspring of Abraham is not about your DNA but about faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:11-12; Gal. 3:7). Only those who share Abram’s faith are the sons of Abraham, and these will be an innumerable multitude in heaven from every people group on the planet (i.e., as numerous as the stars of the sky; cf. Rev. 7).

The Lord made this promise to Abram, and then the Lord bound Himself to keep these promises by means of a covenant ceremony between Himself and Abram (like a marriage ceremony). Genesis 15:7-21 gives this account.

God commanded Abram to bring him animals and to cut them in half (except for the birds, 15:10). Abram fell asleep, and the Lord told him about the future exodus from Egypt as well as the conquest of the Amorites in the promised land. Then the presence of the Lord, represented in a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, passed between the animal corpses. This act was, in effect, God saying to Abram, “Let this happen to Me if these things do not come true. Let Me be cut in pieces if I don’t uphold My end of the covenant.” The Lord was willing to take the covenant curses upon Himself if the covenant were broken, and that is exactly what He ended up doing at the cross.

### 3. God desires for His people to be set apart for His glory (Gen. 17:1-14).

We've seen how the Lord bound Himself to Abram and his offspring (i.e., ultimately Jesus, and all who believe in Him) by means of a covenant. He even committed to take the curses on Himself if these things did not come true (Gen. 15:7-21). But what is the human responsibility in this relationship? We see that in Genesis 17.

Abram's faith faltered somewhat as he and Sarai grew older and older and still did not have a child. God came to him again to reiterate the promises and His covenant commitment to Abram. This time He gave Abram a new name, and He gave him a sign of their covenant relationship, a sign that would set His people apart from the rest of the world.

*<sup>1</sup> When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, <sup>2</sup> that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."<sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, <sup>4</sup> "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup> And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."*

*<sup>9</sup> And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup> both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."*

#### Further Commentary

Much of the controversy in the early church centered on circumcision (see Acts 15; Galatians). A group called "Judaizers" were requiring Gentiles who trusted in Christ to be circumcised. They were telling Gentile believers that trusting the gospel was not enough to be part of God's people (i.e., in covenant relationship with Him), but they also needed to observe the ritual laws of Judaism, chief among them being circumcision. The New Testament authors did not respond by saying circumcision was a silly and arbitrary cultural barrier. Rather, they pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the law. Therefore, for those who are united to Christ by faith, it doesn't matter what their physical skin looks like, in the eyes of God, they were circumcised on the eighth day in Christ, so they don't have to be circumcised again (cf. Col. 2:11). Christ's fulfillment of the law is credited to them by faith, not flesh.

## Further Commentary

God changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "princess" because kings will come from her family, and this points to Jesus. As Stephen Dempster writes, "Abram will become the father of a multitude of nations and his wife the mother of a royal dynasty (Gen. 17:6,16)." <sup>8</sup>

The Lord called Abram to walk blamelessly before Him, and then He restated the promise that He would multiply Abram's offspring and that he would be the father of many nations. So the Lord changed Abram's name to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude" (17:6). Not only that, but kings would come from Abraham's family. He would produce a royal line (leading, of course, to the King of kings—Jesus of Nazareth).

Thus, God will keep His promises, but Abraham had a responsibility to be blameless before God. The covenant was conditionally unconditional! It will come about, but one of Abraham's offspring will have to be blameless. All of them fall short, except for Jesus Christ.

I remember, as a little boy in church, singing a song called "Father Abraham." That song was sort of the Christian version of the Hokey Pokey. Aside from the goofy "right arm, left arm, right foot, left foot," it had some great theology because the song taught "Gentile" children that being a child of Abraham had nothing to do with your race and everything to do with faith in Jesus.

Through faith in Christ, the nations are becoming the children of Abraham.

- ❓ What does the fact that we are part of God's chosen people teach us about the nature of God's love for us?
- ❓ If we are part of His chosen people by faith in Jesus, then how does God relate to us?

The Lord's covenant relationship with Abraham gives rise to one of the key phrases in the entire Bible when God promised to be the God of Abraham's offspring. As the saying goes, "I will be their God, and they will be My people" (cf. Jer. 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 37:23,27; Zech. 8:8; 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10). This is a committed relationship. God promised unconditionally to make these things a reality through Abraham and his offspring. He would not forsake them. They will always be His people (like a husband who commits to be faithful to his bride always).

Then God gave Abraham a sign of the covenant, a physical marking to set apart Abraham's family so that everyone would know they were God's people. We are familiar with a sign of the covenant because in our culture, when a couple gets married, they exchange rings. The ring is a visible symbol of the covenant of marriage.

In Genesis 17, God gave the sign of the covenant between Himself and Abraham, one that Abraham and his offspring were to keep as an everlasting covenant—male circumcision. Every male would be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. This outward symbol marked out in the flesh those who belonged to the people of God, setting them apart from all the other peoples of the world. And there is a reason circumcision was given—

it marked out the place from which the seed comes. Keeping this covenant was a serious matter because anyone who was not circumcised would be cut off from the people (i.e., not part of God's people).

In order to truly be a blessing to the nations, the children of God would need to maintain their distinction from the world. The same is true for us today. We are to be set apart from the rest of the world, not by physical circumcision but by the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29). Our lives should bear the marks of God's redeeming grace.

 Can we be on mission with God and yet fail to pursue holiness? Why or why not?

## Conclusion

God entered into a covenant relationship with Abram in Genesis 12, and through that relationship He intends to bless the world. That promise has come to fruition through Jesus of Nazareth. God enters into an unconditional, loving covenant relationship with all who are in Christ. Not only should that truth give us hope that frees us from the guilt of falling short of God's glory, but it should propel us out into the world so that "all the families of the earth" might be blessed by Jesus.

Interestingly, God gave this promise to Abram in Haran. Today, Haran is in southeastern Turkey, a region that is heavily Muslim and resistant to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Once when I traveled to that region, as I heard the calls to prayer ring out five times a day, I was struck that the place where God promised to bless all peoples is not receiving that blessing right now through Abraham's offspring, Jesus Christ. Our task is to be a light to the world, bringing the blessing of the gospel to all the people groups on Planet Earth. We should pray for the unreached, give to send missionaries to the unreached, and go to the unreached so they can receive the blessing of God through the gospel.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** God promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through his descendants. Jesus Christ is the promised descendant of Abraham through whom salvation flows to the rest of the world.



## Voices from Church History

"Holiness is not something we are called upon to do in order that we may become something; it is something we are to do because of what we already are."<sup>9</sup>

—Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981)

## Additional Resources

# God's Covenant with Abraham

## References

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6. Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You* (VA: The Good Book Company, 2013), 74.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 145.
8. Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 76.
9. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, quoted in *Seeking Him*, by Nancy Leigh DeMoss and Tim Grissom (Chicago: Life Action Ministries, 2004), 120.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- “The God Who Writes His Own Agreements”—Chapter 3 from *The God Who Is There* by D. A. Carson
- “The Sin of Presumption”—Blog post by Michael Kelley; find a link to this blog post at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “Covenant as a Biblical Theme,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Rick Blackwood: “When God Promises”

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### *The Gospel Project Leader Pack*

Throughout the session plans thus far, you’ve seen references to pack items that will enhance your group meeting and help group members gain more from this study of God’s Word. These items are available in *The Gospel Project Leader Pack for Adults*.

- The posters and charts in the Leader Pack will help foster discussion within your group and make clear the connections throughout the Scriptures.
- The map will help put the stories of Scripture in geographical context.
- The pack also includes some take-away items so group members can recall what they learned in the session and be reminded to apply what they learned as they go about their mission of making Jesus known in the world.
- The DVD in the pack contains customizable files of the Leader session plans and commentary, as well as videos from our managing editor that will help leaders make the most efficient use of their group time.

*The Gospel Project Leader Pack for Adults* is available in print and digital formats. Order today at [gospelproject.com](http://gospelproject.com) or by calling 800-458-2772.

# The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham

## Summary and Goal

In this session we see how Abraham's faith in God's promise was put to the test. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the very son He had given him. Believing God would somehow be true to His word, Abraham was willing to obey, even if it meant giving up his beloved son. This event gives us a picture of the special sacrifice God requires for sin and a picture of saving faith in God's promises. As we embrace God's promises, we are empowered to engage in His mission.

### **Main Passages**

Genesis 22:1-14

Hebrews 11:17-19

### **Session Outline**

1. God asked for a special sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-6).
2. God provided a substitute sacrifice (Gen. 22:7-14).
3. God calls us to trust in His provision (Heb. 11:17-19).

### **Theological Theme**

Faith is trusting in God to keep His promise to provide salvation.

### **Christ Connection**

Isaac's question "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" echoes through the pages of the Old Testament and is ultimately answered at the beginning of the New Testament when John the Baptist sees Jesus of Nazareth and declares, "Behold the Lamb!"

### **Missional Application**

God calls us to be people of faith who, like Abraham, are so filled with confidence in God's resurrection power that we are willing to sacrifice for His mission.

## Session Plan

# The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham

## Session 8

### ? For Further Discussion

Describe a time when you had to sacrifice something dear to you in order to gain something else.

How did you think through your decision?

### ? For Further Discussion

Why is it necessary for God's people to be tested?

What is the benefit of being tested?

## Introduction

Begin with the research regarding beliefs of Americans about heaven and how to get there, but briefly note the proper perspective of our works in salvation (leader p. 94; PSG p. 74). *Provide a few examples of how our culture reflects the idea that we work our way up to God* (leader p. 94).

- ? How would you respond to someone who tells you “being a Christian” is basically the same thing as “being a good person”?
- ? How would you respond to someone who told you the way to God was to make yourself acceptable to Him?

Recall the previous session about the call and faith of Abraham; then summarize this session (leader p. 95; PSG p. 75).

## 1. God asked for a special sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-6).

Communicate God's faithfulness to the covenant in providing for Abraham a son, Isaac, in spite of the difficulties. Then read Genesis 22:1-6. Show how trust is demonstrated by obedience, even when it doesn't make sense, as was the case with God's test of Abraham (leader pp. 95-96; PSG pp. 75-76).

- ? Like Abraham, we may not know when we are being tested. In what ways does Abraham's story impact our obedience?
- ? When was the last time God tested you?

*Express the difficulty of identifying with Abraham in receiving God's command to sacrifice his son* (leader p. 96), but place God's command in the context of its cosmic significance—the salvation of the world was in part riding on this son of promise. Still, Abraham obeyed in faith, trusting even for a resurrection of Isaac, if necessary (leader p. 97; PSG p. 77).

- ? What are some things that God asks us to do in His Word that may seem counterintuitive? Why does He ask us to do these things?

## 2. God provided a substitute sacrifice (Gen. 22:7-14).

*Introduce the theme of substitution and its significance for Christianity* (leader p. 97). Read Genesis 22:7-14. Note how Isaac's question about the lamb echoes through the Old Testament. Also emphasize Abraham's faith leading to his obedience in this test (leader p. 98; PSG pp. 78-79).

 How does faith fuel obedience?

Explain the importance of God providing a sacrifice in place of Isaac (leader p. 99; PSG p. 79). Use **Pack Item 7: The Lord Will Provide** (see sidebar).

 Why is it important that God provide a substitute for us?

 Why is this good news for us even when we still fall into sin?

## 3. God calls us to trust in His provision (Heb. 11:17-19).

*Transition to this point, noting that the writer of Hebrews was inspired by the Holy Spirit as he looked back upon Abraham's test* (leader p. 100). Ask a volunteer to read Hebrews 11:17-19. Again point out Abraham's faith in God's power to raise Isaac from the dead (leader p. 100; PSG p. 80).

 How do you think God's past work in bringing life out of Sarah's dead womb impacted Abraham's faith when it was tested?

 How does your faith in the resurrection impact the way you obey?

Highlight the parallels between Abraham's story and the gospel of Jesus using the chart (the **bold** words fill in the blanks in the PSG). Sum up this point that only the Lord provides the sacrifice that makes atonement for our sins (leader pp. 100-101; PSG pp. 80-81). *Reference Pack Item 6: Genesis Map to show how the traditional site of Mount Moriah for the sacrifice of Isaac corresponds to Jerusalem, and connect this to the sacrifices in the temple and the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross just outside the city. The Lord indeed provides.*

 What are some ways we might try to provide atonement for ourselves?

 Why is it important for us to trust instead in the provision of God and not in our own work?

## Conclusion

Hold up Abraham's faith as a model of saving faith for us, and connect this faith to our obedience to the Great Commission (leader p. 101; PSG p. 81). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission" (PSG p. 82).*

### Pack Item 7: The Lord Will Provide

Display this chart before the group meeting.

Use the chart and the leader content to show how the theme of the substitute lamb runs throughout the Bible and ultimately points to Jesus Christ, God's Son (leader p. 99).

Point to the "Essential Christian Doctrine" *Christ as Substitute*, which describes Jesus as the perfect substitute: perfect in His identification with us and perfect in His obedience so He could die in our place (leader p. 99; PSG p. 79).

Ask groups of 3-4 to discuss our natural responses to someone who substitutes himself or herself in order to take credit for something he or she didn't do, and then our response to someone who substitutes self in order to take blame and punishment for another.

After 2-3 minutes, invite groups to share their reflections and responses.

**Christ Connection:** Isaac's question "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" echoes through the pages of the Old Testament and is ultimately answered at the beginning of the New Testament when John the Baptist sees Jesus of Nazareth and declares, "Behold the Lamb!"

.....  
**Missional Application:** God calls us to be people of faith who, like Abraham, are so filled with confidence in God's resurrection power that we are willing to sacrifice for His mission.

## Expanded Session Content

# The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham

## Session 8



### Voices from Church History

“When Abraham offered his son Isaac, he was a type of God the Father, while Isaac prefigured our Lord and Savior.”<sup>2</sup>

—Caesarius of Arles  
(460–542)

## Introduction

Good news! Research shows that 67 percent of Americans believe there is such a place as heaven. Bad news! Most Americans believe the way to get there is by “being a good person.”<sup>1</sup>

We shouldn’t be surprised. Pop culture indoctrinates us with the idea that by our goodness we work our way up to God.

Wayne Cochran’s song “Last Kiss,” made famous by J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers and later covered by Pearl Jam, mourns the loss of a girlfriend, and then, in longing for reunion, says: *“She’s gone to heaven so I’ve got to be good, So I can see my baby when I leave this world.”*

In “Where I Come From,” Alan Jackson sings about his roots, mentioning cornbread and chicken, sitting on the front porch, and then: *“Where I come from tryin’ to make a livin’ and workin’ hard to get to heaven.”*

It’s not just music. When baseball legend Tony Gwynn died, the ESPN sports talk show *First Take* featured Stephen A. Smith reassuring the world that Gwynn was in a better place because of his great character.

The default view of most Americans is that there is a heaven but also that the way to arrive there is through your own obedience. As Christians, we know such is not the case. The Bible teaches from cover to cover that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. It is not of works so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9). Paul said in Romans 3:28, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

But while the New Testament is clear that we are saved by faith, not works, it is also clear that we are saved by a faith that is accompanied by works. James, the half-brother of Jesus, referenced our story here in Genesis 22 and said that real faith, saving faith, demonstrates its authenticity by obedience (Jas. 2:20-24). Saving faith demonstrates that it is real by the works it produces.

- ❓ How would you respond to someone who tells you “being a Christian” is basically the same thing as “being a good person”?
- ❓ How would you respond to someone who told you the way to God was to make yourself acceptable to Him?

### Session Summary

In the previous session, we saw how God chose Abraham out of all the people on earth to be the father of faith, the one through whom the Savior would come. Though Abraham was up in years and had no children, he believed God would keep this extraordinary promise.

In this session we see how Abraham’s faith in God’s promise was put to the test. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the very son He had given him. Believing God would somehow be true to His word, Abraham was willing to obey, even if it meant giving up his beloved son. This event gives us a picture of the special sacrifice God requires for sin and a picture of saving faith in God’s promises. As we embrace God’s promises, we are empowered to engage in His mission.

## 1. God asked for a special sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-6).

Remember that God had made a covenant with Abraham in which He promised Abraham land, offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that through His descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God promised to redeem the peoples of the planet through Abraham’s family.

The problem, of course, was that Abraham and Sarah did not have children, and Sarah was well past the age of being able to conceive. But God repeatedly stated that Abraham and Sarah would have a child of their own, and Abraham believed God’s promise.

In the chapters between what we studied in the previous session and this one, several situations arose, including a threat to the fulfillment of God’s promise when a king named Abimelech attempted to take Sarah as his wife. But God remained faithful and miraculously provided a son named Isaac (Gen. 21). Isaac was the child of promise; he was the heir through whom the promises would be carried forward.

More than a decade later, however, Abraham’s faith was put to the test. God told Abraham to do something that would horrify any father, but especially a man through whom the salvation of the world was to come.

### Further Commentary

“We have seen that the promise to and covenant with Abraham is a continuation of the trajectory of spreading God’s royal blessing throughout the earth in Genesis 1–2 and 3:15. What, then, is the significance of the strange sacrificial narrative of Genesis 22? While God promised to make Abraham a great dynasty, his only son goes through a near-death and resurrection experience, where God provides a substitutionary sacrifice in place of Isaac. The portended suffering of Isaac—the seed of Abraham—echoes the suffering of the seed of the woman and attaches to it the idea of substitutionary atonement that would eventually be institutionalized in the sacrificial system.”<sup>3</sup>

—Jeremy R. Treat

## Further Commentary

“Abraham’s ultimate test of obedience to God is described in 22:1-19, a section known in the Hebrew tradition as the *Akedah* (lit. ‘the binding,’ v. 9). The Hebrew verb *nissah*, translated as ‘tested,’ means ‘to prove the quality of,’ not ‘to entice to do wrong.’ God used this event to affirm the sterling character of Abraham’s faith by giving him the incredibly difficult task of sacrificing his son Isaac in the land of Moriah, i.e., the Jerusalem area (2 Chron. 3:1). Pagans in Canaan during the OT period regularly practiced child sacrifice by making them pass through the fire (2 Kings 16:3) to give them as food to their gods (Ezek. 3:37). With this command God was asking Abraham to demonstrate that he was as committed to the Lord God as pagans were to their gods.”<sup>4</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

<sup>1</sup> *After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”*<sup>2</sup> *He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*<sup>3</sup> *So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.*<sup>4</sup> *On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.*<sup>5</sup> *Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”*<sup>6</sup> *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.*

My family loves to swim and jump off the diving board. When my children were young, these activities were accompanied with a great deal of timidity. As our children learned how to swim, they wanted to jump off the diving board into the deep end, but they were also fearful. So we would tell them, “Jump and we will catch you.” Our girls would tiptoe to the edge, look in, and then tiptoe back. That dance would continue over and over until we’d finally say, “Trust us! You can jump in. We will catch you.” I would inevitably ask, “You trust me, don’t you?” They would reply, “Yes!” “Then jump,” I would say.

