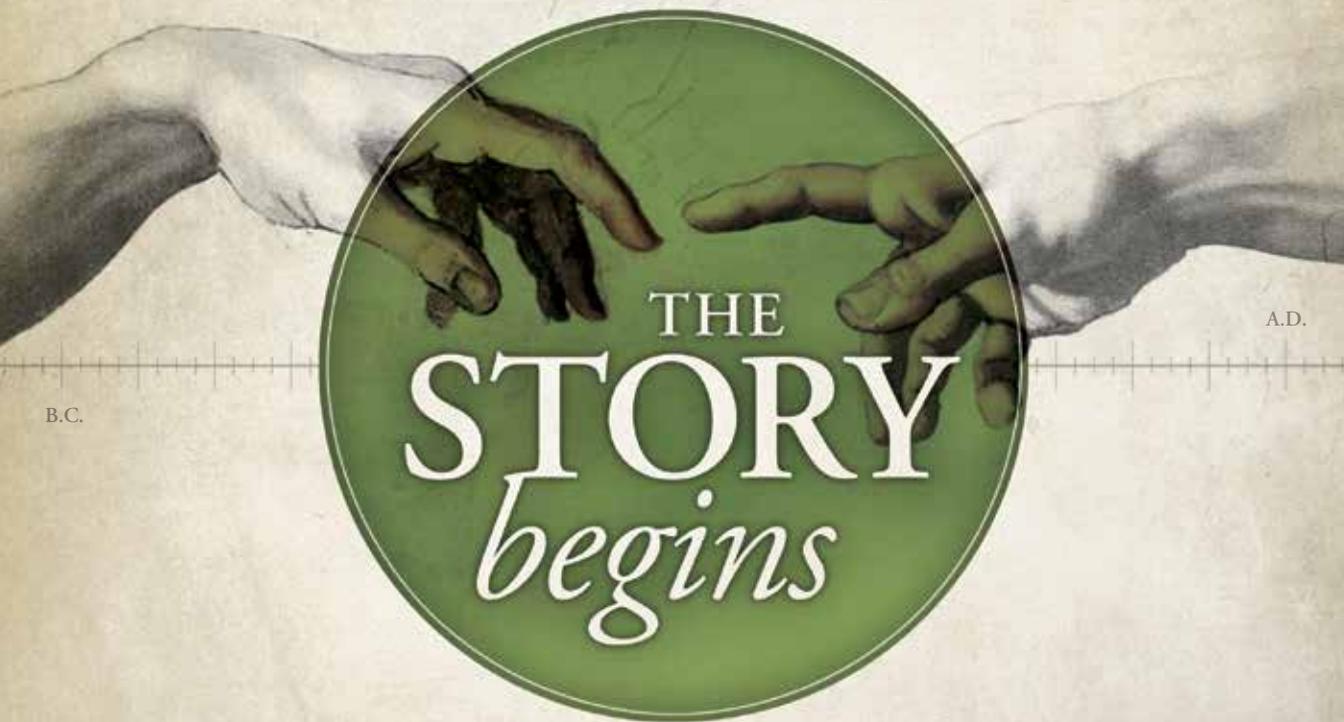


THE
GOSPEL
PROJECT[®]
CHRONOLOGICAL



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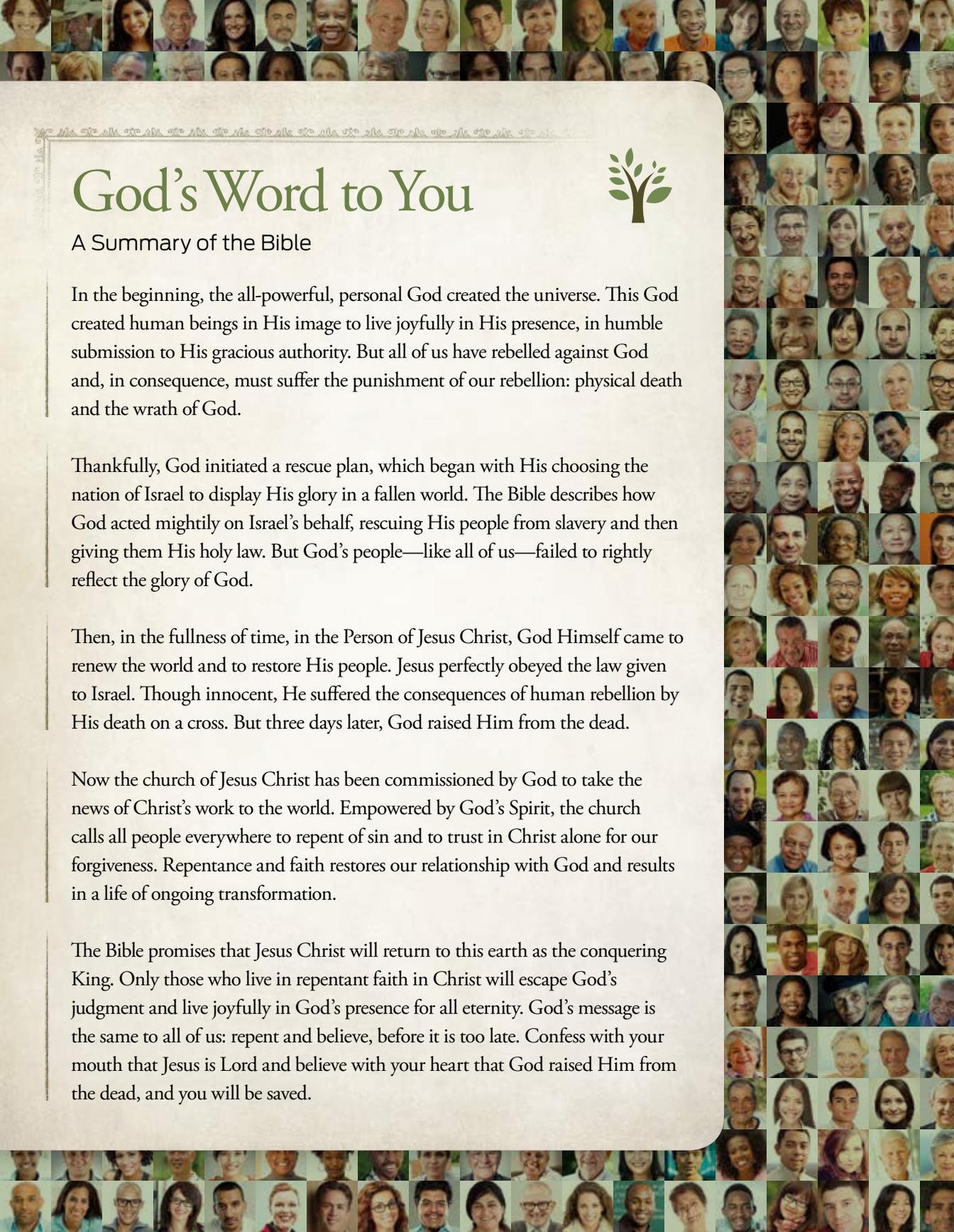
Volume 1

FALL 2015: *Personal Study 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 to 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.

The Gospel Project®

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**Suggested for
the week of**

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

September 6	10	<i>Session 1</i>	In the Beginning, God...
September 13	19	<i>Session 2</i>	In God's Image
September 20	28	<i>Session 3</i>	Human Rebellion
September 27	37	<i>Session 4</i>	The Spread of Sin
October 4	46	<i>Session 5</i>	The Creator Destroys and Redeems
October 11	55	<i>Session 6</i>	The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

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

October 18	65	<i>Session 7</i>	God's Covenant with Abraham
October 25	74	<i>Session 8</i>	The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham
November 1	83	<i>Session 9</i>	God Reaffirms the Covenant
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November 15	101	<i>Session 11</i>	The God Who Gives New Names
November 22	110	<i>Session 12</i>	The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering
November 29	119	<i>Session 13</i>	God Is Faithful to His Covenant



THE GOSPEL PROJECT CHRONOLOGICAL

A Journey Through the Storyline of Scripture

Fall 2015 *The Story Begins*

God the Creator (Genesis 1–11)

God the Covenant-Maker (Genesis 12–50)



Winter 2015-16 *God Delivers*

God the Redeemer (Exodus)

God the Lawgiver (Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy)

Spring 2016 *The Promised Land*

God the Savior (Numbers, Joshua)

