

# ***In the Beginning God: 13 Lessons in Genesis***

## **Leaders Guide**



**13 online adult Sunday school lessons**

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### **About Acacia Resources**

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

For more information about Acacia Resources, call 615-383-3192 or visit our Web site at [www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com).

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An *In the Beginning God: 13 Lessons from Genesis* Students Guide is also available from Acacia Resources ([www.acaciaresources.com](http://www.acaciaresources.com)).

## Preface

It’s all there: humanity and deity; sin and virtue; alienation and community; doubt and hope; violence and peace; loss and gain; grief and joy; deception and honesty; betrayal and devotion; seduction and protection; oppression and freedom.

Within the stories of Genesis lie human emotions and experiences common to people of every generation. The people of Genesis were real people who at times lived faithfully and at other times failed miserably.

As individuals and as a developing nation, the ongoing and interwoven stories of their lives were important to them. They provided a way to transmit their culture, heritage and history as God’s unique people. And they are important to us, for many reasons.

These stories form part of the sacred text for both Jews and Christians and hold inestimable value for people of both faiths.

They convey information, ideas and meanings in ways that touch our emotions and senses.

They help us develop our imaginations and think creatively and critically.

They challenge us to examine our attitudes, see new possibilities and reject long-held prejudices.

They enable us to see the world through the eyes of other people, and in the process, see ourselves, our worst tendencies and our best possibilities. Through the lives and experiences of others, we have the opportunity to look at our own lives more objectively.

They also can persuade, influence and motivate us to action, for in and through the stories of Genesis, God speaks. We must decide how we will respond.

The Genesis family trees reveal love and hate, calm and storm, normalcy and dysfunction. Within these stories we discover families both similar to and different from our own: parents whose enduring love grows deeper and stronger; children devoted to their parents' care; brothers who defend sisters; other siblings who allow jealousy to turn to disloyalty, bitter conflict and rage.

Together these families formed a group of people destined to become a great nation but who struggled with how to make that happen. We see them learn to build relationships, form community and grow in monotheistic faith.

We learn through the Genesis stories the truth that an individual's choices and decisions can affect the equilibrium not only of immediate family but also of community and nation, with repercussions extending across generations.

Many of these stories we first heard as children. The characters became heroes, their flaws and frailties all but hidden from us. And that is how many of us continue to recall the stories: larger-than-life characters, simple plots, sanitized problems, easy solutions.

But these are not children's stories. They are complex, sometimes dark and troubling and often difficult to understand. Controversy surrounds much of Genesis, beginning with the creation account, leading to dialogue and debate that has been both healthy and harmful for the faith community.

Rather than cause us discomfort, this tension should propel us to study the scriptures with clarity and integrity, opening ourselves to new insights and possibilities.

Always our pursuit should lead us to ask: What did this story mean for those who lived it? What does it reveal about God? What does it cause us to realize about ourselves?

As we ask and answer such questions, we will discover a God who, in spite of humanity's repeated rebellion, continues to trust people and work through them. We will see how God works within the faith community, but sometimes also chooses to work apart from and outside of it to meet human need and bless all of creation.

We will see God's plans for a redemptive future unfold as we reexamine these familiar stories. Working through people of all races and cultures and through imperfect systems and flawed families, God creates new life and fresh promises for people of all generations.

Throughout God's activity and humanity's response, we can observe how God does what is necessary to confront, challenge and convict people to live redemptively and faithfully. Often this means that people must turn their backs on old patterns of living and establish new priorities as their understanding of the divine plan grows. In this and other ways, their stories become our stories.

In spite of humanity's often careless living and sometimes flagrant disobedience, the divine plan continues. Poor choices that often result in diminished lives for others do not prevent God from preserving and protecting life. In spite of humanity's failures, God works faithfully to pursue goodness, reconciliation and unity within the human family.

The stories of Genesis as well as our own experiences confirm this truth.

As you approach the familiar stories of Genesis, allow the God whose presence and power fills these stories to teach you something new that will positively affect how you relate to God and to the rest of creation.

*Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.*

## Caring for Creation Leaders Guide

### **Genesis 1:26-31**

*<sup>26</sup>Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." <sup>27</sup>So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup>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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." <sup>29</sup>God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup>And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. <sup>31</sup>God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

### **2:15, 19-20a**

*<sup>15</sup>The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ... <sup>19</sup>So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. <sup>20</sup>The man gave names to all cattle*

*and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field;*

**Theme: God gives human beings responsibility for creation.**

## Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► For excellent perspectives and resources on caring for the environment from a Christian perspective, visit the Web site ([www.creationcare.org](http://www.creationcare.org)) of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), a ministry whose purpose is “to declare the Lordship of Christ over all creation” (Col. 1:15-20).

Jim Ball, executive director of EEN, is a regular columnist for EthicsDaily.com and writes thoughtfully and comprehensively about the relationship between Christian faith and the environment.

You may particularly find helpful the following topics from the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section of EEN’s Web site:

- Jesus Christ’s Relationship to All of Creation: Creator, Sustainer, Reconciler, Consummator, true Imago Dei, Heir of all things, Lord;
- Creation Declares the Glory of God;
- The Old Testament Proclaims God as Creator;
- The Earth is the Lord’s;

- The Relationship Between “Environmental Problems” and Christian Love and Justice.

The site also includes a number of biblical texts relevant to creation care, under these headings:

- God Provides for and Desire’s Sufficiency and Contentment for the Rest of Creation;
- The Interrelationship Between Humanity and the Rest of Creation;
- The Rest of Creation Harmed by Humanity’s Sin;
- God’s Future Kingdom: a New Creation.

► EthicsDaily.com regularly features columns and news related to creation care and the environment. The following list is representative; you may find these and other articles helpful as you prepare for and lead this Bible study:

“The World Summit’s Challenge to Christians,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1571](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1571));

“What Would Jesus Drive?,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=1664](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1664));

“Churches Strive to Practice What They Preach on Environment,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2460](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2460));

“Couple Making ‘What Would Jesus Drive?’ Tour,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=2665](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2665));

“Touching The World And Reading The Bible,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3172](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3172));

“Oceans: Vast But Not Invincible,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3792](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3792));

“Christians and the Creation,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3835](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3835));

“Many Christians Still Don’t ‘Get’ Environmentalism,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3903](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3903));

“Environmental Agenda Making Progress Despite Spin and Distortion,” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4086](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4086));

“Being Good Stewards of God’s World,”  
([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4623](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4623)).

► Suggestions for introducing this lesson come in part from the following article by Melodie Davis on the Internet site Third Way Café. You may want to read it in its entirety:

“The Wonderful Tree,” [www.thirdway.com/aw](http://www.thirdway.com/aw).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Ask adults to indicate by a show of hands if as students they memorized the Joyce Kilmer poem about trees. Identify the poem by its first line: “I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree.” Ask them to recall additional lines if possible.

Then challenge adults to make a list of all of the things, from very general to quite specific, they can think of that trees give us. Write the items on a board or chart. Supplement the list by including items from Melodie Davis’s column:

“wood for houses; firewood; paper; pencils; boxes; board games; candy wrappers; furniture; toothpicks; insulation; musical instruments; branches used in home decorating; flooring; money; packaging; laminated wood; shade; landscaping; homes for birds, squirrels and other creatures; not to mention being a critical part of the photosynthesis process” (“The Wonderful Tree,” [www.thirdway.com/aw/](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/)).

Davis reminds us that “nearly 100 percent of a harvested tree is used for some purpose” and notes the various products we get from trees, including syrup, rubber and all kinds of fruits and nuts.

“In the tree,” Davis says, “we see evidence of God’s creativity, but also the creativity of humans as we tap trees for more and more products. In this case, the nut didn’t ‘fall far from the tree’: God said humans were created in God’s image, so that means we’re at our best when we’re being creative, too. That means we must be creative when it comes to conserving, replanting, refurbishing the earth in order to make sure trees are around for our great-great-grandchildren.”

► Point out that God’s first words to people were about their relationship to the earth. God’s plan from the beginning was to give people creative power and responsibility for creation.