It’s easy to say we trust someone, but the proof of that trust is demonstrated by obedience. We see this truth in this story with Abraham. Here the covenant-making God has tested Abraham’s faith by telling him to sacrifice his “only son Isaac” on one of the mountains in the land of Moriah. The promise of seed—offspring—is again in jeopardy.

-  Like Abraham, we may not know when we are being tested. In what ways does Abraham’s story impact our obedience?
-  When was the last time God tested you?

Can you imagine God asking you to sacrifice one of your children? I remember when my wife and I first became parents. She had a tough pregnancy with many complications, and after the delivery, our daughter spent several weeks in the NICU. I cannot imagine going through all of the waiting and complications of pregnancy, having our daughter delivered under duress but preserved from all harm, and then God saying to me, “Go sacrifice your little girl on a mountain.”

For Abraham, though, this command affected much more than his family; it was a cosmic problem. The problem for Abraham was not just having waited decades to have a natural-born child through Sarah and then being forced to part with the young man. It was even bigger. God had not only promised Abraham offspring as numerous as the stars, but He had also promised that his offspring would restore the world. If Isaac were to die in this way, then the promise of rescuing the world would die with him. God's test of Abraham went beyond anything we can fathom because its implications affected the salvation of the world.

But in obedient faith, Abraham rose early in the morning, gathered the materials for a sacrifice, and set out for the place God told him to go. After a three-day journey, Abraham saw the place and told his servants to remain with the donkey. He said that he and the boy would go over to the mountain to worship and then return. So he took the wood and laid it on Isaac, he himself carried the fire and the knife, and they set off for the mountain.

Abraham demonstrated strong faith in the promises of God. Not only did he intend to sacrifice Isaac, but he also believed that somehow the boy would come away alive on the other side. After all, he told his servants that after the sacrifice was done, "I and the boy will...come again to you" (22:5). He believed that God would keep the seed promise even if it required resurrection from the dead (cf. Heb. 11:17-19).

Abraham and Isaac headed up the mountain for the sacrifice. Abraham did not know exactly what would happen, but he still trusted in the promises of God.



What are some things that God asks us to do in His Word that may seem counterintuitive? Why does He ask us to do these things?

## 2. God provided a substitute sacrifice (Gen. 22:7-14).

We are familiar with the idea of a substitute. Substitute teachers take the place of our regular teachers when they have to miss a day. Subs come into the game to play in our place. Artificial sweeteners are a substitute for sugar in our tea. Substitutes are important when a teacher is sick or when a starting point guard cannot get the job done because they perform tasks for us when we are unable.

The theme of substitution is at the heart of Christianity. We believe Jesus died in our place for our sins as our substitute. The beauty of Christ's atoning work is foreshadowed in a startling way in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Watch and see how the narrative progresses:



### Further Commentary

"A 'burnt offering' involved the entire sacrifice being consumed by fire. The outcome of the incident makes it clear that God never intended the directive to be fulfilled. Thus, taken as a whole (in terms of both the command and the outcome), the incident cannot be seen to conflict with God's moral law."<sup>5</sup>

—T. Desmond Alexander, *ESV Study Bible*



### Further Commentary

The connection between the potential sacrifice of Abraham's only son Isaac and the actual sacrifice of God's only Son, Jesus, is brought out in an ancient text. Aquila's Greek translation of the Old Testament (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) called Isaac the *monogenes*, which modern Bibles translate as "only begotten" or "only." It is the same word used of Jesus in John 3:16. His sacrifice brings eternal life to the world.

## Further Commentary

“At this acute point in the story, the boy speaks his only recorded words, raising the obvious question of a ‘lamb,’ which ironically bears on his own unknown role (v. 7). ‘My father’ (‘father,’ NIV) and ‘my son’ (v. 7) underscore the trust that such familial relations possess; Isaac’s reliance is not misplaced. In a profound twist of outcome, his father’s unreserved dependence on God’s promissory word, though it ostensibly means the loss of Isaac, assures the boy’s future blessing as pledged for Abraham’s generations (cf. v. 17). Abraham’s answer is not evasion but his honest openness to God’s operations (v. 8). ‘God’ at the head of the clause emphasizes the source of the sacrifice. ‘Provide’ (*r’h*) is the key word of the account, used in the offering of the ram (‘saw,’ v. 13) and the naming of the sacred site (v. 14[2x]). In Levitical sacrifice the offerer himself provided the animal. Here, however, Abraham reverses the means, showing that God’s command made the matter his own responsibility. Strikingly, the patriarch’s words convey a theological profundity that has its immediate reality in the unexpected ram (v. 13). The church fathers viewed Abraham’s answer a theological foreshadow of Christ’s sacrifice. The Christian reader today sees the additional irony that God supplies his own Son for the sins of the world, whereas Abraham’s son escapes unharmed.”<sup>6</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews



<sup>7</sup> And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place of which God had

told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

<sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>12</sup> He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” <sup>13</sup> And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Notice what Isaac asked his father: “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Isaac saw that his dad had the knife and fire, and Isaac himself was carrying the wood, but there was no animal. Isaac’s question echoes through the pages of the Old Testament: *Where is the lamb? How will the sacrifice take place?* Abraham answered, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” This is the heart of Christian faith. We believe God provides salvation because He is the One who provides the substitute.

When they reached the place, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his son, laid him on the altar, and raised his knife to sacrifice the boy. We shudder to think of what that moment was like. What was going through his mind at that second?

Suddenly, the Angel of the Lord called from heaven and told Abraham not to touch the boy, “for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Abraham’s faith was tested, and he passed with flying colors because he was willing to obey God, even if it cost him everything. True faith leads to obedience (Jas. 2).

**?** How does faith fuel obedience?

After the Angel stopped him, Abraham saw a ram caught in some thorns. God had provided this animal for the sacrifice as a substitute for Isaac. Abraham offered the ram instead and named the place “The LORD will provide.”

The theme of the substitute lamb runs throughout the Bible. Abraham said that God would provide a lamb. As we will see in future sessions, at the Passover, a lamb’s blood was shed as a substitute for the life of a firstborn son in Israel (firstborn sons just like Isaac). That sacrifice caused the Death Angel to pass over them. Also, on the Day of Atonement, animals were given in place of the Israelites as substitute sacrifices. All of these stories point forward to the moment when the Lord Jesus Himself would die as the sacrifice for our sins (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7). God provided His one and only Son as the substitute for the world.

Here in Genesis 22, there is a substitute for Isaac, and it’s a ram. Just as Isaac, the willing son to be sacrificed, hints at Jesus—God’s Son who went up the mountain—so also the ram hints at Jesus as our substitute. The ram caught in the thorns points forward to the coming descendant from Abraham, Jesus the King, who will be crowned with thorns and pierced for our transgressions.

Abraham was right. The Lord would provide a substitute sacrifice. He did so on that fateful day on Mount Moriah. And many years later, the Lord provided a substitute sacrifice for sin on Mount Calvary—Jesus Christ, God’s Son.

After Abraham demonstrated the reality of his faith, God restated the promise all over again—“*I will give you offspring, defeat your enemies, and bless all the nations through your family*” (see Gen. 22:15-18).

- ?** Why is it important that God provide a substitute for us?
- ?** Why is this good news for us even when we still fall into sin?

 **Voices from Church History**

“The Bible reveals that there is anarchy somewhere, real thorough-going anarchy in the heart of men against God; therefore the need is strong that something should come into us from the outside to readjust us, to reconcile us, to turn us round, to put us right with God. The doctrine of the atonement is the explanation of how God does that.”<sup>7</sup>

—Oswald Chambers (1874-1917)

**99 Essential Christian Doctrines**

*61. Christ as Substitute*

At the heart of the atonement is Jesus Christ substituting Himself for sinners as He died on the cross. This truth is seen against the backdrop of the Old Testament sacrificial system, which provided a picture of humanity’s need for sin to be covered and guilt to be removed by an innocent sacrifice. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with humankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross, He made provision for the redemption of humanity from sin.

## Further Commentary

“It seemed to Abraham illogical for God to ask him to kill his only son when God had said it would be through that son that he would give Abraham numerous descendants. It could only be sorted out in Abraham’s mind that God must intend to raise Isaac from the dead. Thus Abraham ‘reasoned,’ a word meaning inward conviction and not merely opinion.”<sup>8</sup>

—David Allen

## Further Commentary

“Whatever factors were involved, Abraham was *convinced* of God’s ability to raise the dead...The direct result of Abraham’s confidence in God’s ability to raise the dead was that he received Isaac back (lit.) ‘in a symbol’ (*en parabolē*)... Abraham was instructed to sacrifice Isaac but he was prevented from doing so because of God’s intervention: Abraham received Isaac back from the threshold of death... [T]he writer’s previous use of the term *parabolē* suggests ‘a symbol or type’ pointing beyond itself to a reality that is yet to come (see on 9:9). Accordingly, the return of Isaac to Abraham foreshadows or is a type of the future resurrection of believers.”<sup>9</sup>

—Peter T. O’Brien

### 3. God calls us to trust in His provision (Heb. 11:17-19).

The New Testament writer of Hebrews gives us inspired insight into this event in Abraham’s life. He tells us what Abraham was thinking and what motivated his obedience to the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,*

<sup>18</sup> *of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”*

<sup>19</sup> *He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

Hebrews 11 is considered the “Faith Hall of Fame,” and in this passage the author praises Abraham’s faith. Faith was the means by which Abraham offered up Isaac when the Lord tested him. Abraham had received a promise that his offspring—his heir—would be the one to bring restoration to the world, and even though God’s command to sacrifice Isaac looked contrary to that promise, he began to carry it out.

Why did he offer Isaac? He offered Isaac not just because he had faith but because he had faith in the resurrection from the dead. He thought God was able to raise Isaac from the grave, just as God had been able to bring life out of Sarah’s “dead” womb (Gen. 17:15-19; 21:1-5).

- ❓ How do you think God’s past work in bringing life out of Sarah’s dead womb impacted Abraham’s faith when it was tested?
- ❓ How does your faith in the resurrection impact the way you obey?

The parallels between Abraham’s story and the gospel of Jesus are remarkable:

| Isaac  | Jesus   |
|--|---|
| Abraham’s “ <b>only</b> ” son (of promise)                                 | God’s “ <b>only</b> ” Son (John 3:16)                                 |
| Subject to be sacrificed, and willing                                      | Subject to be sacrificed, and willing                                 |
| Carried <b>wood</b> for the sacrifice                                      | Carried <b>cross</b> for His sacrifice                                |
| “ <b>The LORD will provide</b> ” (Gen. 22:14)<br>God provided a substitute | “ <b>The Lamb of God</b> ” (John 1:29)<br>God provided the Substitute |
| <b>Figuratively</b> raised from the dead                                   | <b>Physically</b> raised from the dead                                |

As we will see in future sessions, sacrifice was necessary for sinful humanity to be made right with a holy God. This place where Abraham bound Isaac, Mount Moriah, has traditionally been understood as the site where the temple later would be built, the place where sacrifices were made so that Almighty God could live in the midst of sinful humanity (cf. 2 Chron. 3:1). The ultimate sacrifice that all of these temple sacrifices pointed to was the cross of Jesus Christ. Only the Lord provides.

- ❓ What are some ways we might try to provide atonement for ourselves?
- ❓ Why is it important for us to trust instead in the provision of God and not in our own work?

## Conclusion

Abraham's faith in a substitute sacrifice and God's ability to raise the dead is a model for us. This pattern of trust in a sacrifice and resurrection is the paradigm for saving faith in the New Testament, as we believe in the death of Jesus and His victory over the grave. But it is also the means by which we attempt great things in obedience to God.

For example, carrying out the Great Commission can be at the risk of our lives in some of the toughest places on the planet, but we go boldly because we have a Savior whom death cannot hold. The faith-filled person of God is death-defying! We are convinced that God's mission to the nations will go forth, even if we lose our lives in the process. The King who has power over death is with us.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Isaac's question "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" echoes through the pages of the Old Testament and is ultimately answered at the beginning of the New Testament when John the Baptist sees Jesus of Nazareth and declares, "Behold the Lamb!"



## Voices from Church History

"In the ram that hung in the tree and had become the sacrifice in the place of Abraham's son, there might be depicted the day of him who was to hang upon the wood like a ram and was to taste death for the sake of the whole world."<sup>10</sup>

—Ephrem the Syrian (circa 306-373)



## Voices from the Church

"The God who is there does not demand that we sacrifice our children; instead, in sovereign grace He provides a sacrifice."<sup>11</sup>

—D. A. Carson

## Additional Resources

# The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham

## References

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11. D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 53.
12. Michael Kelley, "Five Things Every Group Leader Should Do," *9Marks Journal* [online], January/February 2012 [cited 26 February 2015]. Available from the Internet: [www.9marks.org](http://www.9marks.org).



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "The Covenant and Promise"—Episode 2, Act 1 from *Telling God's Story* by Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter
- "Is the Bible Really All About Jesus?"—Question 18 from *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* by Robert L. Plummer
- "In the World: How Excellent Are Thy Names"—Article by Ken Hemphill; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "Moriah: Its Biblical and Historical Significance," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Ted Traylor: "A Friend of God Will Experience Testing"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Over Prepare, Then Limit Yourself

Never before has so much information been available so easily. You can access commentaries, teaching plans, and sermons from hundreds of resources online. You'll quickly find out which resources best serve your own preparation, and you'll return to those again and again. No longer will you struggle to fill your group time but to limit your scope. That limitation is important or your group will simply become the means by which you show everybody how smart you are. That's a fail. Instead, articulate to yourself in writing what your main point is, after deriving it from your personal study. Then use that main point as a gate for all the other information.<sup>12</sup>

# God Reaffirms the Covenant

## Summary and Goal

In this session we see that God renews His promise to be with Abraham's offspring and to bless the world through them despite their sinful and unworthy ways. Abraham's descendants fight, lie, and manipulate each other, but God remains faithful and He renews His promises again and again. We can take heart in knowing we serve a God who keeps His promises in unusual ways to unworthy people, a God who is present with us as we fulfill His mission.

### **Main Passages**

Genesis 25:19-26

Genesis 26:1-6

Genesis 28:10-22

### **Session Outline**

1. God keeps His promises in unusual ways (Gen. 25:19-26).
2. God keeps His promises to unworthy people (Gen. 26:1-6).
3. God keeps His promises by offering us His presence (Gen. 28:10-22).

### **Theological Theme**

God promises the blessing of His presence to His people, even when they show themselves to be unworthy of His love.

### **Christ Connection**

God's promise to be with His people is most clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "God with us."

### **Missional Application**

We can boldly share and show the love of Christ, not because we are perfect but because we know that God uses unusual and unworthy people to accomplish His purposes.

## Session Plan

# God Reaffirms the Covenant

## Session 9

### Introduction Option

As group members arrive, play some video clips of Oompa Loompa songs from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

Ask: Does the message of these songs resonate with you? Why or why not?

Then proceed with the introduction to this session.

### ? For Further Discussion

“The Lord works in mysterious ways”—This statement is not in the Bible, but it can describe some of God’s actions. How might this idea be a comfort to you in difficult times?

What are some of God’s works that are clear and forthright rather than mysterious?

### Pack Item 6: Genesis Map

The following locations are mentioned in the Scripture passages and are located on the map, if you wish to highlight them:

- Paddan-aram/Haran
- Gerar
- Beer-sheba
- Bethel (Luz)

### Introduction

Open this session with our tendency to read the Old Testament as if its message were “*Live this way and you will be happy*,” but the message of the Old Testament centers not on “good people” but on a gracious God who keeps His promises even with unworthy people (leader p. 106; PSG p. 83).

- ? Can you recall a time when you received something good even though it was undeserved and unexpected? What went through your mind upon receiving the gift?

*Recap the previous sessions on Abraham’s faith, or ask group members to do so to reinforce what has been covered* (leader p. 106). Then summarize this session (leader p. 107; PSG p. 84).

### 1. God keeps His promises in unusual ways (Gen. 25:19-26).

Read Genesis 25:19-26. Identify Isaac as the child of promise, but note his wife Rebekah’s barrenness and its cosmic significance. Also point out the pattern of miraculous births as God fulfills His promises (leader pp. 107-108; PSG p. 84).

- ? Why do you think God allows us to experience hardship in between the time we receive a promise and its fulfillment?

Explain the circumstance of Rebekah’s twins in the womb and the cultural oddity of God declaring the younger son would inherit the promise (leader p. 108; PSG p. 85).

- ? What are some limitations that may make a person feel unqualified to receive or spread the love of Christ?
- ? How does knowing that God uses unlikely and unworthy people to accomplish His plan free us from those limitations?

## 2. God keeps His promises to unworthy people (Gen. 26:1-6).

*Foreshadow that God's people prove to be unworthy of His promises, but God remains gracious* (leader p. 109). Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 26:1-6. Note that horrible circumstances and unworthy characters can cause us to question God's faithfulness to His promise (leader p. 109; PSG p. 86).

- What situations cause you to doubt God's promises to you? Are they financial challenges, health challenges, family challenges, work challenges, or other issues?
- How can you battle your doubts and trust God's promises in these difficult circumstances?

Connect God's restatement of the promise to Isaac with Abraham's obedience to God's word. God's grace to keep His promises seems to have transformed Abraham into a man of faith and obedience. And show that the pattern of God's grace to unworthy people continues with Isaac (leader p. 110; PSG p. 87).

- God has made promises to us that are independent of our worthiness before Him, but we often seem to believe that God is mad at us or that we forfeit His blessing if we fail Him. Why is it easy to think God is perpetually angry with us when we fail Him?