God the Judge (Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel)

Summer 2016 *A Kingdom Established*

God the King (1–2 Samuel)

God All Wise (1 Kings, Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

Fall 2016 *Prophets and Kings*

God the Revealer (1–2 Kings, Isaiah)

God the Pursuer (Prophets, 1–2 Chronicles)

Winter 2016-17 *Exile and Return*
God the Sustainer (Daniel, Ezra)
God the Provider (Esther, Nehemiah, Malachi)

Spring 2017 *The Rescue Begins*
God the Son (Gospels)
God Among Us (Gospels)

Summer 2017 *Stories and Signs*
Jesus the Storyteller (Synoptic Gospels)
Jesus the Miracle-Worker (Gospels)

Fall 2017 *Jesus Saves*
Jesus the Savior (Gospels)
Jesus the Risen King (Gospels, Acts)

Winter 2017-18 *The Church on Mission*
The Spirit Who Empowers (Acts)
The God Who Sends (Acts)

Spring 2018 *Letters to God's People*
The God Who Directs His People (Epistles)
The God Who Changes Us (Epistles)

Summer 2018 *Come, Lord Jesus*
God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)
The God Who Makes All Things New (Epistles, Revelation)

Unit 1

GOD THE CREATOR

Genesis I–II

Memory Verses

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.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

—GENESIS 1:26-27

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In the Beginning, God...

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God created everything good through His Son.

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?

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.”¹

–Timothy M. Pierce

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...”

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.

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² 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 (Ps. 96:4-5).

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.

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?

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.

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. It does 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?

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."²

—Billy Graham

 What do these experiences tell you about God?

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. 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*.

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

⁶ And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ 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. ⁸ And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

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*.

¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.”²¹ 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.²² And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 He now fills. 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?

Ever since these first six days, creation has been fulfilling its purpose such that *everyone* knows God (Rom. 1:20-21). But even though everyone knows the truth about God, fallen humankind suppresses that truth in unrighteousness (v. 18). (We’ll speak more about the fall of humankind soon.)

Still, we can see the hope of evangelism and missions—we’re just trying to help people stop suppressing what they already know. God accomplishes this work through us with something greater than general revelation—special revelation through God’s Son, Jesus.

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).

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

⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶ 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.

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?” Every time we see God speak things into existence, the Son is there (John 1:1-3). All things are 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).

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

First, as a human being, a believer represents humanity, the apex of all of God’s creation (day 6 holds one more creation of God—the focus of session 2). 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—the light of Jesus Christ. This is why the Bible not only says that Jesus is the light but that we are light (Matt. 5:14-16).



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



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.

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some implications for our lives because of the truth that God made everything?

2. How should our perspective of God's creation and our actions in His creation change since we know God made everything good?

3. Identify one person (write name below), and pray for God to give you boldness to reveal Jesus—the One through whom all things exist and hold together—to this person and for the Holy Spirit to open his or her eyes to the light of Christ.

In God's Image

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.

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.*

I wonder if these same words express the Creator's heart at the beginning of time. "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!"



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?

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).

After God created the world and everything in it, He created the first human beings and 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. Take a look:

²⁶ 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.”

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

²⁸ 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.” ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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.



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.”¹

—Anthony Hoekema
(1913-1988)

 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 fish, birds, and even worms as living creatures that God has entrusted to your care? God intends for humanity to take care of the creation He has given us.

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. 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.

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.”²

—Christopher Wright

 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).



Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

In Genesis 2, we see that another way we reflect God 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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, ⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—⁷ 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. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ 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. 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.



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?

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.

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:

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ 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.”*

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵ 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.



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?



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.”³

—Skye Jethani

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

¹⁵ 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.

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.



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"?

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. ² 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. ³ 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.

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. 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.



Voices from Church History

"For you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you."⁴

—Augustine (354-430)

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.

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some ways we can take seriously the command of Genesis 1:28 to rule wisely over the world God has given us?

2. How will you change the way you relate to others (family, friends, enemies, outcasts, the lost) in light of the image of God that we share?

3. How can our rhythm of work and rest support our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Human Rebellion

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

In the previous session, we learned that 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 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?

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.

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."¹

—D. A. Carson

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

¹ 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?'"² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,³ 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.'"⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die.⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."⁶ 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.⁷ 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?" 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?