Note that trees are, of course, only one part of the creation God has entrusted to us. Because we are created in God’s image, we have the capacity to relate to the wider creation as God does. God gives us numerous opportunities every day to help lead the world closer to its fullest potential.

### Explore the Bible

► Acknowledge the long history of debate over Genesis

and creation, including the controversies among Baptists surrounding the Genesis accounts. Cite examples from the Introduction in the Students Guide and ask adults to elaborate on them.

Point out the differences between the Fundamentalist and moderate views of the creation story.

Encourage adults as you examine scripture accounts of creation to consider the *who* and the *why* rather than the *how* and the *when*. Challenge them to view these accounts through eyes of faith rather than scientific lenses.

Suggest that the intense debates over the creation accounts have often prevented people from realizing and accepting humanity's responsibility in creation.

► Read aloud Genesis 1:26-31 and engage adults in discussion by asking them to respond to questions such as these:

- *Is the place in the creation cycle in which God created humanity significant? Why or why not?*
- *What does it mean that God created people in the divine image? How do you understand this? How do you explain what this means to someone who is unfamiliar with the concept?*
- *Does being created in the divine image affect the way you live? Should it?*
- *Do you think that most people live with awareness that they are created in the divine image? If they did, how do you think our world would be different?*
- *What does dominion involve? What is the differ-*

*ence between dominion and domination?*

- *What is the relationship of justice to dominion?*
- *How do you interpret "be fruitful and multiply the earth"?*
- *Has humanity already fulfilled this mandate?*
- *Have we done so to the point that overpopulation is endangering the environment and degrading the quality of life for many people?*

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 2:15. Explain that the concept of "till" involves seeking the welfare of and serving creation. "Keeping" carries with it the idea of guarding and offering watchcare.

Stress that God's plan is for humanity to serve and care for creation and guard it from harm and abuse.

► Explain the significance of names within the Hebrew tradition. The name parents select for their child might reflect a wish they have for that child; a conviction or statement; an emotion; or even a quality or characteristic. For example, Ezekiel is translated, "may God strengthen"; Daniel as "my judge is God"; Isaac as "laughter."

Names might also refer to specific events, locations or status. Naming someone or something in Jewish life also indicates that the person who names has power and authority.

Read aloud Genesis 2:19-20a. Then ask:

- *Why do you think God allowed "the man" to name the animals?*

- *What special relationship or responsibility does this act imply?*

## Apply Biblical Truth

► Using information in the Students Guide and articles from EthicsDaily.com, recall for adults the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign as an example of a practical way to exercise environmental stewardship. Then ask:

- *Do you believe environmental stewardship and earth care are personal ethical duties?*
- *If so, how can we fulfill these duties?*

Stress that creation care involves caring not only for the earth nor only for humanity but for both. God created the earth and everything in it and gives and sustains life, and Christ has reconciled everything to God. Our relationship with Christ involves us too in creating, sustaining and reconciling, and it also means that we avoid doing things that prevent these from happening.

EEN’s Web site reminds us that “most major environmental problems such as air pollution, water pollution, and the threat of global warming hurt people. These problems fight against Christ’s reconciliation of all of creation. In many instances they hit the poor, the children, and the elderly the hardest.”

► As time permits, read or summarize the following thoughts from EthicsDaily.com columnist Miguel De La Torre and ask adults to respond and react to them:

“If the Creation story describes humanity’s appointment as steward of the earth’s resources, then as caretakers, humans are called to protect, preserve and safeguard

those resources so that all can benefit and enjoy its fruits. ... Creation as gift means that all living creatures have a basic right to its products, and no group has the right to hoard all its resources. Hoarding the earth’s resources upsets the delicate balance between life and the resources needed to sustain life. We in the U.S., as part of the world’s richest 20 percent, own 85 percent of the world’s income. Yet we are responsible for producing 66 percent of the world’s greenhouse gasses and consuming 70 percent of the world’s energy” (“Christians and the Creation,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3835](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3835)).