## 3. God keeps His promises by offering us His presence (Gen. 28:10-22).

*Share the writer's conversation about a poor view of marriage* (leader p. 111). Compare this to our relationship with God. Read Genesis 28:10-22. Highlight God's promise of His gracious presence (leader pp. 111-112; PSG pp. 88-89).

- Is it possible to experience God's presence and not be changed? Why or why not?

Describe the stairway as the reversal of the Tower of Babel; reference John 1:51—this stairway pointed forward to Jesus (leader pp. 112-113; PSG p. 89).

- In what ways does sin prohibit us from experiencing the presence of God?
- How does God overcome our sin in order to give us a glimpse of His glory and grace?

## Conclusion

Emphasize the promise and fulfillment of God's presence in Jesus Christ (leader p. 113; PSG p. 90). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission"* (PSG p. 91).

### ? For Further Discussion

What are the similarities and differences between God's promises and the promises we make?

### ? For Further Discussion

Ask groups of 3-4 to read the "Essential Christian Doctrine" *God Is Truthful* (leader p. 110; PSG p. 87) and then answer the following questions:

- What are some specific ways we can bear the image of God with respect to God's truthfulness?
- How might these ways impact our mission to reflect Jesus in the world?

After 3-4 minutes, allow groups to share their responses and reflections.

**Christ Connection:** God's promise to be with His people is most clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "God with us."

**Missional Application:** We can boldly share and show the love of Christ, not because we are perfect but because we know that God uses unusual and unworthy people to accomplish His purposes.

# God Reaffirms the Covenant

## Session 9



### Voices from Church History

“It is delightful to worship God, but it is also a humbling thing; and the man who has not been humbled in the presence of God will never be a worshiper of God at all.”<sup>1</sup>

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

### Introduction

One of my favorite movies from childhood was *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. I loved the Oompa Loompas, the short and stout little men who helped Wonka in the factory. In the movie, whenever one of the kids violated a rule and got sucked off toward the incinerator, or some other such consequence, the Oompa Loompas would come out and sing a song with a moral lesson. They always sang about good things to do, like obeying your parents, or they sang about things to avoid, like gluttony. “*Live this way and you will be happy*”—that was their message.

I wonder sometimes if we look at the Old Testament in a similar way. We read the stories and think the point is to imitate the “good guys” and avoid the actions of the “bad guys” if we want to live a happy life. The problem is that’s not the message of the Old Testament.

Within its pages we have plenty of examples when someone walked faithfully with God and still suffered. Likewise, we have examples when people were unworthy of God’s blessing and yet God prospered them. The message of the Old Testament centers not on “good people” but on a gracious God who keeps His promises to be with His people and bless them even though they are sinful and unworthy of His love.



Can you recall a time when you received something good even though it was undeserved and unexpected? What went through your mind upon receiving the gift?

### Session Summary

In the previous sessions, we’ve seen how God chose Abraham to be the one through whom salvation would come to the world. We saw how Isaac was the child of promise, and how Abraham’s faith was tested. But what happens when Abraham’s descendants are unfaithful to God? How will God’s promise go forward?



In this session we see that God renews His promise to be with Abraham's offspring and to bless the world through them despite their sinful and unworthy ways. Abraham's descendants fight, lie, and manipulate each other, but God remains faithful and He renews His promises again and again. We can take heart in knowing we serve a God who keeps His promises in unusual ways to unworthy people, a God who is present with us as we fulfill His mission.

## 1. God keeps His promises in unusual ways (Gen. 25:19-26).

We're still working through Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and we see how this book is divided into units by the key phrase "These are the generations of..." (cf. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2). The use of this phrase in Genesis 25:19 indicates that a new section is starting, one that deals with Isaac and his children.

*<sup>19</sup> These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, <sup>20</sup> and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. <sup>21</sup> And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. <sup>22</sup> The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. <sup>23</sup> And the LORD said to her,*

*"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the older shall serve the younger."*

*<sup>24</sup> When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. <sup>25</sup> The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. <sup>26</sup> Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.*

We've seen that Isaac is the child of promise who carries forward the promises of land, offspring, and blessing that God gave to Abraham. But before the promises are carried forward, a crisis must be addressed. Like Abraham's wife, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, could not have children.

### Further Commentary

Consider this pattern throughout the Bible. God granted Isaac as a miracle child to Abraham and Sarah in order to keep His promise to them. Esau and Jacob were also an answer to Isaac's prayer. God granted a miraculous birth, the prophet Samuel, to Hannah who was barren. Manoah's wife faced infertility but gave birth to Samson, whom God used to judge Israel. Ultimately, the virgin Mary gave birth to the Savior of the world, an unlikely birth that was the culmination of all of God's promises.

### Voices from Church History

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm."<sup>2</sup>

—William Cowper  
(1731-1800)

## Further Commentary

“The notion of the younger son holding sway over his senior was contrary to custom (29:26; 37:10-11; 43:33; Deut. 21:15-17; Job 32:6), although in Genesis it was common for Israel’s fathers (27:29,32-33; 38:27-30; 48:14-20; 49:8). That the ‘older will serve (*abad*)’ the younger brother recalls the curse and blessing invoked by Noah (9:25-27), and it anticipates the blessing stolen by Jacob at the expense of Esau (27:29,37,40). Ironically, it is Jacob who submits to his brother upon his return to Canaan (cf. ‘your/his servant,’ 32:4-5,19[5-6,20];33:3-5,14; cp. Num. 20:21), for Edom is the stronger militarily (32:6[7]; 33:1; 36:31). That the oracle speaks of two ‘nations’ shows that the prophecy and its fulfillment look beyond the brothers to their descendants. Edom’s history reveals repeated submission to the Israelites (e.g., Ex. 15:15; Num. 24:18; 2 Sam. 8:12-14; 1 Kings 11:14-16; Isa. 11:4; Amos 9:11-12; Obad. 1:18). Sibling rivalry and submission will occur also in the household of Jacob (e.g., 37:3-10; 42:6; 43:28; 44:23; 49:8).”<sup>3</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews

## Voices from Church History

“Many reasons for God’s designs are beyond our understanding...Hence in every case we should marvel at his wisdom and praise his ineffable love.”<sup>4</sup>

—Chrysostom  
(circa 347-407)

Rebekah’s barrenness was not only tragic for the family, as painful as not being able to have children may be. In this case, barrenness was a cosmic tragedy because God had promised that the removal of the curse of sin and the defeat of Satan would come through the birth of a child (Gen. 3:15), and the restoration of the world would come through the offspring of Abraham (12:1-3). The fact that Rebekah could not have children again put those promises in jeopardy.

But Isaac prayed for his wife, and God miraculously opened her womb. Are you noticing the pattern here? God is using unlikely pregnancies and births to keep His promises and deliver His people, and He is asking His people to trust Him in the process.

? Why do you think God allows us to experience hardship in between the time we receive a promise and its fulfillment?

Rebekah became pregnant with twins, and they fought inside her. She was perplexed by what was happening, so she prayed and asked God about it. God told her the fighting foreshadowed what their lives would be like. Two nations were in Rebekah’s womb. They would war with each other, but the older would serve the younger.

When God promised the salvation of the world through the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3:15, He said that victory would come through warfare between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. This declaration plays out in Genesis, and it continues here as Edom—the descendants of Esau—will constantly war with Israel—the descendants of Jacob.

But through it all, God’s salvation and blessing will come to the world. And how unusual will be the way it comes. In the ancient world the inheritance was given to the oldest son, but here God promised it to the younger son. Jacob would carry the promises forward, not Esau, the firstborn.

? What are some limitations that may make a person feel unqualified to receive or spread the love of Christ?

? How does knowing that God uses unlikely and unworthy people to accomplish His plan free us from those limitations?

## 2. God keeps His promises to unworthy people (Gen. 26:1-6).

We've seen how God keeps His promises in unusual ways. As the story progresses, we watch how God's people prove to be unworthy of those promises by their behavior. They play favorites, lie, and manipulate. Yet God remains gracious to them.

While God's grace toward sinners is most clearly seen in its ultimate display in the cross of Jesus, God's grace toward sinners does not begin there. Through the entire Bible we see God's unmerited love given to unworthy people. We see that clearly here in Genesis 26, where God reaffirms His covenant with Abraham, but this time with Abraham's son Isaac.

*<sup>1</sup> Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. <sup>2</sup> And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. <sup>3</sup> Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. <sup>4</sup> I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, <sup>5</sup> because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."*

Here we read about another famine in the land, just like there was in the days of Abraham. The famine in Abraham's day foreshadowed the exodus. Famine drove Abraham and his family to Egypt, where plagues were unleashed on Pharaoh's house, and Abraham's family left Egypt richer than they came. The similar thing will happen generations later on a larger scale, when God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt. God continues to rescue His people and keep His promise of land, offspring, and blessing despite horrible circumstances, such as famine and being away from their homeland.

This famine, which happened in the life of Isaac, shows God continuing to keep His promises in tough circumstances. God told Isaac not to go to Egypt but to live in the Philistine region of Gerar. Like his father before him and his descendants after him, Isaac spent time among the Gentiles outside of the promised land. Like his dad, he spent time among Abimelech, the king of the Philistines (cf. Gen. 20).

The horrible circumstances (starvation) and the unworthy characters that Isaac and his descendants turn out to be (see the rest of Genesis) make us wonder if God will truly keep His promise. Can human disobedience or natural disasters keep Him from being true to His word?

### Further Commentary

"Isaac and his clan experienced the second recorded famine of the Bible [the first recorded in Gen. 12:10]. To avoid the effects of the famine, Isaac sought refuge in the region where his father had once lived (20:1). The Abimelech mentioned here may or may not be the same one with whom Abraham negotiated a treaty (21:27). The name may have been given to each succeeding king within a dynastic family. Isaac must have been tempted to leave the famine-ravaged land and go down to well-watered Egypt as his father had done (12:10), but the LORD warned him not to do this. To inherit the promises of offspring, land, and blessing that God had given Abraham, Isaac had to stay in the land as a foreigner."<sup>5</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
HCSB Study Bible

### Voices from the Church

"The supreme blessing in Isaac's life was not material possessions, but the Lord Himself. 'I am with you,' God said to Isaac."<sup>6</sup>

—Willem VanGemeren

## Voices from Church History

“Grace is love, but love of a special sort. It is love which stoops and sacrifices and serves, love which is kind to the unkind and generous to the ungrateful and undeserving.”<sup>7</sup>

—John Stott (1921-2011)

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 18. God Is Truthful

The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). God represents things as they really are. Everything He says can be trusted because God guarantees the truth of everything He tells us. The call for humans to be honest and not to bear false witness is rooted in the utter truthfulness of our Creator. Telling the truth is one way we bear the image of God, whose Son is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

-  What situations cause you to doubt God’s promises to you? Are they financial challenges, health challenges, family challenges, work challenges, or other issues?
-  How can you battle your doubts and trust God’s promises in these difficult circumstances?

The promises of land, offspring, and blessing were once again in jeopardy, but God took this opportunity to restate the promises to Isaac. God told Isaac to remain in the land of Gerar as a foreigner, and He promised to be with Isaac and to bless him. Then He promised to give this land—even the territory of the Gentiles—to Isaac and his offspring. He again promised offspring for Isaac as numerous as the stars, and He foretold that Isaac’s offspring would bless all the nations of the earth.

God restated these promises because Isaac’s father, Abraham, obeyed His commands. It is intriguing that God would mention Abraham’s obedience because, at times, Abraham was not obedient. Remember how he took matters into his own hands rather than trust God? He lied about Sarah (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18), he tried to offer his servant Eliezar as the heir (15:2-3), and then he fathered Ishmael by Hagar (16:1-16).

But God graciously kept His promises to Abraham despite Abraham’s unworthiness. In the end, Abraham seems to have been transformed by God’s gracious presence. He became a man of faith and obedience, even willing to offer up the child of promise in obedient faith to God.

We see in the rest of Genesis 26 a similar unworthiness in Isaac, and we also see God’s graciousness to keep the promises. Like his father, Isaac passed off his wife, Rebekah, as his sister because he feared the men of the area would kill him to take her as a wife since she was so beautiful. Yet despite Isaac’s cowardly treatment of his wife, he was blessed in this foreign land and became rich, to the point the Philistines wanted him to leave. Eventually Isaac made it back to the land of promise in Beer-sheba, where God restated the promises to him yet again.

-  God has made promises to us that are independent of our worthiness before Him, but we often seem to believe that God is mad at us or that we forfeit His blessing if we fail Him. Why is it easy to think God is perpetually angry with us when we fail Him?

### 3. God keeps His promises by offering us His presence (Gen. 28:10-22).

I had lunch with a friend who had been dating the same girl for several years, and I asked him if he had thought about marriage. He said he had and thought that marriage would be a good idea. He wanted to be a missionary in a Muslim context, and he indicated that having a wife and family in a patriarchal context like a Muslim country would be an advantage to the mission. He listed all the benefits it would afford him. In the end, he sounded like a politician who wanted to get married because it would make him electable. Now, it's true that there are many benefits of marriage. But how can someone talk about marriage without mentioning the intimate companionship of someone who is committed to you for life?

Sometimes I fear that we approach our relationship with God in the same way. We love having a relationship with God because of all the perks it brings: heaven when we die, streets of gold, perfect health, no more sadness, and much more. But let's not forget we get something far better than all of those things combined—God Himself! What's most important about the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection is not the benefits it gets us but rather that the gospel gives us God Himself. He will be our God, we will be His people, and we will be together enjoying Him forever.

The promise of God's gracious presence is stated again and again throughout the Bible, and we see it here in Genesis 28.



*<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending*

*on it! <sup>13</sup> And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. <sup>14</sup> Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. <sup>15</sup> Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." <sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,*

#### Further Commentary

"This is a supreme display of divine grace, unsought and unstinted. Unsought, for Jacob was no pilgrim or returning prodigal, yet God came out to meet him, angelic retinue and all, taking him wholly by surprise. Unstinted, for there was no word of reproach or demand, only a stream of assurances flowing from the central 'I am the Lord,' to spread from the past (13a) to the distant future, from the spot where Jacob lay (13b) to the four corners of the earth (14) and from his person to all mankind (14b). It was also immediately apposite, meeting his solitary, homeless and precarious condition by assuring him of the covenant with his forbears, allotting him a landed inheritance, and promising him safe conduct. Jacob's reply is often condemned as mere bargaining; yet it was as thorough a response as he knew how to make. It expressed profound awe (16,17), a preoccupation first of all with the One who had been encountered, not with the things that were promised. From this it issued in homage and in the vow to pledge himself in covenant."<sup>8</sup>

—Derek Kidner

## Further Commentary

“Jacob started northward on the approximately 500-mile journey to Haran. At the end of one of his first days he stopped in central Palestine and camped outdoors. That night God appeared to him. Perhaps the stairway (a better translation than ‘ladder’) he dreamed of was a supernatural version of humanity’s Tower of Babylon (11:4), with God’s angels—and not sinful humans—using it to commute from heaven to earth. In the dream Yahweh transferred to Jacob all the essential elements of the promises given originally to Abraham and Isaac.”<sup>9</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

## Voices from the Church

“Unlike the tower built by the people of Babel, this was a ladder built by God. This was not a ladder on which men would make their way up to the gates of God but a ladder on which God would come down to man on this night, to a lonely, fearful, loved-by-God heel-grabber.”<sup>10</sup>

—Nancy Guthrie

*“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.”<sup>17</sup> And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

*<sup>18</sup> So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19</sup> He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.*

*<sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,*

*<sup>21</sup> so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, <sup>22</sup> and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”*

As foretold at his birth, Jacob received the blessing, though he stole it from Esau and was forced to run from him. (We’ve jumped ahead in the narrative for a moment. We’ll take a look at the story of Jacob’s betrayal in great detail in the next session.) Jacob found a place to stay the night and chose a stone as his pillow. As he slept, Jacob dreamed about a stairway on the ground with its top in the heavens. Angels were going up and down on it. It is here that Yahweh restated the promises of Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. Yahweh reminded Jacob that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and He would be Jacob’s God too.

God would give the land to Jacob and his offspring. He would give Jacob offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth, and they would spread out in the land. God promised that all the peoples of the world would be blessed by Jacob’s offspring. Then God promised, “I am with you.” Jacob took the stone he used for a pillow and set it up as a marker and named the place Bethel, or “House of God.” For Jacob, this was the gate of heaven. Like in Eden, God promised to live among His people. Jacob then vowed to serve Yahweh as His God.



Is it possible to experience God’s presence and not be changed? Why or why not?

The stairway Jacob saw reminds us of the Tower of Babel (its “top” reached into the heavens, Gen. 11:4). The people of Babel had attempted to come before God on their own terms. But this story shows us that if man is to reconnect with God, then it will require God coming down to us. Christianity is different from other religions because we believe God’s presence is secured not through our climbing up toward Him but through His gracious descent toward us.

Genesis 28 shows that God will indeed come to be with His people through Jacob and his offspring. Jacob's stairway gives us a glimpse into the reversal of Babel. The people of Babel were trying to get back to God by lifting up a tower, and it caused them to be separated all over the planet.

But when *the* offspring of Jacob, God incarnate—Jesus of Nazareth—will come down from heaven, He will be lifted up to draw all people to Himself. He will bless all the peoples of the earth and reunite them in Himself. John 1:51 tells us that Jesus is the true stairway to heaven. He is the One who reconnects earth and heaven.

-  In what ways does sin prohibit us from experiencing the presence of God?
-  How does God overcome our sin in order to give us a glimpse of His glory and grace?

## Conclusion

God graciously grants many things to us in the gospel. He gives us forgiveness of sin, adoption into His family, eternal life, an inheritance in His kingdom, and so much more. But the one thing the gospel of Jesus Christ secures for us that is far more glorious than any of these is God Himself.

The God-man, Jesus Christ—the One who shed His own blood for us and was raised from the dead to free us from the curse of sin—He will live with His people forever. The promise of God to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is the promise God has fulfilled for us in Jesus Christ. This is a God who keeps His promises, even at the cost of His own life!

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** God's promise to be with His people is most clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "God with us."