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.

Adam and Eve’s sin 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?



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.”²

—A Puritan prayer

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

⁸ *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.* ⁹ *But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”* ¹⁰ *And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”* ¹¹ *He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”* ¹² *The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”* ¹³ *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.”* ¹⁴ *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.* ¹⁵ *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.”* ¹⁶ *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 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.

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 clenched fist toward the One who made us.

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.



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 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).

¹⁷ 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;

¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ 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.”

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

²² 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—”²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ 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.

The work God gave us to subdue the earth has been invaded by toil, and the beauty of childbirth to fill the earth has been wracked with pain. Choosing to separate ourselves from God—the source of life—is the choice of death, our 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.

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 to cover their 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. 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?



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.”³

–W. A. Criswell (1909–2002)

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:

RULING OVER

RULING OVER

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

RULING OVER

RULING OVER

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

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

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some ways we are prone to distort or deny God's Word?

2. How is our mission in the world connected to the story of Adam and Eve's sin? How should this impact the way we share the gospel?

3. Name an effect of the fall that you see on a regular basis in the lives of others. How does the promise and appearing of Jesus give hope for this circumstance?

The Spread of Sin

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

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!" 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?

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. 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. Could one of these be the Son who will crush the serpent's head?

¹ Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ 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,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?⁷ 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, but God only accepted the sacrifice of Abel. Why? We find the answer in Hebrews 11:4. 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.



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."¹

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)



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?

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.



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.”²

—Augustine (354-430)

<p>List a number of sinful actions; then match them to the sinful desires that precede them.</p>	<p>Why is it important to consider sinful desires, not just sinful actions, in our battle against sin?</p>
Empty space for student response	Empty space for student response

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



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⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰ And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² 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. 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?”

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.



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?

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.



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.”³

—Bede (circa 673-735)



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? 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).

¹³ Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. ¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

.....

²⁵ 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."²⁶ 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.

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.



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

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. Yet 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.

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. Abel's blood, the blood shed *by* sin, was crying out 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.

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."⁴

—Tim Keller

 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).

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some practical ways we can fight against evil desires that rise up within us?

2. Where are specific places in our community that we, as a group and a church, can slow the spread of sin?

3. How have you been impacted by the mercy of God shown to us in Jesus' blood shed for our sins? With whom will you share this good news of Jesus?

The Creator Destroys and Redeems

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

So far in our study of Genesis, we've seen how God created the heavens and the earth and human beings made in His image. We watched how Adam and Eve sinned. 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.



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?

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.

Voices from the Church

"The story of the flood reveals a God who is both a holy Judge and a gracious Redeemer."¹

—Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen

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.

⁵ 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. ⁶ And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ 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. That word “grieved” (v. 6) 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?

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.

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?

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.

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

⁸ *But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

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

¹¹ *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.* ¹² *And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.* ¹³ *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."* ¹⁴ *Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.* ¹⁵ *This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits.* ¹⁶ *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.* ¹⁷ *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.* ¹⁸ *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.* ¹⁹ *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.* ²⁰ *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.* ²¹ *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."* ²² *Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

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?

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.



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.”²

—Dirk Philips (1504-1568)

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.



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.



¹ And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ² 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. ³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴ But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ 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.

⁶ “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

⁷ And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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?

We see clearly through God's words to Noah and his family that the flood did not fix everything and restore everything back to its proper order and place. 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.



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.'"³

—Chrysostom (circa 347-407)



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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some thoughts people in our culture might have about God judging the wickedness of the world? How would you respond to these thoughts?

2. What parallels do you see in the story of the flood and the gospel of Jesus Christ?

3. How will you carry out the Great Commission in light of your salvation in Christ from the coming judgment?

The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God judges and thwarts human attempts to thwart His glory.

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 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.

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.



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."¹

—Christopher Wright

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

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ 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. ⁴ 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." ⁵ 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..."

"They said to one another..."

"Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens."

“Let us make a name for ourselves.”

“Lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

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?



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.”²

—Chrysostom (circa 347-407)

? What role does “gathering together” play in a Christian’s desire to obey?

Considering the phrases discussed above, how might the events of Genesis 11 provide a window into human thought and behavior, even our thoughts and behavior?

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).