“The earth needs to be saved in order for individuals also to receive salvation. If nature is wasted, depleted and destroyed, then individuals will not be able to control their destiny. Such a sin cannot be easily atoned, for we are not gods that can resurrect extinct species. This calls for radical changes in the political sphere, changes that if not taken can lead to the domination of all due to limited resources, which would continue being controlled by the wealthy few. ... The God who takes notice of the least of creation, the falling sparrow, is concerned with all of creation. ‘Man’ is not called to dominate the earth. Rather, humans are called to be stewards of the earth’s resources, ensuring that each has enough.”

► To demonstrate your care for and involvement with God in creation, challenge your group to plan and carry out a recycling, refurbishing or planting project. For example, you may decide to plant one or more trees in your community. Consult administrators of a nearby school or park to find a suitable location and for permission to proceed.

Ask someone to coordinate this effort, and suggest that it become an intergenerational, family or even churchwide event involving children, teenagers, grandchildren and others.

## Assigning Blame or Accepting Responsibility? Leaders Guide

### Genesis 3:1-19

*<sup>1</sup>Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" <sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." <sup>6</sup>So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. <sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. <sup>8</sup>They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup>But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" <sup>10</sup>He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." <sup>11</sup>He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" <sup>12</sup>The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I*

*ate." <sup>13</sup>Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." <sup>14</sup>The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. <sup>15</sup>I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." <sup>16</sup>To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." <sup>17</sup>And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup>thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

**Theme: The human cycle of sin and blame results in disharmonious relationships at all levels.**

### Before You Teach

- ▶ Prior to reading scripture or any other source, make a list of facts you can recall about Adam, Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Save the list to use later as you teach.
- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► For additional information and an informative read, Student Guide lesson writer Mike Smith recommends *Noah's Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries About the Event that Changed History* by William Ryan and Walter Pittman (Simon & Schuster: 1998).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Lead adults to explore the human tendency to blame by asking them to recall recent events that caused people to rush to assign blame.

For example, some people blamed the rash of school shootings exclusively on violence-filled music, television, computer games and movies. When instances of sexual abuse by priests and other religious leaders began to surface, some people, in an attempt to cover up the alleged abuses, blamed the victims.

Point out how horrified people from around the world blamed the tragic events of September 11, 2001, on everything and everyone from the President to the CIA, Congress and Muslims. Cite the following from Tom Ehrich, a syndicated columnist and Episcopal priest.

Writing on the third anniversary of 9/11, Ehrich reminded readers of how quickly we focused on which government agencies to blame but how we failed to seek understanding of the why and who of September 11. We failed to listen and learn from how much of the rest of the world perceives America and Americans, he said.

“Rather than repent, we declared our righteousness. Rather than learn, we insisted on already knowing. Rather than see reality, we blamed. Rather than open our hearts to love, our

minds to wisdom and our souls to God, we retreated behind familiar walls. Now we are isolated in the world, divided from each other, fighting for scraps of religious and political right-opinion, and more vulnerable than ever to further assault.

“It is tragic,” Ehrich concludes. “And we have done it to ourselves. Pride and blindness won again. Repentance—God’s avenue to wisdom and peace—was declared weak and unnecessary.”

► Suggest that regardless of the circumstances, when things go wrong people generally want to blame anything and anyone before accepting personal responsibility. We somehow think that implicating others lessens the degree of our own guilt or responsibility.

Point out that the roots of our tendency to blame others are as deep as our tendency to sin. When sin entered the human equation, blame followed closely on its heels. And while sin separates us from God, blame damages our relationships with others. Sin and blame form a cycle that disrupts relationships at all levels.

### Explore the Bible

► Ask adults to list all of the facts they can recall from the account of Adam, Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Encourage them to do so solely from memory and the recollection of things they were taught in Sunday school.

As adults name facts from the story, list these on a board or chart. Reveal for them the list you personally made prior to re-reading the scripture and this related lesson. Review the list and, as necessary, strike through those not supported by scripture. For example, this passage never identifies the serpent as Satan. That interpretation came later. Eve did

not “trick” Adam. Adam willfully chose to eat the fruit. And the fruit was not identified as an apple.

Challenge adults to listen to the scriptural account of Adam and Eve and their experience with sin and blame in the Garden of Eden as if hearing it for the first time.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 2:15-18. Then ask another to read aloud Genesis 3:1-7.