### John 1:51

"And he said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"

### Voices from the Church

"[God] proves Himself to be more generous to us than our highest hopes. The darkness of our doubt is burned away in the light of His presence."<sup>11</sup>

—Jim Thomas

## Additional Resources

# God Reaffirms the Covenant

## References

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11. Jim Thomas, *Streetwise Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 156.
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For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "Isaac, Jacob and Joseph"—Episode 2, Act 2 from *Telling God's Story* by Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter
- "Jacob's Ladder and Stairways to Heaven"—Article by Paul Louis Metzger; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "Abraham's Family: An Overview," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Joshua Moody: "Stairway to Heaven"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Encourage Group Members to Be Good Inviters

Why do guests visit a group or participate in a fellowship opportunity? The answer is simple. They are invited by a friend or a relative. Read Luke 14:15-24. Inviting is not a substitute for evangelism, but it is a credible supplement. You want the unchurched to hear and have opportunities to respond to the gospel. Consider tracking the number of guests invited to your Bible study, fellowships, and special church events. You will discover that more people are present when more people are invited. Furthermore, when more are present, there are more opportunities for the gospel to be heard.<sup>12</sup>

# God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we will see that despite the dysfunction of Isaac's family, the deception of Jacob, and the despondency of Esau, God is committed to His plan to redeem a people from all the nations on the planet through the offspring of this family—Jesus of Nazareth. Because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our struggle with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

### **Main Passage**

Genesis 27:1-40

### **Session Outline**

1. God's plan goes forward through a dysfunctional family (Gen. 27:1-17).
2. God's plan goes forward through a deceitful son (Gen. 27:18-29).
3. God's plan goes forward through a despondent son (Gen. 27:30-40).

### **Theological Theme**

God is sovereign over all of life, and He will work out His plan of redemption despite and sometimes through our dysfunction.

### **Christ Connection**

Jacob's story is a good example of why humanity needs a Savior. Like Jacob, we seek a blessing that is not ours, but we cannot lie, deceive, or trick to receive it. Instead, Jesus shared His blessing with us when He took the judgment we deserve so that we might receive the blessing He deserved.

### **Missional Application**

Because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our struggle with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

## Session Plan

# God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

## Session 10

### ? For Further Discussion

What are some messed-up families portrayed on TV, in movies, or through other mediums? How are these families dysfunctional?

In the cultural context of these families, what hope is offered as a solution to their dysfunction, if any?

### Point 1 Option

After reading Genesis 27:1-17, ask your group to help summarize the Bible passage, filling in gaps as necessary (leader p. 120). This will provide an easy opportunity for some in your group to contribute, some who might not ordinarily answer a question but would be willing to share a story. Try to invite input from multiple group members, not just a few vocal ones.

## Introduction

Illustrate the idea that up-close, life looks messed up, but stepping back to take in the whole picture helps us see how God has been working. *You can tangibly illustrate this idea with a stained glass window, or a blanket with a pattern on one side and the woven mess on the other* (leader p. 118; PSG p. 92).

- ? What is an event in your life that you didn't understand at the time but later realized God used to bless your life?

*Recall God's faithfulness in spite of His people from the last session* (leader p. 118). Then summarize this session (leader p. 118; PSG p. 92).

## 1. God's plan goes forward through a dysfunctional family (Gen. 27:1-17).

Communicate that no family is perfect, yet God can and does use dysfunctional families to carry out His plans (leader p. 119; PSG p. 93).

- ? What are some common dysfunctions in families? How can God's grace in the gospel overcome these?

*Review the story thus far of Esau and Jacob* (leader p. 119). Then read Genesis 27:1-17. Point out the unflattering picture Genesis paints of Abraham and his offspring, yet emphasize God's continued faithfulness to His promises (leader pp. 119-121; PSG pp. 93-94).

- ? In what ways does the dysfunction in your life or family discourage you from engaging in God's plan and mission?
- ? How does the story of God's continual grace through messed-up people free you to be part of His plan?

## 2. God's plan goes forward through a deceitful son (Gen. 27:18-29).

Set up the idea behind why we lie and cheat, and then read Genesis 27:18-29. Show how we are often no different than Jacob in our lies (leader pp. 121-122; PSG pp. 95-96).

? In what kinds of situations do we find it easiest to lie? What do those situations tell us about what our hearts are craving?

? How can we change the desires of the heart?

Point out that Isaac's blessing of Jacob was basically a restatement of God's promises to Abraham. As God said before the brothers were born, the younger Jacob would receive the blessing (leader p. 123; PSG p. 96).

? What hope does it give you to know that God works even through our deceit and sinfulness to accomplish His plan?

## 3. God's plan goes forward through a despondent son (Gen. 27:30-40).

Share the writer's experience of a good outcome coming through disappointment, or share one of your own (leader p. 123). Emphasize that God is always in control and His ways are best (leader p. 123; PSG p. 97).

? How does the truth that God's plan is always working out help you face the surprises, disappointments, and hardships of your daily life?

Ask a couple of volunteers to read Genesis 27:30-40 about Esau's reaction to Jacob's deception. Note how Hebrews 12:16-17 characterizes Esau in this circumstance, yet God still carries out His plan. Show how God's promise that His people would both **ble**ss and **rule over** the nations is fulfilled in Jesus, the King of the universe (leader pp. 123-125; PSG pp. 97-99).

? Why is it an act of love to call people to submit to King Jesus rather than an act of domination or coercion?

## Conclusion

Share that in spite of our dysfunction, we are called to proclaim King Jesus boldly and to call others to faith in Him (leader p. 125; PSG p. 99).

Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission" (PSG p. 100).

## ? For Further Discussion

What objections might be raised to the point that "God's plan goes forward through a deceitful son"?

Read the "Essential Christian Doctrine" *God's Plan and Human Action* (leader p. 120; PSG p. 94), and ask the following questions:

- How does this doctrine answer those objections?
- Is it sufficient to affirm both that God is sovereign and that human beings are morally responsible for their actions? Why or why not?

**Christ Connection:** Jacob's story is a good example of why humanity needs a Savior. Like Jacob, we seek a blessing that is not ours, but we cannot lie, deceive, or trick to receive it. Instead, Jesus shared His blessing with us when He took the judgment we deserve so that we might receive the blessing He deserved.

**Missional Application:** Because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our struggle with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

## Expanded Session Content

# God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

## Session 10

### Voices from the Church

"In the great mystery of grace, God commandeers even our stupid decisions to accomplish His purposes in us."<sup>1</sup>

—J. D. Greear

### Introduction

I grew up attending a church with beautiful stained glass windows in the sanctuary. These windows depicted scenes from well-known Bible stories. However, when I stood close to the window, I could not see the story; instead, I saw jagged glass, bright colors, and indistinct details. Up close it looked like an abstract collage; only when I stood back and took in the entire window could I see the beauty, intricate planning, and masterful design.

God's plan often works this way. Up-close in the gritty details of daily life, things look jagged and messed up. There does not seem to be cohesion. The particulars do not make much sense. But whenever we look back at our lives, taking in the whole picture, we can often see how God has been working all along the way.

A sickness, a rejection letter from your favorite university, a shake-up at work, getting pregnant sooner than you planned, or a sudden transfer across the country—at the time, these may seem like unwanted deviations from your plans (or God's plans). As we look back, though, we can see how God has worked through these moments to put us where He wanted us when He wanted us there, and we see how His plan was better than what we could have mapped out for ourselves.

-  What is an event in your life that you didn't understand at the time but later realized God used to bless your life?

### Session Summary

God's plan may not seem the least bumpy or the most efficient at times, but through it all He remains faithful, committed to His promises. We saw this truth on display in the previous session, in which God reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even when they proved less than faithful in their actions.

In this session, we will see that despite the dysfunction of Isaac's family, the deception of Jacob, and the despondency of Esau, God is committed to His plan to redeem a people from all the nations on the planet through the offspring of this family—Jesus of Nazareth. Because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our struggle with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

## 1. God’s plan goes forward through a dysfunctional family (Gen. 27:1-17).

Some Christians long for “the good old days” when family values were celebrated. We complain about the shows on TV and wish there were more sitcoms focused on the perfect nuclear family. Or perhaps we worry about the messages these shows convey. The truth is there hasn’t been an era of “good old days” since the garden of Eden. Families have always been sinful and dysfunctional. Because of our innate sinfulness, families have always shifted blame, reversed roles, and much more.

No family is perfect. Every family has its temptations and challenges. But the good news is that God does not reserve His love and grace for perfect families. He pours out His mercy on the broken. We will see this truth on display in Isaac’s family: God can and does use dysfunctional families to carry out His plans.

 What are some common dysfunctions in families? How can God’s grace in the gospel overcome these?

Let’s review. When Isaac and Rebekah’s children—Esau and Jacob—were in their mother’s womb, the Lord told Rebekah that the older would serve the younger. In ancient cultures, the younger son would serve the older son, and the older son would receive the family inheritance. But as this story unfolds, we see the older son, Esau, selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Esau was defined by food, by his appetite.

Not only did Esau sell his birthright, but he also took Hittite wives. He intermarried with a pagan people who didn’t follow the one true God, and his actions made things miserable for his parents (Gen. 26:34-35). But God had declared that His promise to Eve, that her offspring would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3), and to Abraham, that his offspring would bring salvation to all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12), would be carried forward through Jacob, not Esau.

We see in Genesis 27 a final showdown between these brothers. Even though Isaac and his family were sinful, dysfunctional, and manipulative, God graciously keeps His promises.

*<sup>1</sup> When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.”<sup>2</sup> He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death.”<sup>3</sup> Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me,<sup>4</sup> and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.”*

### Further Commentary

“The blessing given by a clan patriarch to his heir was of great significance since it formally conferred the right to rule over the clan following the patriarch’s death. As with covenant-making (26:28-30), a patriarchal blessing was accompanied by a delicious meal... Following Near Eastern tradition (18:9-10), Rebekah could not be in the immediate company of males—even family members—who were conducting business. However, she was listening to the men from nearby. After learning of Isaac’s intentions for Esau, Rebekah came up with a scheme to overturn the plans. Perhaps she did it because she remembered the decades-old prophecy about Jacob dominating his older brother (25:23). With this the Bible paints a picture of a troubled family: Rebekah using her son (not ‘their son’) to destroy her husband’s plans, and Jacob agreeing to lie to his father and cheat his brother. A curse of an unexpected sort did result for both Jacob and Rebekah: their scheme forced Jacob to leave his father and mother (28:5), and the Bible gives no indication that Rebekah ever saw her favorite son again.”<sup>2</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
*HCSB Study Bible*

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 25. God's Plan and Human Action

God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand." In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, <sup>6</sup> Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, <sup>7</sup> 'Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.'<sup>8</sup> Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. <sup>9</sup> Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. <sup>10</sup> And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies."<sup>11</sup> But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. <sup>12</sup> Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing."<sup>13</sup> His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me."

<sup>14</sup> So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. <sup>15</sup> Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. <sup>16</sup> And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. <sup>17</sup> And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

As Isaac anticipated his death, he sent for his oldest son, Esau, in order to bless him. God had made promises to Abraham and Isaac concerning land, offspring, and blessing, so Isaac intended to pass that on to his oldest son. Earlier in the narrative, the Scriptures told us that Isaac loved to eat what Esau brought back from the hunt (Gen. 25:28). So Isaac instructed Esau to hunt some game and prepare a meal in order that Isaac might bless Esau before the Lord.

One can see the dysfunction of this family, like other families, in that the parents played favorites. Isaac loved Esau's "manliness" and appreciated his ability to bring back food from the hunt. Rebekah preferred Jacob, so when she overheard Isaac's conversation with Esau, Rebekah hatched a plot to help Jacob receive the blessing instead of Esau.

The plot was to deceive Isaac into thinking that Jacob was Esau. Jacob was to grab goats from their flock so that Rebekah could make a meal that Isaac loved. Jacob protested that even though his father could not see well, if Isaac touched him, then Isaac would realize that he was not Esau. Jacob was concerned that he would be cursed by his father rather than blessed. But Rebekah had everything figured out. She clothed Jacob in Esau's clothes, she put the goats' skin on Jacob to make him hairy, and she prepared a meal her husband would like.

Genesis paints an unflattering picture of Abraham and his offspring. We see them lie, cheat, and manipulate. Abraham and Isaac both passed their wives off as their sisters in order to get the heat off themselves (Gen. 12:11-13; 26:7). Isaac played favorites with his son Esau; so did his wife, Rebekah, with her favorite son, Jacob. Rebekah and Jacob were willing to deceive in order to get what they wanted.

In spite of all this scheming, God continued to be gracious. He kept His promises. His plan to redeem the world will not be thwarted by human cunning and sin.

- ❓ In what ways does the dysfunction in your life or family discourage you from engaging in God's plan and mission?
- ❓ How does the story of God's continual grace through messed-up people free you to be part of His plan?

## 2. God's plan goes forward through a deceitful son (Gen. 27:18-29).

Why do we lie and cheat? Usually to get something we want. I remember in ninth grade literature class helping some of my classmates take the midterm exam out of our teacher's desk, make copies in the library, and then put it back in her desk before we got caught. I wanted the A so badly (not badly enough to study for it apparently) that I lied and cheated to try to get it. This kind of craving is in all of us, and it was a craving for the blessing that drove Jacob to lie to his father. Let's see how the story continues:

*<sup>18</sup> So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" <sup>19</sup> Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that your soul may bless me." <sup>20</sup> But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." <sup>21</sup> Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." <sup>22</sup> So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." <sup>23</sup> And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands. So he blessed him. <sup>24</sup> He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." <sup>25</sup> Then he said, "Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank.*

### Voices from the Church

"All through the Bible, when God chooses someone to work through, he chooses the younger sibling. He chooses Abel over Cain. He chooses Isaac over Ishmael. He chooses Jacob over Esau. He chooses David over all [seven] of his older brothers. Time after time He chooses not the oldest, not the one the world expects and rewards. Never the one from Jerusalem, as it were, but always the one from Nazareth."<sup>3</sup>

—Tim Keller

### Further Commentary

"God takes and redirects Isaac's gropings and ambitions—which contain a core of faith (Heb. 11:20)—so as to answer them beyond anything he can ask or think. The hunter's garments, redolent of the country, evoke the promise of the land, enhanced now to a vision of plenty (in terms to be amplified in, e.g., Deut. 11:11-15), not of mere living-space. His fierce pride in Esau demands an empire for him, against the decree of 25:23—and Psalms 72 and 87 will show in different ways how Jacob's king and city will enjoy it. Finally the protective curse and blessing are made to speak of what will hinge on the attitude of every one (29b) to the true Israel."<sup>4</sup>

—Derek Kidner

## Further Commentary

Ken Mathews points out that the blessing given to Jacob, though not including the exact words, is basically a restatement of the promises to Abraham and Isaac. He writes, "Although not stated in typical promissory terms (cf. 28:3-4), both the Abrahamic land and progeny promises are assumed and reflected here."<sup>5</sup>

*26 Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son."<sup>27</sup> So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said,*

*"See, the smell of my son  
is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed!*

*28 May God give you of the dew of heaven  
and of the fatness of the earth  
and plenty of grain and wine.*

*29 Let peoples serve you,  
and nations bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
Cursed be everyone who curses you,  
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"*

Jacob deceived Isaac into thinking that he was Esau. Isaac questioned how Esau could have gotten back so quickly, but Jacob responded by saying that the Lord had blessed his endeavor. Isaac, still not convinced, asked his son to come closer so he could tell if he were really Esau. He was confused because it sounded like Jacob and felt like Esau. Ultimately, on account of the smell of his clothes, Jacob's deception worked, and Isaac blessed him.

Jacob schemed and lied to get what he wanted. In fact, he had numerous opportunities to come clean with his father and tell the truth. But he was so blinded by greed for the blessing that he continued to deceive.

We are often no different than Jacob. In situations where we find ourselves lying, it is usually because of something we want. We want others to have a certain opinion of us, so we bend the truth. We want more money for ourselves, so we lie to the government on our tax returns. A craving to manipulate a desired outcome fuels lying.

❓ In what kinds of situations do we find it easiest to lie? What do those situations tell us about what our hearts are craving?

❓ How can we change the desires of the heart?

Notice that the words of blessing Isaac uttered over Jacob were basically a restating of the promises to Abraham. God had promised Abraham land, offspring, and blessing. Isaac spoke here of land and blessing. He asked that God would cause Jacob's brothers and the nations to serve him. God's blessing would be given to those nations that blessed Jacob.

Jacob would eventually become the representative head of the nation of Israel, and Israel was called to be a light to the nations. God's redeeming plan would go through Jacob to all the nations of the earth. The saving line would come through the deceitful younger son, Jacob, not Esau.

 What hope does it give you to know that God works even through our deceit and sinfulness to accomplish His plan?

### 3. God's plan goes forward through a despondent son (Gen. 27:30-40).

One of the biggest disappointments of my life came during a Christmas basketball tournament. I was a senior in high school, and I played guard on the varsity team. During this tournament game, I threw my shoulder out of socket, and it ended my competitive basketball career. I was crushed. Sports were the reason I went to school! Looking back, I see that was a formative time in my life, a time God would ultimately use to lead me into ministry by showing me there was more to life than sports.

Often we need to be reminded that what we want for our lives isn't always what God wants for our lives. He is in control, and His ways are best. The good news for those in Christ is that no apparent setback can derail God's plan.

 How does the truth that God's plan is always working out help you face the surprises, disappointments, and hardships of your daily life?