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). 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:

⁶ 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.” ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

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.



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?

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.

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. 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?



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."³

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)

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



⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ 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?

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.

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.

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."⁴

—Keith Whitfield

 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 taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, especially in the face of persecution and the threat of death.

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.”⁵

—John Piper

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some steps we should take when God convicts us of our prideful plans and disobedience?

2. Identify some examples of personal kingdom-building that we need to give up in order to make known the great name of God's Son—Jesus.

3. How does the Holy Spirit help us in our mission to lift up the name of Jesus?

Unit 2

GOD THE COVENANT-MAKER

Genesis 12–50

Memory Verse

And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

—GENESIS 15:6

Writer

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God's Covenant with Abraham

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

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.

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!"

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."¹

—Christopher Wright

? 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?

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.

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).

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ 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."

⁴ 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?

Through Abram’s descendants, God will reverse the misfortunes of Eden (separation from God) and Babel (separation from each other). 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).

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.

¹ 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."² 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?"³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."

Abram looked at the promises and his situation, and he thought that he would try to help God along. 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!

⁴ 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."⁵ 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."⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Voices from the Church

"Saving faith is faith in God's provision, not our performance."²

—Tim Keller

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).

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.

¹ 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, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ 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. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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."

⁹ And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² 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, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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."

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. 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?

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. 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).



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."³

—Martyn Lloyd-Jones
(1899–1981)

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some ways our group can be involved right now in being a light to the nations, both local and abroad?

2. What kind of person will a faith-focused life cause us to become?

3. How do our holiness and distinctiveness affect our mission as God's people?

The Covenant-Making God Tests Abraham

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Faith is trusting in God to keep His promise to provide salvation.

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.”¹

We shouldn't be surprised. Pop culture indoctrinates us with the idea that by our goodness we work our way up to God. 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?

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.



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."²

—Caesarius of Arles
(460-542)

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.

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."² 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."³ 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.⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.⁵ 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."⁶ 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?

For Abraham, 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).



⁷ 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?”⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹ 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.¹⁰ Then

Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”¹² 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.”¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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. 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."

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.

 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?

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.

3. God calls us to trust in His provision (Heb. 11:17-19).

17 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, 18 of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

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. He had faith that 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 “_____” son (of promise)	God’s “_____” Son (John 3:16)
Subject to be sacrificed, and willing	Subject to be sacrificed, and willing
Carried _____ for the sacrifice	Carried _____ for His sacrifice
“_____” (Gen. 22:14) God provided a substitute	“_____” (John 1:29) God provided the Substitute
_____ raised from the dead	_____ 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 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, such as carrying out the Great Commission. 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."³

—Ephrem the Syrian
(circa 306-373)

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. In light of the mercies of God in Jesus Christ, what does it mean for us to present our bodies as "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1)?

2. In what ways do we exercise faith when we need to forgive those who have wronged us, give faithfully to the work of the Lord, fight against lust, etc.?

3. How do Jesus' resurrection and the promise of our resurrection in Him help us overcome our fears about sharing our faith and participating in missions?

God Reaffirms the Covenant

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God promises the blessing of His presence to His people, even when they show themselves to be unworthy of His love.

One of my favorite movies from childhood was *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate 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?

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.



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."¹

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)

1. God keeps His promises in unusual ways (Gen. 25:19-26).

¹⁹ These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac,²⁰ 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.²¹ And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived.²² 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.²³ 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."²⁴ When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb.²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau.²⁶ 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—Isaac's wife, Rebekah, could not have children. Rebekah's 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. 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.

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.



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.”²

—Chrysostom (circa 347-407)



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).

¹ 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. ² And the LORD appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ 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. ⁴ 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, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

Another famine, this one 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?



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.”³

—John Stott (1921–2011)



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?

God took this opportunity to restate the promises to Isaac—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, he tried to offer his servant Eliezar as the heir, and then he fathered Ishmael by Hagar.

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. 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?

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).

3. God keeps His promises by offering us His presence (Gen. 28:10-22).

Sometimes I fear that we approach our relationship with God as one interested only in the benefits. 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.



¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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! ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ 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."

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel,

but the name of the city was Luz at the first.²⁰ 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,²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God,²² 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?

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!