Note that God had not yet created Eve when God gave Adam the original command regarding the tree. Lead adults to examine the scriptural account by asking them to respond to questions such as these:

- *What was God’s actual command to Adam regarding “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”?*
- *What did the serpent ask Eve?*
- *What did Eve say that God had said?*
- *How did Eve’s interpretation/explanation differ from what God actually said?*

Remind adults that Eve did not hear God’s original command regarding the tree. Either she misquoted God or she was repeating Adam’s misquoting of God’s command. Then ask:

- *What did knowing good and evil mean for Adam and Eve?*
- *Why do you think Eve chose to eat from the tree?*

- *What do you think God meant when God said that “in the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you shall die”?*
- *What was the immediate result when Adam and Eve disobeyed God?*

Suggest that much of humanity’s sinfulness stems from the same things that led Eve ultimately to disobey God: hunger, lust and pride.

► Read aloud Genesis 3:8-13 and challenge adults to respond to these questions:

- *Why did Adam and Eve want to hide?*
- *What were they hiding from?*
- *How did God’s relationship with Adam and Eve change as a result of their disobedience?*
- *How did God deal with their disobedience?*

Note that God first called to Adam and asked him where he was. Point out Adam’s rather lengthy answer, in light of God’s direct question. After noting God’s response, point out Adam’s statement in verse 12 where he not only blames Eve but also in effect blames God for what happened because God created Eve (“the woman whom you gave to be with me”). Eve, in response to God’s question, blamed the serpent, saying it tricked her.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 3:14-19 and review the ways God dealt with the serpent, Eve and Adam. Point out that while God cursed the serpent and the ground, God did not curse Eve or Adam. God’s curse to the serpent

resulted in it being subject to humiliation and having enmity with human beings.

God added pain to Eve's experience of childbirth to remind her of her disobedience. Adam's disobedience resulted in much of his work being futile and non-productive. And their collective disobedience created disharmony in their marital relationship.

► Remind adults that in scripture's first story that includes two active human characters, sin and blame also enter the picture. Humanity quickly learned to use blame as a strategy to deflect responsibility for personal sin.

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Suggest that just as we often join sin and blame in human experience and create fractures in our relationships, we must deliberately join genuine confession with repentance if forgiveness is the desired result. Cite the following as an example:

When religious leaders gathered in 1998 for the White House Prayer Breakfast, they expected a discussion on the race initiative. Instead, they heard a 15-minute speech from then President Bill Clinton about his personal moral failings and his desire to change.

"I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned," Clinton said. "I must have God's help to be the person that I want to be, a willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek. A renunciation of the pride and the anger which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain. ... God can change us and make us strong at the broken places" ([www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week202/p-cover.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week202/p-cover.html)).

► Challenge adults to seek reconciliation in relationships damaged by sin and blame. Suggest as first steps admitting and accepting personal responsibility, repenting and seeking forgiveness.

## Providing Hope Leaders Guide

### Genesis 6:11-19, 22

*<sup>11</sup>Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. <sup>12</sup>And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. <sup>13</sup>And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. <sup>14</sup>Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. <sup>15</sup>This is how you are to make it: . . . <sup>17</sup>For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. <sup>18</sup>But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your son's wives with you. <sup>19</sup>And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. . . . <sup>22</sup>Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

### Genesis 9:9-10

*<sup>9</sup> "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you, and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark."*

**Theme: In spite of all the problems people make for themselves and others, God continues to trust humanity, give them hope and work through them.**

## Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► On individual paper strips, write one of the following phrases: human responsibility and possibility; the price of irresponsibility; divine grace; daily hope. Make enough copies of the strips for each person in your group to have one.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Ask adults who have seen the 1991 movie "City Slickers" to summarize its plot. Supplement their comments with the following:

Billy Crystal plays Mitch Robbins, a middle-aged radio ad salesman who, along with his friends Ed (Bruno Kirby) and Phil (Daniel Stern), is having a midlife crisis. The three men decide to take a two-week trip and drive cattle from New Mexico to Colorado. In the process, they meet a real cowboy, Curly (Jack Palance), who teaches them not only what they need to know to live like cowboys but also some other valuable life lessons.