Jacob's deception crushed Esau and left him without the blessing of God. Despite the terrible circumstances, the Lord was still working to bring about His plan to redeem the world. Let's read on to see Esau's reaction:

#### Voices from Church History

"If one believes that this blessing was accomplished in Jacob, he is mistaken. [It is accomplished] in nobody else but Christ, Son of God."<sup>6</sup>

—Hippolytus (circa 170-236)

## Further Commentary

"In these verses, God does not call upon us to sympathize with Esau but to learn from him, warning that although God is exceedingly gracious and is forever tempering justice with mercy, there are nevertheless choices in life that cannot be undone and consequences of sin that are thereafter unavoidable. If you reject the grace of God in Christ now, who knows that you will ever again experience a spiritually melting heart and have an opportunity to turn to him? If you reject the revealed Word of God in some matter and instead do what you know to be wrong, who knows that you will ever have a chance to make that wrong right or avoid the destructive consequences that may follow? Tears mean nothing. Esau wept, but his tears were of frustrated selfishness and not of genuine regret for wrongs committed. The only true repentance is a turning from sin to do what God desires."<sup>7</sup>

—James Montgomery Boice

<sup>30</sup> *As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting.* <sup>31</sup> *He also prepared delicious food and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, "Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me."*

<sup>32</sup> *His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau."* <sup>33</sup> *Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed."* <sup>34</sup> *As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!"* <sup>35</sup> *But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing."* <sup>36</sup> *Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"* <sup>37</sup> *Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Behold, I have made him lord over you, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?"* <sup>38</sup> *Esau said to his father, "Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father." And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.*

<sup>39</sup> *Then Isaac his father answered and said to him:*

*"Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high.*

<sup>40</sup> *By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck."*

The author of Hebrews described Esau as "sexually immoral" and "unholy," unable to find an opportunity for repentance, even though he was grieved by his circumstances (Heb. 12:16-17). The picture of Esau is one of despondency. His trading of the birthright and then the subsequent deception from his brother left him in a spiritual state of grief.

What would all this mean for God's big plan of redemption? Esau would serve Jacob, just as the promises stated. Even though Esau's line—Edom—would fight with Israel, ultimately all the nations would bow to Israel. The promise of Genesis 3:15 was that the offspring of the serpent would war against but finally be overcome by the offspring of the woman, and that promise continues here. The promises to the patriarchs were that the foreign nations would bow to them and God would set all things right that had gone wrong.

In fact, the promises to Abraham and Isaac and now Jacob were two-fold in relation to the nations:

1. **They would bless the nations;**
2. **but they would also rule over the nations.**

The nations would bow to them and serve them. We see this clearly stated in Amos 9, for example, in reference to Edom. The Lord declared through Amos that He would raise up His people “that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name” (9:12).

How can both be right at the same time? How can Israel bless the nations but also be over them as rulers? Acts 15 answers this question in reference to Amos 9 with the gospel of Jesus Christ through the Great Commission. He is the offspring of Abraham, the One who blesses all the nations, but only as they bow the knee to Him alone. (Consider James’ speech in Acts 15:16-17.) The nations are blessed by the offspring of Israel—Jesus—as they bow the knee to Him.

Right now, all across the globe, there are Vietnamese and Kurds and Arabs and Chinese and Americans who bow down and confess that a Jew is King of the universe. Despite the dysfunction of Isaac’s family, despite the deception of Jacob, despite the animosity of Esau, people from every nation will eventually bow down to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And in bowing to Jesus, they will be saved.



Why is it an act of love to call people to submit to King Jesus rather than an act of domination or coercion?

## Conclusion

We are called to carry on God’s promises through the Great Commission. As we go and preach the good news that Jesus is Lord and as sinners in all nations bow their knees to King Jesus, they receive the gracious promises of God. So let us get over our dysfunction and go with boldness to our neighbors and our nations because we go with the authority of the One who rules the universe.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Jacob’s story is a good example of why humanity needs a Savior. Like Jacob, we seek a blessing that is not ours, but we cannot lie, deceive, or trick to receive it. Instead, Jesus shared His blessing with us when He took the judgment we deserve so that we might receive the blessing He deserved.



## Voices from Church History

“Esau wept but did not repent; instead he envied his brother’s prosperity.”<sup>8</sup>

—Theodoret of Cyr  
(circa 390-457)

## Hebrews 12:16-17

“[See to it] that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.”

## Additional Resources

# God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

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7. James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 757.
8. Theodoret of Cyr, *Interpretation of Hebrews*, 12, quoted in *Hebrews*, ed. Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey, vol. X in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 221.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- “Genesis: The Origins of Israel”—Pages 47-59 from *The Drama of Scripture* by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen
- “Is It Ever Too Late to Repent?”—Article by Michael Patton; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “Esau and the Edomites,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcasts

Matt Carter: “True vs. False Repentance”

Ravi Zacharias: “A Family’s Failure”

Find links to these at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Provide Resources for Guests

An inexpensive way to make first-time guests feel welcome is to provide them copies of your Bible study materials. Based on past experience, make your best guess about how many first-time guests you can expect each quarter, and order that number of personal study guides (or request them from your leaders). What about people who have not yet visited your group? You can encourage them to visit by providing copies of the personal study guide.

# The God Who Gives New Names

## Summary and Goal

In this session we follow the story of how Jacob received a new name from God. His old name meant “deceiver” and was an apt description of his life. But after a mysterious encounter with God, Jacob was never the same. He received a new name that reflected God’s grace to him and his descendants. Like Jacob, we are flawed and sinful, in need of an encounter with God that will transform our identity and give us a new mission in life.

### ***Main Passages***

Genesis 32:24-32

Genesis 35:9-15

### ***Session Outline***

1. Jacob’s old name reflected his flawed character (Gen. 32:24-27).
2. Jacob’s new name reflected the grace God showed him (Gen. 32:28-32).
3. Jacob’s new name reflected the task God gave him (Gen. 35:9-15).

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### ***Theological Theme***

Encountering God leads to a fundamental change of identity and purpose.

### ***Christ Connection***

God’s renaming of individuals in the Old Testament reflects both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of mission.

### ***Missional Application***

God calls us to live in a manner worthy of the name we have received so that others may praise God for His transforming power.

## Session Plan

# The God Who Gives New Names

## Session 11

### Introduction Option

As group members arrive, ask them to gather in groups of 3-4 to share their thoughts on transformation shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Home Makeover*, and *ESPN College GameDay*, or other such shows (see leader p. 130).

After a few minutes, proceed with the Introduction.

### ? For Further Discussion

What is the history behind your name, and what does your name mean?

Have you found that your name accurately describes your character or circumstances? How so?

### Point 2 Option

Show the video clip of the bishop being gracious to Jean Valjean.

[www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/les-miserables/back-to-god](http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/les-miserables/back-to-god)

### Introduction

Open with a discussion of New Year's resolutions and the struggle for lasting change (leader p. 130; PSG p. 101).

- ? What resolutions have you made in the past? What kept you going?
- ? What is it about failed resolutions that cause us to doubt if lasting change is possible?

*Share the good news that life-change is possible and is accomplished by God* (leader p. 131). Then summarize the session (leader p. 131; PSG p. 102).

### 1. Jacob's old name reflected his flawed character (Gen. 32:24-27).

*Recall Jacob's life of deceit from the previous session and his flight to the east* (leader p. 131). Share the context and ask a volunteer to read Genesis 32:24-27. Note two things: *First*, God confronting Jacob hints at the reality of his flawed character and the punishment for sin (leader pp. 131-132; PSG pp. 102-103).

- ? How have your sinful or foolish decisions hindered you in your service to the Lord?
- ? What are some ways God has confronted you about your sin?

*Second*, Jacob's dislocated hip may point to his need to be broken before carrying forward the blessing, a reality consistent with the meaning of his name (leader p. 132; PSG p. 103).

- ? In what ways do our past mistakes haunt and define us?
- ? Why is it difficult for us and for others to forget them?

### 2. Jacob's new name reflected the grace God showed him (Gen. 32:28-32).

*Illustrate the transformational power of grace from Les Misérables* (leader p. 133).

- Describe a time you made a difference in someone else's life by an act of grace.

Read Genesis 32:28-32. *Note the significance of names in the ancient world* (leader pp. 133-134). Then explain the names "Israel" and "Peniel," and emphasize Jacob's transformation by God's grace (leader p. 134; PSG p. 104).

- Have you ever wanted to be someone else or to have a fresh start or to receive a new reputation? What ways did you go about accomplishing that?
- How is God's "renaming" us similar to or different than trying to change our reputation?

Show how the transformation of Jacob should encourage us, as we are also transformed and given a new name in Christ. The circumstance that leads us to repentance is God's kindness (leader pp. 134-135; PSG pp. 105-106).

- What difficult circumstances in your life has God used to lead you to repentance?
- Why were those struggles necessary to get you to the point of repentance?

### 3. Jacob's new name reflected the task God gave him (Gen. 35:9-15).

*Note everyone's desire for God's blessing, but many don't understand why God blesses people* (leader p. 135). But Scripture makes it clear that we are blessed to bless others (leader p. 135; PSG p. 106).

- What are some areas in which we ask for the blessing of God without giving thought to how God might want us to bless others?

Read Genesis 35:9-15. Explain the progression for Jacob: **Blessing, New Identity, Responsibility** (*these fill in the chart in the PSG*). And we share in this same progression. Connect Jacob's blessing to God's promises to Abraham and Isaac, and one of Jacob's offspring would be the King, the Messiah, who would bring salvation to the world (leader pp. 135-137; PSG pp. 107-108).

- How do God's blessings set us up to serve on mission with Him?

### Conclusion

Highlight Jacob's transformation in light of God's patience and grace. God also gives us a new identity and purpose through His Son (leader p. 137; PSG p. 108). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission"* (PSG p. 109).

### Point 2 Option

Before the group meeting, enlist a volunteer to read the "Essential Christian Doctrine" *New Identity of the Believer* (leader p. 134; PSG p. 105) and to share his or her testimony of becoming a "new creation" in Christ, along with the implications for living according to this new identity.

### Pack Item 6: Genesis Map

The following locations are mentioned in the Scripture passages and are located on the map, if you wish to highlight them:

- Paddan-aram
- Peniel, at the Jabbok River
- Bethel

**Christ Connection:** God's renaming of individuals in the Old Testament reflects both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of mission.

**Missional Application:** God calls us to live in a manner worthy of the name we have received so that others may praise God for His transforming power.

## Expanded Session Content

# The God Who Gives New Names

## Session 11

### Voices from the Church

“Sanctification is stripping off the characteristics of old humanity, like filthy clothing, and reclothing ourselves with Christian behavior.”<sup>1</sup>

—Richard Lovelace

### Introduction

Like many others, I’ve used the beginning of a new year as an opportunity to get in better shape. Last time, I purchased exercise equipment, I worked out every day, I started eating healthy meals, and I started to feel better. But like most people adopting New Year’s resolutions, within a few months, I regressed and eventually wound up back where I started.

The human heart longs for lasting change, and this longing goes beyond faddish New Year’s resolutions. For some people, it might be an addiction they want to be free from; for others, it may be a pattern of ruined relationships, a financial strain, or family dysfunction. Whatever the case, most of us wonder, *Is transformation possible in my situation?*

It’s easy to lose hope in change because so often we’ve tried to make changes only to be disappointed. We are tempted to give up and think, *What’s the use?!* For this reason, we love transformation stories. We love to see examples of dramatic change.

Shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Home Makeover* tap into our desire for transformation. Even sports channels offer pre-game shows, such as *ESPN College GameDay*, that reveal the players’ life stories, how they have overcome adversity and how their life has been changed for the better. We love seeing an obese man no longer have heart problems or seeing a down-and-out family have their home remodeled. These events remind us that dramatic change is possible.

-  What resolutions have you made in the past? What kept you going?
-  What is it about failed resolutions that cause us to doubt if lasting change is possible?

## Session Summary

The good news from the Bible is that life-change is possible, and it is not dependent on you. God is the life-changer, as we see in Genesis 32 and His interactions with Jacob.

In this session we follow the story of how Jacob received a new name from God. His old name meant “deceiver” and was an apt description of his life. But after a mysterious encounter with God, Jacob was never the same. He received a new name that reflected God’s grace to him and his descendants. Like Jacob, we are flawed and sinful, in need of an encounter with God that will transform our identity and give us a new mission in life.

## 1. Jacob’s old name reflected his flawed character (Gen. 32:24-27).

As we will see, Jacob became the namesake for God’s chosen people, Israel. Yet the account of Jacob reveals a deeply flawed man. He cheated his brother out of his blessing and lied multiple times to his father.

In fact, the author of Genesis provides markers that indicate Jacob’s sinful, wandering heart. Genesis often presents traveling east as a bad thing, as a signal that a person was moving away from God (i.e., exile). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished to the east, away from God’s garden (3:24). After Cain murdered Abel, he went east (4:16). When Lot chose the land near Sodom and Gomorrah, he went east (13:11). After Jacob cheated his brother and deceived his father, he traveled toward Paddan-aram and came to the eastern country (29:1).

In the east, Jacob met his future wife Rachel at a well. He loved Rachel and wanted to marry her, so he served her father, Laban, for seven years to win her hand in marriage. But Laban deceived Jacob, himself a notorious deceiver. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his oldest daughter, Leah, and Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel.

Despite Laban’s deception, God kept His promises to Jacob. Remember, the promise was land, offspring, and blessing. God gave Jacob financial blessing (though Jacob schemed to get it), and God blessed him with children. So Jacob had offspring, and he had blessing, but he did not have the land yet.

## Further Commentary

John Sailhamer writes this about the first couple being banished east from Eden: “The author’s mention of the direction ‘eastward’ is not a mere geographical detail. Throughout Genesis, the author carefully apprises the reader of the direction of the characters’ movement. In doing so, he plants a narrative clue to the meaning of the events he is recounting. At this point in the narrative, ‘eastward’ has only the significance of ‘outside the garden.’ Later in the book, however, the author will carry this significance further by showing ‘eastward’ to be the direction of the ‘city of Babylon’ (11:2) and the ‘cities of Sodom and Gomorrah’ (13:11). Moreover, he will show that to return from the east is to return to the Promised Land.”<sup>2</sup>

## Further Commentary

“The unexpected and sudden introduction of this man, who wrestles in the dark with Jacob, captures something of the event itself. By the time their contest comes to an end, Jacob is convinced that his opponent is God himself (see v. 30). This is not improbable, given that God had previously come to Abraham in human form (18:1-15). The story contains an interesting wordplay in Hebrew: God wrestles (*ye'abeq*) with Jacob (*ya'aqob*) by the Jabbok (*yabboq*).”<sup>3</sup>

—T. Desmond Alexander, *ESV Study Bible*

## Voices from Church History

“O grand and splendid mystery! Overcome, he blesses, just as having suffered, he sets free.”<sup>4</sup>

—Augustine (354-430)

The Lord told Jacob to return home to the land promised to his fathers, so he journeyed toward Canaan as a rich man with a large family. In order for Jacob to receive the promises of God, however, a transformation needed to take place. Jacob was fearful that his brother, Esau, would seek revenge, so he sent gifts with an envoy ahead of him to soften the blow. As Jacob remained behind, he encountered an unusual “man” who would change Jacob’s life forever.

*<sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”*

Later on in the text, it is revealed that this man is God Himself. During the wrestling match, the man struck Jacob’s “hip socket” and dislocated it.

This wrestling match is instructive in at least two ways. *First*, the fact that God confronted Jacob hints at the reality of Jacob’s flawed character and the truth that God will not allow sin to go unpunished. We see a similar event in the life of Moses when he failed to obey God’s command (see Ex. 4:24-26). God wanted to use Jacob, but He would have to change him first.

- ❓ How have your sinful or foolish decisions hindered you in your service to the Lord?
- ❓ What are some ways God has confronted you about your sin?

*Second*, the fact that the man dislocated Jacob’s hip, in what seemed to be a desperate act to get away before sunrise, may point to the reason God held Jacob accountable and wanted to transform him. Before the blessing could be carried forward, this sinful man—Jacob—had to be broken. Perhaps that is why the man asked Jacob about his name, which meant “cheater.” Jacob’s life up to this point had been in line with his name.

- ❓ In what ways do our past mistakes haunt and define us?
- ❓ Why is it difficult for us and for others to forget them?

## 2. Jacob's new name reflected the grace God showed him (Gen. 32:28-32).

*Les Misérables* is a powerful story that reveals how transforming grace can be in a person's life. The ex-con Jean Valjean has been released from almost two decades in prison, and Bishop Myriel gives him shelter. In a brazen act to someone so kind, Valjean steals the bishop's silverware. When the police catch the thief, Bishop Myriel tells them he gave the silverware to Valjean. He then admonishes Valjean that God has been gracious to him, and in response, Valjean must become an honest man. This act of grace is the starting point for Valjean's transformation from a petty criminal into a kind and good man.

 Describe a time you made a difference in someone else's life by an act of grace.

It is one thing for a person to show grace to someone else. But the effects are multiplied when the God of the universe shows grace to a wretched person. Grace ensures we will never be the same. We see this truth in the life of the cunning deceiver Jacob. Despite Jacob's repeated lying and scheming, God poured out grace upon him, and we see its effect here in Genesis 32.

*<sup>28</sup> Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."<sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."<sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.<sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.*

Even though Jacob was injured in the wrestling match with the man, he grabbed him and would not let him go. Jacob had already told the man his name, which revealed the deceptive nature of his character. But here, in an act of amazing grace, the man who happened to be God Himself allowed Jacob to prevail, and then He renamed him.

### Further Commentary

"The crippling and the naming show that God's ends were still the same: He would have all of Jacob's will to win, to attain and obtain, yet purged of self-sufficiency and redirected to the proper object of man's love, God Himself. It was defeat and victory in one...Jacob emerged broken, named, and blessed. His limping would be a lasting proof of the reality of the struggle. The new name would attest his new standing."<sup>5</sup>

—Derek Kidner

### Voices from the Church

"It often takes an experience of crippling weakness for us to finally discover [God's blessing]. That is why so many of the most God-blessed people limp as they dance for joy."<sup>6</sup>

—Tim Keller



## Voices from Church History

"With God, we have power and prevail, when we weep, when we cry, when we're broken, when we're pleading, when we're clinging, when our heads are bowed. The blessing comes when we're crippled, when we're hurt."<sup>7</sup>

—W. A. Criswell (1909-2002)

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 82. *New Identity of the Believer*

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, becoming more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).



Today, we often choose names that are popular at the time or have some family significance to us. But in the ancient world, names indicated someone's character. Names told you about a person's makeup. Therefore, being renamed indicated a change in character—a new start!

Jacob's new name would be "Israel" because he had struggled with God and prevailed (32:28). In a battle of great endurance through a painful injury, Jacob had struggled with God for a blessing and had not given up. Though He would not tell Jacob His name, God blessed him. Then Jacob named the place "Peniel" because he had seen God face to face and been saved (32:30).