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.”⁴

—Jim Thomas

CHRIST CONNECTION: God’s promise to be with His people is most clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, “God with us.”

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some unusual ways you have seen God keep His promises in your life or in our church? How do these testify to God's faithfulness?

2. How can the promises of God from Genesis stir up our hearts toward gratitude and obedience?

3. In what ways are we changed by experiencing the presence of God, either in worship or when we are not expecting it?

God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is sovereign over all of life, and He will work out His plan of redemption despite and sometimes through our dysfunction.

I grew up attending a church with beautiful stained glass windows that depicted scenes from well-known Bible stories. However, when I stood close to the window, I could not see the story; I saw jagged glass, bright colors, and indistinct details. 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.

 What is an event in your life that you didn't understand at the time but later realized God used to bless your life?

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.

Voices from the Church

"In the great mystery of grace, God commandeers even our stupid decisions to accomplish His purposes in us."¹

—J. D. Greear

1. God's plan goes forward through a dysfunctional family (Gen. 27:1-17).

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?

We see in Genesis 27 a final showdown between the brothers Jacob and Esau. Even though Isaac and his family were sinful, dysfunctional, and manipulative, God graciously keeps His promises.

¹ 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."² He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death.³ Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me,⁴ 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."

⁵ 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,⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father speak to your brother Esau,⁷ 'Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.'⁸ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you.⁹ 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.¹⁰ And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies."¹¹ But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man.¹² Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing."¹³ His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me."

¹⁴ So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷ And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

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?

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.

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:

¹⁸ So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?"¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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."²¹ 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."²² 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."²³ And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands. So he blessed him.²⁴ He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am."²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son."²⁷ 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 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.



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."²

—Hippolytus (circa 170–236)

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).

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:

³⁰ 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. ³¹ 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."

³² His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." ³³ 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." ³⁴ 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!" ³⁵ But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." ³⁶ 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?”³⁷ 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?”³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ 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.



Voices from Church History

“Esau wept but did not repent; instead he envied his brother’s prosperity.”³

—Theodoret of Cyr
(circa 390–457)

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.**

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 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; see also Amos 9:11-12.) 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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. In what ways can our dysfunctions and flaws distract us from our mission?

2. How can we boast in our weaknesses in a way that brings glory to God for Christ's power in us (2 Cor. 12:9)?

3. What are some ways we as a group or as individuals can engage in God's mission to bless all peoples of the earth?

The God Who Gives New Names

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Encountering God leads to a fundamental change of identity and purpose.

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 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?

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.

Voices from the Church

“Sanctification is stripping off the characteristics of old humanity, like filthy clothing, and reclothing ourselves with Christian behavior.”¹

—Richard Lovelace

1. Jacob’s old name reflected his flawed character (Gen. 32:24-27).

After Jacob cheated his brother and deceived his father, he traveled toward Paddan-aram and came to the eastern country (29:1), where he 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.

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.

²⁴ *And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.*

²⁵ *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.* ²⁶ *Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”*

²⁷ *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 (32:30). 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.



Voices from Church History

“O grand and splendid mystery! Overcome, he blesses, just as having suffered, he sets free.”²

—Augustine (354–430)



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).



Describe a time you made a difference in someone else's life by an act of grace.

Despite Jacob's repeated lying and scheming, God poured out grace upon him, and we see its effect here in Genesis 32.

²⁸ 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."²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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."³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.³² 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.

Jacob's new name would be "Israel" because he had struggled with God and prevailed (32:28). God blessed him, and 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.

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."³

—Tim Keller



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.

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).

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).

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:

⁹ God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.” ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

Notice the progression for Jacob:

_____	_____	_____
(v. 9)	(v. 10)	(v. 11)

In the same way, God blesses us with salvation and transformation so that we can then fulfill His calling on our lives.

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.

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.



Voices from Church History

"During this struggle you are Jacob, but after your faith in the blessing for which you prayed you are Israel."⁴

—Hilary of Poitiers
(circa 300-368)

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR 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.

1. Write a prayer of confession for the sinful character traits in your life, and thank God for the grace and forgiveness found in Jesus.

2. In what ways has your life or someone you know been changed by an act of grace from another? How does this reflect God's grace?