Naming the place Peniel indicated that Jacob actually wrestled with God, not a man. Of course, this raises all kinds of theological questions and concerns, such as "How could a man wrestle with God and not be killed instantly?" But the text is not concerned with these matters; rather, its purpose is to show us that Jacob was a transformed man because of his encounter with the gracious Lord. Jacob walked away with a limp, but he walked away a changed man. He did not return to the promised land the same scoundrel that left it years before.

-  Have you ever wanted to be someone else or to have a fresh start or to receive a new reputation? What ways did you go about accomplishing that?
-  How is God's "renaming" us similar to or different than trying to change our reputation?

Jacob's life reveals how gracious and patient God is. For years, Jacob schemed to manipulate people and outcomes, and he lied to the people closest to him to get what he wanted. He did not care whom he trampled or hurt along the way. But through it all, God showed kindness and compassion to Jacob. God gave Jacob a second chance, and God patiently did the work of transforming Jacob's life. Finally, one great, painful encounter with God made Jacob a new person. Genesis demonstrates that Jacob was a new man by following this story with Jacob's reconciliation with Esau (Gen. 33).

Genesis 32 should encourage us because it reveals that no matter how messed up our lives may be, no matter how many bad decisions we have made, and no matter how much we have wrecked the relationships around us, if we encounter the living God, we can be given a new life. The New Testament teaches that we can encounter God through His Son, Jesus, and that in Christ we bear His name! Therefore, our identity will no longer be wrapped up in our sin, but rather, our identity will be that of beloved children of God.

Not only does Jacob's story teach us about God's gracious patience toward sinners, but it also shows that it often takes a painful encounter with the living God for us to come to our senses. And yet, God's disciplining hand is a sign of His kindness to lead us to repentance and change.

- ❓ What difficult circumstances in your life has God used to lead you to repentance?
- ❓ Why were those struggles necessary to get you to the point of repentance?

### 3. Jacob's new name reflected the task God gave him (Gen. 35:9-15).

Everyone wants God's blessing. That's why we pray and ask God for health or for provision or to bless our children or a thousand other things. Asking for blessing is not wrong, of course. It shows how dependent we are on God, and asking Him to bless us is one way of communicating what a good and gracious God He truly is. We ask Him to bless us because we know He delights in blessing His children.

The problem, though, is that many of us do not understand *why* God blesses His people. We want God to change our lives, but when He does, we don't understand *why* or *for what purpose* He has changed us.

In Scripture, we see that God's purpose in blessing His people is not so they will hoard the blessing to themselves. No, God blesses His people so that they will be a blessing to others. God changes people so that they can be agents of change for others.

- ❓ What are some areas in which we ask for the blessing of God without giving thought to how God might want us to bless others?

We see in Jacob's life that God blessed and changed him so that Jacob—Israel—would be the means by which God brought change and blessing to the whole world. Watch how God reappeared to Jacob and again gave him his new name, which implied the continuing nature of God's promised blessing to Abraham:

#### Hosea 12:4

"[Jacob] strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us"

## Further Commentary

“God’s final recorded words to Jacob came as He spoke to him for the second time (cp. v. 1) since the patriarch returned from Paddan-aram. In this proclamation the Lord revealed Himself as God Almighty (Heb. ‘El Shaddai’), a name for God revealed first to Abraham (17:1) and later known to Isaac (28:3)...At the same time God blessed Jacob with words that enlarged previously given promises. The blessing previously given to Adam, Noah, and Noah’s sons (1:28; 9:1)—be fruitful and multiply—was now extended to Jacob. For the first time also it is stated that kings and an assembly of nations would come from the patriarch.”<sup>8</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
HCSB Study Bible

<sup>9</sup> God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. <sup>10</sup> And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel. <sup>11</sup> And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. <sup>12</sup> The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” <sup>13</sup> Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. <sup>14</sup> And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. <sup>15</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

Notice the progression for Jacob:

|                    |                         |                           |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| Blessing<br>(v. 9) | New Identity<br>(v. 10) | Responsibility<br>(v. 11) |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|

In the same way, God blesses us with salvation and transformation so that we can then fulfill His calling on our lives.

What led to the events in this passage? After Jacob returned to the land, he reconciled with Esau and blessed him. Later, God commanded Jacob to settle in Bethel, where God had first appeared to him in his dream (Gen. 28). In response, Jacob led his family to get rid of all their false gods. In these events, we see the gradual transformation in Jacob’s life. Yes, the transformation was slow, but it was progressive. (The same is true with us!)

At Bethel, God appeared to Jacob and restated the promises of blessing, land, and offspring. God blessed Jacob and repeated that his new name was Israel. Not only did God bless Jacob, but in an echo of Genesis 1:28, God commanded Jacob to be fruitful and multiply (35:11). This command would fulfill the promise of seed, or offspring. God foretold that a great nation would come from Jacob, and his family line would include kings. Finally, God told Jacob that He would give the land to Jacob and his offspring. Jacob set up a stone marker, offered a drink offering, and he named the place “House of God.” (This was the same place God made promises to Jacob in Genesis 28.)

God would keep His promises to Jacob. Jacob was indeed fruitful and multiplied. He had 12 sons who would become the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. And God would keep His promise that through Jacob’s offspring would come a King—a Messiah—who would bring salvation to the world.

Just as God had done with Jacob, his firstborn son would not carry the promises forward. The promises passed to Judah (cf. Gen. 49), and through Judah would come the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus would fulfill God’s calling on Israel to be a light to the nations, and through His death and resurrection, He would bring salvation to the world.

God had changed Jacob, but He did not do so in order for Jacob to keep the blessing to himself. Rather, God intended for Jacob’s offspring to bring God’s saving blessing to the world. The same is true for us as well. Psalm 67:1-2 states, “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.” God’s gracious blessing in our lives through Jesus Christ is intended for the salvation of the world.

 How do God’s blessings set us up to serve on mission with Him?

## Conclusion

Jacob was a conniving deceiver, but God’s patience and grace completely transformed Jacob’s life. By the end of his life, he was no longer the same man.

God chose this man, with all of his wretched past, to be the agent through whom He would bring His saving blessing to the whole world. Jacob would have a son, and his son would have a son, and his son would have a son, and his son would have a son, until eventually a virgin peasant girl would have a Son named Jesus—the Savior of the world! Through Jesus, God can change your life forever and use you to bring blessing to the world around you. He will give you a new identity and a new purpose that fuels your life like never before.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** God’s renaming of individuals in the Old Testament reflects both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of mission.

## Voices from Church History

“During this struggle you are Jacob, but after your faith in the blessing for which you prayed you are Israel.”<sup>9</sup>

—Hilary of Poitiers  
(circa 300-368)

## Further Commentary

“At an important and dangerous time Jacob the trickster wrestled through the night with the very God of Israel! A transformation occurred in the life of the patriarch. Jacob would not release the ‘man’ until he had received the divine blessing. Jacob was marked forever by this struggle—he limped out to meet his brother the next day, lame from his ‘dark night of the soul.’ This meeting on that night ‘represents the transformation of sly and clever Jacob into Israel, the ancestor of the people of God.’ At daybreak Jacob was a different man, and the destiny of Israel was changed. The story of Jacob is an important narrative of two men: Jacob as Jacob, and Jacob who becomes Israel. As a story of Jacob who is Jacob, this is a biography of the human condition realistically portrayed. As a story of Jacob who becomes Israel, though, it is a story which challenges one to the life of faith and rigorous encounter with God.”<sup>10</sup>

—Fred Downing,  
*Biblical Illustrator*

## Additional Resources

# The God Who Gives New Names

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8. Robert D. Bergen, in *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 67-68, n. 35:9-15.
9. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 5:19, quoted in *Genesis 12–50*, ed. Mark Sheridan, vol. II in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, 222.
10. Fred Downing, “Jacob: All We Know,” *Biblical Illustrator* (Summer 1988): 70.



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- “The End of Counterfeit Gods”—Chapter 7 from *Counterfeit Gods* by Timothy Keller
- “Failure Is Not Final”—Article by Adrian Rogers; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “What Happened at Peniel?” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

J. D. Greear: “Wrestling All Night”

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### A Missional Attitude

A group seeking to be missional and an international missionary have something in common: an assignment to reach a “people group.” What people group is the mission of your group? All adults? Senior adult men? Empty-nest married couples? Forty-something single adults? Nearly-weds and newlyweds? Parents? College students? High-school boys? Middle-school girls? Preteens? First through third graders? Preschoolers? Babies? A group with a missionary mentality thinks like a missionary, asking the question “What can we do to serve and reach those in our community?” What can you do to help your group have an attitude—a missional attitude?

# The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering

## Summary and Goal

In this session we see how God used the suffering in Joseph's life to accomplish His plan to save many lives. We also get a preview of how God will work through Jesus' suffering in our place to save the world. The good news for those in Christ is that we can trust God to take the hardships in our life and use them to fulfill His plan.

### **Main Passages**

Genesis 37:3-11

Genesis 37:23-28

Genesis 39:6b-23

### **Session Outline**

1. Trust in God's plan for the future (Gen. 37:3-11).
2. Trust in God's process of preparing us for the future (Gen. 37:23-28).
3. Trust in God's presence when He seems absent (Gen. 39:6b-23).

### **Theological Theme**

God is sovereign over our lives, and He uses suffering and injustice to accomplish His plans in and through us.

### **Christ Connection**

Joseph suffered unjustly and was later exalted to a place of prominence. In a similar manner, Jesus suffered unjustly and was later raised from the dead and exalted as Lord of the world.

### **Missional Application**

God calls us to trust Him to fulfill His promises because when obstacles appear to thwart His mission, God is faithful to use even the obstacles as part of His plan to bring glory to His Son.

## Session Plan

# The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering

## Session 12

### Pack Item 8: Joseph's Life

Display this poster prior to the group meeting.

The story of Joseph's life comprises sessions 12-13, so use this poster as needed to help group members track with the biblical account as we cover it in two parts.

### ? For Further Discussion

Throughout our study of Genesis, what are some ways you have seen people struggle with trusting in God's plan for the future? (Ex. Adam and Eve in Eden; the people at the Tower of Babel; Abram waiting for a son; Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, regarding the birthright and blessing from Isaac.)

What were some of the consequences from their lack of trust?

## Introduction

Begin with the dangerous misconception that God is a “bargainer” who rewards obedience with a suffering-free life (leader p. 142; PSG p. 110).

- ? Have you or someone you know ever sought to do “good things” for God in hopes He would reward you with a smoother, more prosperous life?
- ? How does such a mind-set lead to anger or disappointment when we encounter suffering?

Correct this misconception—God promises we are never alone in our suffering—and summarize the session (leader pp. 142-143; PSG p. 111).

## 1. Trust in God's plan for the future (Gen. 37:3-11).

*Reference God's promises and His foretelling of future slavery; both blessing and suffering are part of God's plan* (leader p. 143). Read Genesis 37:3-11. Explain the family dynamic at play (leader pp. 143-144; PSG pp. 111-112).

- ? When you read the text, do you get the sense that Joseph was justified in telling his family about his dreams? Or do you see him as proud and arrogant? Why?

Tie Joseph's dreams to God's plan to bless the world through Abraham's offspring, but they would first involve suffering (leader p. 144; PSG p. 112).

*Note that God's plan is best and we should trust Him* (leader p. 144).

- ? Under what circumstances might we envy God's plan for someone else's life rather than accept the one He has laid out for us?
- ? When we try to live out God's plan for someone else, how does that usually turn out?

## 2. Trust in God's process of preparing us for the future (Gen. 37:23-28).

Discuss the importance of preparation in life (leader pp. 144-145; PSG p. 113).

? What are some ways you intentionally put a strain on your body in order to be better prepared for the future?

? How can the same truth apply to our character?

Use the “Essential Christian Doctrine” *God Is Omniscient* to help explain why we can trust God’s process of preparing us for the future (leader p. 146; PSG p. 114). Then ask a volunteer to read Genesis 37:23-28. Characterize the brothers actions as a betrayal and unjust, but emphasize that God would use this sin to accomplish His plan (leader pp. 145-146; PSG p. 114).

? What are some challenges you have faced that prepared you to handle future challenges and blessings?

### 3. Trust in God’s presence when He seems absent (Gen. 39:6b-23).

Set the context of Joseph blessing the household of Potiphar as a servant, and then read Genesis 39:6b-23 (leader pp. 147-148; PSG pp. 115-116).

? What lessons can we learn from Joseph’s victory over temptation?

Revisit the misconception from the introduction. Highlight that our promise, rightly understood, is that no kind or amount of suffering can separate us from God and His love in Christ (leader p. 148; PSG p. 116).

? What are some instances in your life where you were tempted to think that God was absent? What are some instances where you clearly felt His presence?

? Why do we assume God is there in the good times and gone in the bad?

Explain how Joseph’s life points forward to Jesus in His suffering and blessing to the world (leader pp. 148-149; PSG pp. 116-117).

? How does the knowledge that God is with you in hardship help you battle things like discouragement, depression, and isolation?

## Conclusion

Put our suffering in the context of our Savior’s; we can trust God’s promise and His plan in the midst of hardship (leader p. 149; PSG p. 117). *Apply the truths of this session with “His Mission, Your Mission”* (PSG p. 118).

*Pass out bookmarks from Pack Item 9: Grace Sustains Us to help members recall God’s faithfulness to us in the midst of suffering.*

## ? For Further Discussion

How would you counsel a believer struggling to trust in the presence of God in the midst of his or her circumstances?

What are some ways you might be a tangible expression of God’s presence in such a situation?

## ? For Further Discussion

How would you counsel a non-believer struggling with being alone in the midst of his or her circumstances?

What are some ways you might be a tangible expression of the love of Christ in such a situation?

**Christ Connection:** Joseph suffered unjustly and was later exalted to a place of prominence. In a similar manner, Jesus suffered unjustly and was later raised from the dead and exalted as Lord of the world.

**Missional Application:** God calls us to trust Him to fulfill His promises because when obstacles appear to thwart His mission, God is faithful to use even the obstacles as part of His plan to bring glory to His Son.

## Expanded Session Content

# The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering

## Session 12



### Voices from Church History

“When I read [the story of Joseph], I have the same feeling in my heart, the same response in my soul, as when I read about the suffering and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

—W. A. Criswell (1909–2002)

### Introduction

Twice I have received in the mail a “miraculous” prayer rug. The rug depicted Jesus with His eyes closed. It claimed that if you stared at the picture long enough, then Jesus would open His eyes. When His eyes opened, then you were supposed to kneel in the middle of the rug and pray, and whatever you asked for, you would receive from God. With the rug came a letter with testimonies from people who had used it.

Most of us see this rug for the gimmicky nonsense it is. God is not some kind of genie who grants us whatever we want or think we need. And yet, many Christians believe if only they have enough faith and obey God, then God will help them achieve their dreams or fix their financial challenges or bring them a spouse or take away their cancer, and so on.

Believing that God is a grand “bargainer” who rewards people’s obedience with a suffering-free life is detrimental to our faith. People who see God this way blame Him and walk away from the faith when things don’t work out. They face disillusionment because of the suffering they never expected.

- ❓ Have you or someone you know ever sought to do “good things” for God in hopes He would reward you with a smoother, more prosperous life?
- ❓ How does such a mind-set lead to anger or disappointment when we encounter suffering?

The Bible never guarantees that true faith in God will lead to a pain-free life. We live in a fallen world where suffering is inevitable. Sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. But we see in Scripture that those who trust in God are never alone in their suffering. God can even use pain to bring about His good purpose and plan.

## Session Summary

In this session we see how God used the suffering in Joseph's life to accomplish His plan to save many lives. We also get a preview of how God will work through Jesus' suffering in our place to save the world. The good news for those in Christ is that we can trust God to take the hardships in our life and use them to fulfill His plan.

### 1. Trust in God's plan for the future (Gen. 37:3-11).

We've seen how God made gracious covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But God also warned Abraham about a future slavery in a foreign land before they would receive the promised land (Gen. 15:13). So, yes, God's plan was to bless the entire world through Abraham's offspring, but that future plan included pain and suffering.

That's where the story of Joseph (Jacob's son) comes in. Let's take a look at Genesis 37, where we see God reveal His plan for Joseph's future.

*<sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. <sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.*

*<sup>5</sup> Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup> Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.*

*<sup>9</sup> Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." <sup>10</sup> But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" <sup>11</sup> And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.*

Jacob's favorite son was Joseph because he was born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, in Jacob's old age (Gen. 30:22-24). That's why Jacob made Joseph a robe of many colors, a sign of favoritism toward Joseph and something that caused Joseph's brothers to despise him.

## Further Commentary

"The passage introduces the sibling rivalry through the vehicle of dreams that establishes the commanding motif of the chapter and largely the remainder of the Joseph narrative section. Two competing narrative functions are introduced in vv. 2-11: the first is the family strife that eventually leads to Joseph's 'death,' and the second is the mystery of the dreams that foreshadow the ascent of Joseph over his brothers. The two plots work together to create the narrative tension evidenced at the end of the chapter...It is fair to say that no one in chap. 37 exhibits noble character, including Jacob, whose exaggerated favoritism aggravated the enmity that half-brothers exhibit. At least this was the pattern in the Abraham clan, one that Jacob evidently did not learn from his parents Isaac and Rebekah (25:28). The passage presents three motivations for the hatred that Joseph's older brothers had for him, culminating in their jealousy: the favored status of Joseph, evidenced by the father's gift of a splendid coat (vv. 2b-4), and the two dreams that symbolically foretell Joseph's ultimate rule over the household of Jacob (vv. 5-7; 8-11)."<sup>2</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews

## Voices from Church History

“Joseph had a great deal of trouble before him, and therefore God gave him [beforehand] this prospect of his advancement, to support and comfort him.”<sup>3</sup>

—John Wesley (1703-1791)

## Voices from the Church

“The will of God will never take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us.”<sup>4</sup>

—Billy Graham

Making matters worse, Joseph had dreams about his brothers bowing down to him—not something you want to hear from your younger brother. The text never indicates whether or not Joseph was right or wrong in recounting these dreams to his family, but it’s clear that the dreams were a picture of God’s future plan.

-  When you read the text, do you get the sense that Joseph was justified in telling his family about his dreams? Or do you see him as proud and arrogant? Why?

The journey from Joseph’s initial dreams to the fulfillment of God’s plan would be long and arduous. But it’s important to see how these dreams set the stage for the conclusion of Genesis. God’s overarching plan, as we’ve seen, was to bless the entire world through Abraham’s offspring. Joseph’s dreams gave a glimpse of this plan coming to fruition at the end of Genesis because, through Joseph’s exaltation above his brothers and father, God would not only rescue Israel, but He would also rescue the surrounding people groups.

Despite the suffering that would befall Joseph, God would use the terrible circumstances to exalt Joseph and save his family (along with many others). God gave the family a picture of this plan through Joseph’s dreams. It’s not surprising that Joseph’s brothers did not like the plan, but as we will see later, in the end, the dreams pointed to the way God would save them from famine and certain death.

We can learn from Joseph’s brothers because no matter how much we may not like what God is doing, we can trust that God’s plan for our future is better than any plan we can come up with for ourselves. We can trust His plan for the future even when we do not like or understand our present circumstances.

-  Under what circumstances might we envy God’s plan for someone else’s life rather than accept the one He has laid out for us?
-  When we try to live out God’s plan for someone else, how does that usually turn out?

## 2. Trust in God’s process of preparing us for the future (Gen. 37:23-28).

I hated high school basketball practice. Running “suicides,” doing “wall sits,” and a dozen other activities were tortuous. What I did like was hearing my name called in the starting lineup and running out on the court to play the actual games.

What was the relationship between the exhausting practices and the exhilarating games? The former prepared us for the latter. Without the drills that drove me to exhaustion, I would not have been able to play as effectively. The coach put us through the challenges of practice to prepare us for endurance in the game.

The same holds true in other areas of life. We must be put through a process in order to be prepared to enjoy blessing and abundance rightly. How many times have we watched athletes or singers get rich at a young age and be bankrupt within a decade? Most of the time, they were never put through a process where they were prepared to handle the affluence rightly.

- ❓ What are some ways you intentionally put a strain on your body in order to be better prepared for the future?
- ❓ How can the same truth apply to our character?

In a much bigger way, God knows what it will take to prepare us for the wonderful future awaiting us. God knows what we need in order to conform us to the image of Christ so that we can be ready for the inheritance. That's why sometimes He does not rescue us instantly from hardship and suffering; rather, He lets us be trained by the peril, the distress, and the want so we can be the type of people who enjoy the blessings He has prepared for us (see Rom. 8:28-39).

We see this truth in the life of Joseph. He suffered greatly at his brothers' hands, but God used this event in Joseph's life to prepare him for his future role.

*<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. <sup>24</sup> And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.*

*<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup> Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.*

## Further Commentary

"The fact that Joseph's brothers sat down to eat a meal soon after they disposed of him reveals how brazenly sinful they were. Later Joseph would be free while the brothers were in prison (42:17). But on this day the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites traveling south on the main road leading from Egypt to Damascus. Judah convinced seven of his brothers that it was more profitable to sell Joseph as a slave than to kill him. According to 42:21, Joseph pleaded with his brothers, but to no avail. They sold him for 20 pieces of silver, the standard price for a teenage male slave (Lev. 27:5). Midianite is another designation for Ishmaelites in this narrative. Mention of the descendants of Ishmael (21:9-13) and Midian (25:1-6) call to mind the kind of sibling rivalry that is taking place here again."<sup>5</sup>

—Robert D. Bergen,  
HCSB Study Bible

## Voices from the Church

“The irony is that the sale of Joseph actualizes the dreams that the brothers meant to subvert.”<sup>6</sup>

—Kenneth A. Mathews

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 9. God Is Omniscient

Scripture teaches that God is all-knowing. He is the One who “is perfect in knowledge” (Job 37:16), and this knowledge extends to all things past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. His knowledge is complete, and as He is outside of time, He has known from all eternity whatever will come to pass. In response to God’s omniscience, we admit our finite knowledge and trust His decisions as wise and good.



Joseph’s brothers were shepherding their dad’s flock near Shechem, and Israel sent Joseph to check on them. When the brothers saw him coming in the distance, they devised a plan to harm him. At first, they intended to kill him and throw him into one of the pits (37:20), but Reuben tried to convince the brothers not to kill Joseph. Hoping to come back later to rescue Joseph,

Reuben told his brothers to throw him in the pit alive (37:21-22).

When Joseph approached, the brothers stripped him of his robe and threw him in the pit as Reuben had suggested. As they ate, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on a journey to Egypt. Judah concocted a new plan; he reasoned that killing Joseph would not be profitable but selling him as a slave to the Ishmaelites would be. So they sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver, and the caravan took Joseph down to Egypt. When Reuben returned and found this out, he was distraught, and the brothers let their father believe that a wild animal had killed Joseph.

This horrific act of betrayal and injustice was part of the process God would use to accomplish His plan. God’s plan was not merely to rescue Israel; rather, He intended to rescue the world, and Joseph’s rejection and suffering were the means by which God would accomplish the plan. Those closest to Joseph—his own family—betrayed him for silver. He was taken captive and brought down to Egypt against his will. However, God was using all of these events to prepare Joseph to save the very ones who rejected him, and others as well.



What are some challenges you have faced that prepared you to handle future challenges and blessings?

### 3. Trust in God's presence when He seems absent (Gen. 39:6b-23).

Although Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, God was with him. Joseph became a servant in the house of Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers and the captain of the guard. Because God was with Joseph and prospered everything that he did, Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his entire house, and the Lord blessed Potiphar's house greatly. This shows an example of how God continued to keep His promise to Abraham that He would bless everyone who blessed Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3).

But just as things were looking up, they went from bad to worse.

*<sup>6b</sup> Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. <sup>7</sup> And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."*

*<sup>8</sup> But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. <sup>9</sup> He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"*

*<sup>10</sup> And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.*

*<sup>11</sup> But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, <sup>12</sup> she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. <sup>13</sup> And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, <sup>14</sup> she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. <sup>15</sup> And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." <sup>16</sup> Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, <sup>17</sup> and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. <sup>18</sup> But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."*

*<sup>19</sup> As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. <sup>20</sup> And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. <sup>21</sup> But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. <sup>22</sup> And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. <sup>23</sup> The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.*

#### Further Commentary

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, made a speech before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, in Acts 7. In his speech, Stephen revealed a pattern in Israel's history that found its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ: (1) God raises up a savior. (2) Israel rejects him. (3) The Gentiles accept him. (4) He saves Israel. In Joseph's case, Stephen pointed out that the patriarchs (Israel) sold Joseph into slavery because of their jealousy, but God was with him and gave him favor among the Egyptians so that he could save his family from the famine later on (Acts 7:9-16). Moses' life would follow this same pattern. He was rejected by his kinsmen, spent time in Midian among the Gentiles, and then came back to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Acts 7:20-36). The prophets would partially fulfill this pattern because the Israelites persecuted and killed them (Acts 7:52). Stephen's point was that this pattern culminated in the murder of the Messiah himself—Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the Savior betrayed by one close to Him for silver, handed over to captivity, rejected by—and large by the Jews, accepted by the Gentiles, and in the future He will save the Jews (cf. Rom. 11).

## Voices from the Church

“One day God would send another Prince, a young Prince whose heart would break. Like Joseph, he would leave his home and his Father. His brothers would hate him and want him dead. He would be sold for pieces of silver. He would be punished even though he had done nothing wrong. But God would use everything that happened to this young Prince—even the bad things—to do something good: to forgive the sins of the whole world.”<sup>7</sup>

—Sally Lloyd-Jones

Joseph did the right thing in rejecting the sexual advances of his master’s wife. Even so, he was falsely accused, and despite his innocence, he was thrown into prison. Yet even there, the Lord was with him (v. <sup>21</sup>). He was not alone. God had not abandoned him. God gave Joseph great grace so that even the prison warden put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners. And once again, the Lord prospered everything that Joseph did.

 What lessons can we learn from Joseph’s victory over temptation?

Too many Christians have the false idea that if God is with us, then nothing bad will happen. We think of verses like Romans 8:31—“If God is for us, who can be against us?”—as if they promise life without adversity. But we leave out the verses that say we may experience suffering, famine, nakedness, peril, and many other obstacles (8:35-39). Rightly understood, nothing can separate you from God and His love in Christ, not because He shields you from bad things but rather because in the midst of those circumstances, He walks with you. He brings you safely through to the other side.

We are tempted in the tough moments to question if God is with us, but the Bible assures us that He never leaves nor forsakes His people (Deut. 31:6; Heb. 13:5). Our hope is not in a God who keeps bad things from happening to us; our hope is in a God who is with us in life and death, a God who sees to it that nothing separates us from His love in Jesus Christ.

 What are some instances in your life where you were tempted to think that God was absent? What are some instances where you clearly felt His presence?

 Why do we assume God is there in the good times and gone in the bad?

Joseph’s life points forward to Jesus. Jesus would be betrayed, handed over to captivity, stripped of His robe, and killed through an unjust sentence. But the rejection and humiliation of Jesus was God’s plan to save Israel and the world! Jesus looked abandoned by God, as if His cries to the Father went unanswered, but when that grave opened on Sunday morning, it was clear He was not alone. God vindicated His Son.

We get a glimpse of this plan in Joseph's life. He suffered. It seemed as if he were abandoned, but God was with him and God was accomplishing His good plan. Joseph was a righteous sufferer and God was with him. He succeeded in captivity, and his humiliation would eventually lead to his exaltation to bless Israel and all nations (cf. Gen. 12; Phil. 2).

 How does the knowledge that God is with you in hardship help you battle things like discouragement, depression, and isolation?

## Conclusion

Let's not fall for a pseudo-Christianity that fails to prepare us for inevitable suffering. We follow a Savior who suffered before He was exalted, was mistreated before He was vindicated, and was killed before His resurrection. This Savior told us that a servant is not above his Master. If the King suffered, then His followers will suffer (John 15:20). But they will also be vindicated and blessed on the other side (16:33).

For some, this message may cause fear and despair, but it is actually the best news in the world. Because of the truth that our Savior suffered for us and was vindicated for us, we can trust God's promise that our suffering will not last forever. We know that our hardships are not pointless. We can have hope in the midst of our pain because we know we are not alone, and we know that a day is coming when all things will be made new.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Joseph suffered unjustly and was later exalted to a place of prominence. In a similar manner, Jesus suffered unjustly and was later raised from the dead and exalted as Lord of the world.

## Voices from Church History

"There is no victory without opposition. God has not called you to a life of ease. He has called you to a life of victory through His Son Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup>

—Adrian Rogers (1931-2005)

## Further Commentary

"We can learn several lessons about integrity from Joseph's adult life. First, Joseph put forth his best effort despite his circumstances. Joseph successfully took on responsibility, even when he was not the primary beneficiary of his work. Although a house slave, Potiphar recognized Joseph's potential and promoted him to head of the household (39:1-6). Likewise, the captain of the guard placed Joseph over all the work at the prison where he was confined (vv. 21-23)... Second, Joseph was a person of moral character. Joseph demonstrated this best in how he dealt with Potiphar's wife. He did not give in to her recurring advances (39:7-9). Instead he fled, leaving his coat behind. He did not violate the trust Potiphar had placed in him...Third, Joseph forgave."<sup>9</sup>

—Terry W. Eddinger,  
*Biblical Illustrator*

## Additional Resources

# The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering

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7. Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 82–83.
8. Adrian Rogers, "Victory over Temptation," Love Worth Finding [online], 2013 [cited 29 January 2015]. Available from the Internet: [www.lwf.org](http://www.lwf.org).
9. Terry W. Eddinger, "Joseph: A Man of Integrity," *Biblical Illustrator* (Fall 2013): 76–77.



For help on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- "Covenant: God Makes a Promise and Establishes a People"—Chapter 2 from *Living God's Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hayes
- "The Glory of the Cross"—Article by Jeremy Treat; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including "Camels and Caravans: Joseph's Trip to Egypt," can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

Alistair Begg: "New Coat, Big Dreams, Big Pit"

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Questions: Key to Discovery Teaching/Learning

When Jesus embarked on the three-year teaching ministry that preceded His ultimate sacrifice and resurrection, He asked a lot of questions. Even when asked a question, He often responded with either a story or a question of His own. Luke 10:25–37 provides an example. Jesus was asked perhaps the most important question anyone can ask: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Yet Jesus answered with a question: "What is written in the law?" The man answered with the great commandment; Jesus commended him: "You've answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But the man asked Jesus to clarify the commandment by inquiring, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus "took up the question" by telling the story of the good Samaritan, concluding with yet another question! This is a great example of how discovery learning takes place and how questions can be a catalyst.

# God Is Faithful to His Covenant

## Summary and Goal

In this session, we see how the story of Joseph reveals three ways that God remains faithful to His covenant. He remains faithful by bringing fruit out of our affliction, by showing us a picture of forgiveness, and by overruling evil with good. With confidence in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, we are called to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us and to trust Him no matter our circumstances.

### **Main Passages**

Genesis 41:46-57

Genesis 45:1-15

Genesis 50:15-21

### **Session Outline**

1. God brings fruit out of our affliction (Gen. 41:46-57).
2. God shows us a picture of forgiveness (Gen. 45:1-15).
3. God overrules evil with good (Gen. 50:15-21).

### **Theological Theme**

God is sovereign and He will bring good out of evil circumstances.

### **Christ Connection**

God took the evil deeds of Joseph's brothers and used them for His greater plan of providing salvation from the famine. In the same way, God used the evil injustice of those who put His Son, Jesus, on the cross to bring about His master plan of providing salvation from sin and death.

### **Missional Application**

God calls us to forgive those who sin against us because we recognize that God is working everything for the good of those who love Him.

## Session Plan

# God Is Faithful to His Covenant

## Session 13

### ? For Further Discussion

How should we think through and process the gospel call to forgive and the desire for justice?

### Point 1 Option

Consider inviting an older couple who has experienced the bond that can come through struggle to come and share their experiences with your group.

Alternately, allow group members to share their own experiences for the group at large or in small groups of 3-4.

### ? For Further Discussion

Do the names in your family have a special meaning? If so, what is it, and why were these names chosen?

## Introduction

Begin the session by calling to mind revenge, get-even stories and songs (leader p. 154; PSG p. 119).

- ? What are your favorite revenge stories or songs? What causes them to resonate with you?

Identify why these stories and songs resonate with us and why the sentiment is wrong. Then summarize the session (leader p. 154; PSG pp. 119-120).

## 1. God brings fruit out of our affliction (Gen. 41:46-57).

Use the example of couples who spent the early years of marriage in near poverty and bonded together because of the struggle. Connect this idea to our spiritual lives, in which spiritual fruit is born from affliction and reliance upon God (leader p. 155; PSG p. 120).

- ? What are some challenges in your life that have made you a better follower of Christ, spouse, parent, and friend?

*Use Pack Item 8: Joseph's Life to help group members recall what we studied in the previous session and to fill in Joseph's journey up to this session, now promoted to rule over Egypt as a vice-regent to the Pharaoh. Read Genesis 41:46-57. Highlight Joseph's fruitful work and family life, and call attention to the meaning of his sons' names, as they evidence God's sustaining work in Joseph's life (leader pp. 155-156; PSG pp. 120-122).*

- ? What are some challenges you've faced that you see others facing? In what ways can God bring fruit out of your past affliction by leading you to minister to others in similar circumstances?

## 2. God shows us a picture of forgiveness (Gen. 45:1-15).

Recall Joseph's affliction at the hands of his brothers, but note that he provides us with a Christlike example of forgiveness (leader p. 157; PSG p. 122).

- ❓ Why is it so difficult for us to forgive those who wrong us?
- ❓ What is it about forgiveness that is so painful?

Fill in details about the story up to this point, and then read Genesis 45:1-15. Explain how Joseph could forgive his brothers, recognizing the purpose of God's plan. Show how such forgiveness relates to the gospel (leader pp. 157-158; PSG pp. 122-123).

- ❓ How does holding a grudge contradict the gospel?
- ❓ How can meditating on the gospel empower you to be patient with and forgive others?

## 3. God overrules evil with good (Gen. 50:15-21).

Show that we should follow the way God works and overrule evil with good and forgiveness. Again fill in the story to this point, and then ask a volunteer to read Genesis 50:15-21. Highlight Joseph's confidence that what his brothers meant for evil, God used for good to save many lives (leader pp. 158-159; PSG pp. 124-125).

- ❓ What wrong actions toward you would make you consider someone an "enemy"?
- ❓ How can we show our enemies love and mercy as an expression of God's love for us?

Provide a conclusion to the story Genesis tells: promises not yet fulfilled. And help your group members see how Joseph's life was a preview of the Messiah, who would forgive those who wronged Him and use their evil deeds for good (leader p. 160; PSG pp. 125-126).

- ❓ How does the gospel help you put the bad things that happen in your life in the right perspective?

## Conclusion

Affirm our desire for justice, but describe our desire for revenge as unbelief in our hearts. Rather, we should suffer injustice and forgive just as Jesus did, and we find the power to do so by trusting in God's justice and mercy (leader p. 160; PSG p. 126). *Apply the truths of this session with "His Mission, Your Mission"* (PSG p. 127).

### ❓ For Further Discussion

How might those of the world struggle with an example of such radical forgiveness, as displayed by Joseph with his brothers?

How could you use an opportunity to forgive to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

### Point 3 Option

Ask groups of 3-4 to look at **Pack Item 8: Joseph's Life** and to reflect on how the pattern of Joseph's life points to the life of Jesus. Encourage group members also to consider what this pattern means for the lives of Christ's followers.

After 2-3 minutes, call on groups to share their responses and reflections.

**Christ Connection:** God took the evil deeds of Joseph's brothers and used them for His greater plan of providing salvation from the famine. In the same way, God used the evil injustice of those who put His Son, Jesus, on the cross to bring about His master plan of providing salvation from sin and death.

.....  
**Missional Application:** God calls us to forgive those who sin against us because we recognize that God is working everything for the good of those who love Him.

# God Is Faithful to His Covenant

## Session 13

### 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

#### 16. God Is Faithful

God's faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; 1 Pet. 4:19). God's faithfulness is demonstrated in His fulfillment of the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The apostle Paul linked the attribute of "faithful" to God's coming through on His word: "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:24). We reflect God by keeping the promises we make to Him and to others.