3. What are some blessings that God has given you that He intends for you to use to bless others?

The God Whose Plan Involves Suffering

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is sovereign over our lives, and He uses suffering and injustice to accomplish His plans in and through us.

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.

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).

Let's take a look at Genesis 37, where we see God reveal His plan for Joseph's future.

³ 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. ⁴ 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.

⁵ Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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.

⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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?"

¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.



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."¹

—W. A. Criswell (1909-2002)

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. 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?

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.



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."²

—John Wesley (1703-1791)

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.



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.



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.

²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. ²⁴ And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ 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.

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.



This horrific act of betrayal and injustice was part of the process God would use to accomplish His plan of rescuing Israel, and the world. 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.

^{6b} Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."⁸ 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. ⁹ 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?"¹⁰ And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

¹¹ 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, ¹² 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. ¹³ And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. ²² 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. ²³ 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.

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. 21). 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.



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).



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."³

—Adrian Rogers (1931-2005)

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. What are some specific promises of God that can sustain us as we seek to bring glory to God's Son, Jesus?

2. Why is it important to do the right thing, regardless of the outcome?

3. What role should the body of Christ play in showing people that God has not abandoned them?

God Is Faithful to His Covenant

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is sovereign and He will bring good out of evil circumstances.

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!

? 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.

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.

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 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.



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."¹

—Chrysostom (circa 347-407)

⁴⁶ 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. ⁴⁷ During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, ⁴⁸ 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. ⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphra priest of On, bore them to him. ⁵¹ 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."⁵² The name of the second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

⁵³ The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ 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. ⁵⁵ 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."

⁵⁶ 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. ⁵⁷ 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: Manasseh and Ephraim. Their names are theologically instructive, teaching us how God was working in Joseph's life to accomplish His plan.

 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).

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.

¹ 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. ² And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ 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.

⁴ 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. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ 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. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.” ¹² And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ 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.

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?



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.”²

—Dan Allender

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 exhorted his brothers 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?

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.

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.”³

—Christopher Wright



How does the gospel help you put the bad things that happen in your life in the right perspective?

Conclusion

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.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

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.

1. How does God's faithfulness to bring fruit out of our affliction encourage you to remain faithful during desperate and trying times?

2. Are you holding a grudge? Pen a prayer asking for forgiveness and the grace to forgive. Then plan your steps to seek reconciliation.

3. Since Jesus is the Savior who offers forgiveness to the world, how can we be part of the commission to take the message of forgiveness to all peoples?

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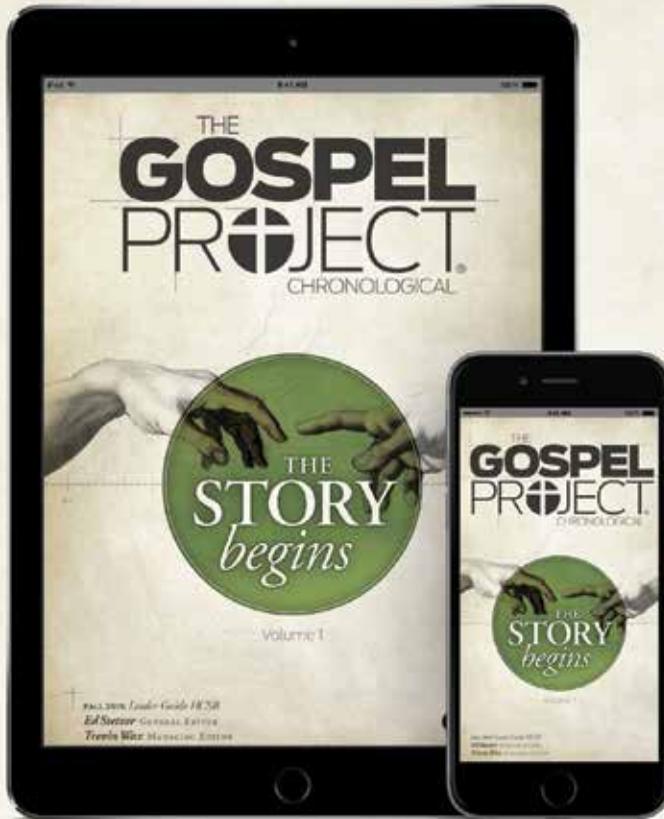
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WINTER 2015-16

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