### Introduction

I've always loved the film *The Princess Bride*—the battle of wits, the way the priest said "marriage," but most of all, the story of Inigo Montoya exacting revenge on the six-fingered man: "Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!" In the end, he got his revenge!

We all enjoy the get-even stories, don't we? We read books like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and we sing revenge songs like Toby Keith's "How Do You Like Me Now?!" or Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats" or Taylor Swift's "Mean." We know what it is like to be wronged or be bullied or be betrayed in some way. We long for those things to be made right, and when they are not made right, we get frustrated.

- ❓ What are your favorite revenge stories or songs? What causes them to resonate with you?

The reason these stories and songs resonate with us is because we have a deep sense of justice, and when people do wrong, we want them to be held accountable. The problem comes in when we want to be the ones who execute justice instead of leaving that role to God. Harboring bitterness or holding a grudge reveals a lack of faith in the justice of God. It reveals that we think we could do His job better than He can. It's also a failure to trust that God can take the evil things done to us and use them for good as part of His bigger plan.

### Session Summary

In the previous session, we saw how Joseph suffered grave injustices, and yet through every difficulty Joseph experienced, he remained a man of steadfast faith. In this session, we see how the story of Joseph reveals three ways that God remains faithful to His covenant. He remains faithful by bringing fruit out of our affliction, by showing us a picture of forgiveness, and by overruling evil with good. With confidence in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, we are called to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us and to trust Him no matter our circumstances.

## 1. God brings fruit out of our affliction (Gen. 41:46-57).

Many young couples today assume they should experience the same affluence as their parents. After growing up in homes where they had all of the latest technology, their own room, and their own car by their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, they assume that even as newlyweds, they are entitled to the same wealthy lifestyle. Unfortunately, they forget the fact that their own parents probably did not start their marriage with riches.

Many older couples describe how their marriages began in near poverty, with the two scraping to get by. No big house. No eating out. Penny-pinching and saving. And yet many of these couples will say their early years of marriage, the hardest years financially, were great years. They did not have anything but each other, and they bonded together in those tough times in ways they never would have in affluence. The challenges of being newly married and learning to provide for themselves created a bond that helped them weather the decades of matrimony to follow.

The same truth applies to our lives spiritually. There is spiritual fruit born from affliction that never would have come otherwise. Difficult times in our lives show us our need for God, drive us to our knees in prayer, cause us to cling to God in faith, and much more.

 What are some challenges in your life that have made you a better follower of Christ, spouse, parent, and friend?

Let's briefly summarize Joseph's journey. He was falsely accused of attempted rape and thus spent years in jail. While in prison, Joseph—the dreamer—correctly interpreted a dream for Pharaoh's chief cupbearer. He asked the cupbearer to remember him and to mention him to Pharaoh once Pharaoh showed him favor. But the cupbearer forgot Joseph when he was restored to his position. Once again, Joseph had been treated unfairly.

After two years, Pharaoh had a dream that alarmed him, and this caused the chief cupbearer to remember Joseph. Consequently, Joseph was brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dream. Relying on God's power, Joseph explained the dream's meaning—there would be seven years of agricultural abundance followed by seven years of famine. Joseph then mapped out a wise plan for Pharaoh that would prepare a reserve for the seven years of famine. As a result, Joseph was promoted to rule over Egypt as a vice-regent to the Pharaoh.

*<sup>46</sup> Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. <sup>47</sup> During the seven plentiful years*



### Voices from Church History

"[Joseph] bore distress with endurance, endurance gave him character, having such character he acted in hope, and hope did not disappoint him."<sup>1</sup>

—Chrysostom  
(circa 347-407)

## Further Commentary

“These names, which are Hebrew, not Egyptian, tally with the two sides of Joseph’s experience. With Manasseh there were still the mixed feelings that go with the closing of a chapter in life, voiced in the two phrases of 51b. With Ephraim there was a more buoyant sense of fulfilment, perhaps owing something to the phenomenal fruitfulness of the land at this moment (cf. v. 47), according to the promise. There may be an intended echo of this story of the great provider, in John’s record of the similar words (‘Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it’, John 2:5) which made way for the miracle at Cana. What Joseph was to the men of his day (John may imply), this and more would Jesus be to the world.”<sup>2</sup>

—Derek Kidner

*the earth produced abundantly,<sup>48</sup> and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it.<sup>49</sup> And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.*

*<sup>50</sup> Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him.<sup>51</sup> Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.”<sup>52</sup> The name of the second he called Ephraim, “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”*

*<sup>53</sup> The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end,<sup>54</sup> and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.<sup>55</sup> When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.”*

*<sup>56</sup> So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.*

Joseph was 30 years old when he came to power in Egypt. He executed his plan to store up extra food in the cities during the seven years of abundance. In an echo of God’s promise to bless Abraham’s offspring, the text says that Joseph stored up grain “like the sand of the sea” (41:49).

Not only was Joseph fruitful in his work, but also he was fruitful in his family life. He married a woman named Asenath, and she gave birth to two sons. The sons’ names are theologically instructive. They teach us how God was working in Joseph’s life to accomplish His plan.

The first son was named “Manasseh,” which basically meant “made to forget.” God had made Joseph forget the hardship he had gone through at the hands of his family. This name indicates to the reader that God brought Joseph through his suffering, and we will see later on in Joseph’s life that this means he does not hold a grudge against his brothers. Thus, God had developed Joseph’s character.

The second son was named “Ephraim,” which basically meant “made fruitful.” God made Joseph fruitful through his affliction. So, not only had God brought Joseph through his hardship, but God produced something in Joseph through his suffering that would not have otherwise been produced.



What are some challenges you’ve faced that you see others facing? In what ways can God bring fruit out of your past affliction by leading you to minister to others in similar circumstances?

## 2. God shows us a picture of forgiveness (Gen. 45:1-15).

We've seen that one way God was faithful to His covenant was by bringing fruit out of Joseph's affliction. It's here that the story takes a turn, and now we see in the life of Joseph an incredible picture of forgiveness, one that models the faithfulness of God to His people.

As we saw earlier, our culture thrives on movies and songs about revenge. But we follow a King who commands us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and forgive those who have wronged us. King Jesus puts forth a counterculture where we do not hold a grudge. He shows us a bigger and better plan where evil is used for good and forgiveness leads to salvation.

- ❓ Why is it so difficult for us to forgive those who wrong us?
- ❓ What is it about forgiveness that is so painful?

When Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt for food, they bowed down to him, which fulfilled his earlier dreams. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. Through a series of circumstances, Joseph hatched a plan to keep his brother Benjamin behind, but the brothers worried such an event would hasten their father Jacob's death. At this pivotal moment, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers.

*<sup>1</sup> Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. <sup>4</sup> So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. <sup>10</sup> You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.*

### Further Commentary

Israel's family went to Egypt to get bread during the famine—just as Abraham had done (Gen. 12:10–20). Abraham's experience during famine—going to Egypt and eventually leaving enriched—was a preview of what would happen in the long run with Israel (cf. Ex. 12:35–36). God would keep His promises to the patriarchs.

### Further Commentary

"The climactic use of the sending in Genesis is seen in Joseph's words to his brothers, 'God *sent* me before you' (45:5, author's italics). That Joseph should discern the hand of God in his getting to Egypt was remarkable in light of the ungodly deeds which were the human side of the story. Three times Joseph is explicit in his use of the sending (vv. 5,7–8). 'God sent me before you to preserve life...to preserve for you a remnant on earth,' he emphasizes. This passage is profound in its covenantal and salvific implications. There is more than providence here. Joseph's words reach both back to the Abrahamic covenant and forward to the Exodus deliverance... The sending of Joseph was seen as a prelude to the sending of Moses and Aaron (Ps. 105:17,26) and, therefore, of the Exodus."<sup>3</sup>

—Francis Dubose,  
*The Mission of God  
Study Bible*

## Voices from the Church

“Godly love exposes darkness with a strength that reveals God’s righteousness and a tender mercy that invites the heart to repent and receive forgiveness.”<sup>4</sup>

—Dan Allender

## Voices from Church History

“As [Joseph] moistened the necks of his frightened brothers with his refreshing tears, he washed away their hatred with the tears of his charity.”<sup>5</sup>

—Caesarius of Arles (460-542)

## Voices from the Church

“Biblical forgiveness does release us, and not simply from our own anger and hurt. Biblical forgiveness releases us to bring the mercy we received from God out into the world to others.”<sup>6</sup>

—Leslie Leyland Fields

<sup>11</sup> *There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.’*

<sup>12</sup> *And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you.* <sup>13</sup> *You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.”*

<sup>14</sup> *Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck.* <sup>15</sup> *And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him.*

The reason Joseph could forgive his brothers was because he saw that it was really God who had sent him to Egypt for this very purpose—to save his family from the famine. God was keeping His covenant promises to Abraham. He rescued and sustained Jacob’s family through the suffering, humiliation, and exaltation of Joseph to power in Egypt.

Joseph kissed his brothers and showed them great mercy. He forgave his brothers because He trusted in the good plan of God—a plan that took what was meant for evil and turned it to good, to salvation! Joseph could have let bitterness take root in his heart, but instead, he forgave his brothers because he trusted in God’s plan to save others.

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that we are all sinners, but Christ died on the cross in order to forgive all of our sins fully. Christ’s forgiveness of our sins is the fuel to forgive those who sin against us. Refusing to forgive is not just disobedience; it’s unbelief. Holding a grudge reveals that you believe the cross of Christ is enough to forgive the sins you commit against God but not enough to forgive the sins committed against you. Instead, those of us who have been forgiven so much should extend forgiveness freely to others.

-  How does holding a grudge contradict the gospel?
-  How can meditating on the gospel empower you to be patient with and forgive others?

### 3. God overrules evil with good (Gen. 50:15-21).

You’ve probably heard the proverb “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” Just because someone mistreats you, it does not give you the right to mistreat them. Repaying evil with evil may be our sinful urge, but it is not the way God works. He is the God who forgives those who sin against Him and who does not repay evil with evil; instead, He overrules evil with good. We are called to follow God by displaying this kind of love to everyone, including our enemies and those who have wronged us because God uses this in His master plan.

As we pick back up with the story of Joseph, we see that Israel took his family down to Egypt to live there during the famine. At the time, they numbered around 70 people (Gen. 46:27). But God blessed them in Egypt and made them rich, and they multiplied (47:27).

Remember, God had promised to bless the whole world through Abraham's offspring. So before he died, Jacob restated these promises from God to his sons and foretold that the Messiah would come from Judah (49:8-10). When Jacob died, Joseph took his father's body to the promised land for burial. When he returned to Egypt, his brothers were concerned that Joseph would get his revenge—*Godfather* style—now that their father was dead.

*15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." 16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 17 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.*

Joseph's brothers feared that with their father dead, Joseph would now take revenge on them for selling him into slavery. They sent word to Joseph that before their father's death, he told them that he wanted Joseph to forgive everything his brothers did to him. Joseph cried when he heard this. His brothers bowed before him and told him they would serve him.

But Joseph exhorted them not to be afraid, and he indicated that he trusted in God's justice. He said he was not in God's place—what they intended for evil, God used for good to save many lives. So Joseph forgave them, comforted them, and took care of them and their families. He showed amazing grace to his brothers.

-  What wrong actions toward you would make you consider someone an "enemy"?
-  How can we show our enemies love and mercy as an expression of God's love for us?

## Further Commentary

"It is important not to suggest that God 'turned the evil into good,' or that because it all worked out in the end, it wasn't really so bad after all. The actions of the brothers were evil. Period. Evil in intent and evil in execution. But God demonstrated his sovereignty by showing that he can take what is done as an existing evil in the world and use it to bring about his own good purposes. God remains good, and God remains sovereign."<sup>7</sup>

—Christopher Wright

## Further Commentary

The Messiah will come from the line of Judah (Gen. 49:8-10), not the line of Joseph. We see a change in Judah's character throughout the Joseph story. Judah devised the plan to sell Joseph into slavery, but later on he was willing to substitute his life for Benjamin's (cf. Gen. 43:9; 44:33). The Lion from the tribe of Judah—Jesus Christ—would substitute Himself on the cross for the sins of the world.

## Voices from the Church

“The cross shows us that God can take the worst possible evil and through it accomplish the greatest possible good—the destruction of evil itself.”<sup>8</sup>

—Christopher Wright

Joseph went on to live a long life. When he died, he was put in a borrowed tomb in Egypt, his remains waiting to return with God’s people to the promised land. Genesis began with life in paradise, but it ends in death in a borrowed tomb outside the promised land. God made a covenant with Abraham, and the promises were still unfulfilled. But the story was not over yet...

Joseph’s life was a preview of the coming Messiah who would forgive those who wronged Him. Joseph knew that God used his brothers’ sinful actions to save many people. Jesus would be mistreated, betrayed for silver, handed over to captivity, and ultimately executed at the hands of evil men. While He was being crucified, He looked upon the ones killing him with a forgiving heart (see Luke 23:34). On the cross, He secured saving forgiveness for the world, and then God highly exalted Him so that the nations of the world would stream to Him, bow the knee and confess Him as Lord (Phil. 2:5-11; cf. Isa. 45:23). Evil men killed the Messiah, but God used even their evil deeds to accomplish His goal of salvation.



How does the gospel help you put the bad things that happen in your life in the right perspective?

## Conclusion

Longing for justice and for things to be set right are not wrong, but our bitterness, desire for revenge, and lack of forgiveness reveal that we want to execute a task that belongs to God alone. It reveals unbelief in our hearts because it shows that we do not trust in the justice and mercy of God (Rom. 12:19; cf. Matt. 18:21-35).

How can we suffer injustice and forgive while trusting that God’s plan is better? The answer is the gospel of Jesus Christ. “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly,” says 1 Peter 2:23. The power to forgive our enemies is found in trusting the justice and mercy of God, a justice and mercy that touched down clearly on Calvary’s hill.

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** God took the evil deeds of Joseph’s brothers and used them for His greater plan of providing salvation from the famine. In the same way, God used the evil injustice of those who put His Son, Jesus, on the cross to bring about His master plan of providing salvation from sin and death.

## Additional Resources

# God Is Faithful to His Covenant



For helps on how to get started using *The Gospel Project*, ideas on how to better lead groups, or additional ideas for leading a specific session, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

## Study Material

- “The Defeat of Evil”—Chapter 3 from *The God I Don’t Understand* by Christopher J. H. Wright
- “The Test of Trust”—Article by Margaret Manning; find a link to this article at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)
- Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles, including “Joseph and His Brothers,” can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at [www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator](http://www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator). Look for Bundles: The Gospel Project.

## Sermon Podcast

W. A. Criswell: “Joseph Revealed to His Brothers”

Find a link to this at [gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://gospelproject.com/additionalresources)

## Tip of the Week

### Insightful Contributions

“Those who teach adults should recognize the fact that their students might have better and more valuable contributions to make to group learning than they, the teacher, might bring. That can be threatening to some adult teachers. Instead of being threatened, the adult teacher should see [group] insights and feedback as one of the greatest assets of adult education. Adults can take an average [group] and make it outstanding, if only adult teachers would tap into this quality of the adult learner.”<sup>9</sup>

To facilitate such contributions from your group members, utilize the small group and discussion activities in the session plans. Also, consider pairing or grouping members to discuss specific, important questions related to our mission as Christians. These will help people open up in less intimidating scenarios and provide opportunities for group members to share their God-given experiences and learning with others.

## References

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4. Dan Allender, quoted in *As We Forgive*, by Catherine Claire Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) [eBook].
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7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 62.
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### GOAL

Over the course of three years, participants will journey from Genesis to Revelation and discover how God's plan of redemption unfolds throughout Scripture and still today, compelling them to join the mission of God.

### PLAN OVERVIEW

|  |                       |                                |  |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------------|--|
|  | <b>Fall 2015</b>      | <i>The Story Begins</i>        | God the Creator (Genesis 1–11)<br>God the Covenant-Maker (Genesis 12–50)                   |
|  |                       | <b>Coming Next Quarter</b>     |  |
|  | <b>Winter 2015-16</b> | <i>God Delivers</i>            | God the Redeemer (Exodus)<br>God the Lawgiver (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy)             |
|  | <b>Spring 2016</b>    | <i>The Promised Land</i>       | God the Savior (Numbers, Joshua)<br>God the Judge (Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel)                 |
|  | <b>Summer 2016</b>    | <i>A Kingdom Established</i>   | God the King (1–2 Samuel)<br>God All Wise (1 Kings, Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)   |
|  | <b>Fall 2016</b>      | <i>Prophets and Kings</i>      | God the Revealer (1–2 Kings, Isaiah)<br>God the Pursuer (Prophets, 1–2 Chronicles)         |
|  | <b>Winter 2016-17</b> | <i>Exile and Return</i>        | God the Sustainer (Daniel, Ezra)<br>God the Provider (Esther, Nehemiah, Malachi)           |
|  | <b>Spring 2017</b>    | <i>The Rescue Begins</i>       | God the Son (Gospels)<br>God Among Us (Gospels)  |
|  | <b>Summer 2017</b>    | <i>Stories and Signs</i>       | Jesus the Storyteller (Synoptic Gospels)<br>Jesus the Miracle-Worker (Gospels)             |
|  | <b>Fall 2017</b>      | <i>Jesus Saves</i>             | Jesus the Savior (Gospels)<br>Jesus the Risen King (Gospels, Acts)                         |
|  | <b>Winter 2017-18</b> | <i>The Church on Mission</i>   | The Spirit Who Empowers (Acts)<br>The God Who Sends (Acts)                                 |
|  | <b>Spring 2018</b>    | <i>Letters to God's People</i> | The God Who Directs His People (Epistles)<br>The God Who Changes Us (Epistles)             |
|  | <b>Summer 2018</b>    | <i>Come, Lord Jesus</i>        | God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)<br>The God Who Makes All Things New (Epistles, Revelation) |

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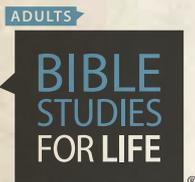
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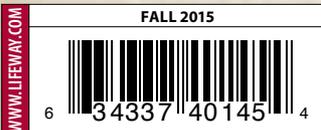


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