In one scene, Phil becomes very emotional, saying that he is almost 40 years old yet he feels his life is a waste. His friend Mitch reminds him of times when they played ball as children. If their ball got stuck in a tree, they could call a "do over." Mitch encourages Phil to consider that his life is a clean slate, that he can have a "do over."

► Lead adults to consider the possibility of "do overs" in life by asking such questions as:

- *Do you think that once people have made a mess of things in their lives, they can have opportunities for “do overs”? Why or why not?*
- *What biblical evidence can you provide that affirms the fact that God offers people additional chances—“do overs”—and continues to work through them in spite of their mistakes and problems?*
- *Do you think that you have had the opportunity for “do overs” in life? When?*
- *What kinds of problems do we create for ourselves that cause us to want to start over?*
- *What kinds of problems do our choices often create for other people? for the earth?*

► Suggest that many of the problems we face are the result of our own poor choices: personal debt that spirals out of control due to undisciplined spending; health problems resulting from unwise eating habits and lack of exercise; broken relationships resulting from lack of communication, an unwillingness to compromise and dysfunctional living patterns.

Note that our problems often affect not only us but others as well. And general societal attitudes of self-centeredness, apathy and discourtesy create problems for other people and for the rest of creation. Polluted air and water, eroding soil, depleted ozone layer, global warming and nuclear technology have implications not only for our physical health but also for our planet and its future and for the lives of people not yet born.

► State that in the story of Noah we find evidence of God’s willingness to give humanity another chance—a “do over.” In spite of a world plagued by violence and corrupt living, God refused to give up on humanity and instead displayed trust, offered hope and worked through Noah’s family to preserve creation. Noah’s story reminds us that God wants to do the same through each of us.

### **Explore the Bible**

► Suggest that because the story of Noah is widely told to children in Sunday school, it has become one of the Genesis stories that we tend to see, even as adults, as a “children’s story.” Yet if we continue to frame it only that way, we may fail to understand some important truths about God and the way God chooses to work with and through humanity.

Also suggest that the detailed instructions God gave Noah for building the ark can become a stumbling block for those reading this story and trying to learn from it. These details are instructive for us primarily because they show the great lengths to which God went to ensure that the ark would be safe for the human and animal inhabitants and that they could thereby continue life following the destructive flood. Encourage adults in your group to affirm and appreciate the details of the ark’s construction but not get bogged down in examining them in detail.

Remind adults that Noah’s story provides firm evidence that the worst human-induced catastrophes are not enough to stop God’s divine plan or prevent God from providing hope and offering a future.

► Point out that Genesis 6-9 contains the complete Noah account. Your discussion will focus on a small portion of this account.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 6:11-15a. Then lead adults to discuss it by asking the following questions, supplementing their comments with information from the Students Guide:

- *How would you describe the nature of Noah's world? How do you think the people interacted with each other?*
- *What specific complaint did God lodge against the earth and humanity?*
- *What did God resolve to do as a result of humanity's corruption and violence?*
- *What set Noah apart from the other people around him? Why did God take special notice of Noah?*
- *How do you think Noah lived in contrast to those around him?*

► Read aloud Genesis 6:17-19, 22. Then guide adults to understand the devastating nature of floods by pointing out such facts as these ([www.fema.gov/hazards/floods/flood.shtm](http://www.fema.gov/hazards/floods/flood.shtm)):

- The force of only six inches of moving water is strong enough to knock people off their feet.
- Flash flood waters are capable of rolling boulders, tearing out trees, destroying buildings and knocking out bridges. Walls of water can reach 10 to 20 feet in height and often carry large volumes of destructive debris.
- Just two feet of moving water can sweep away cars.

- The only natural disaster that is more common and widespread than flood is fire.
- More than 10,000 people have died as the result of flooding in the United States since 1900.
- Flooding causes more than \$1 billion each year in property damage in the US.

► Remind adults that God's destruction of the earth and all its inhabitants was complete, with the exception of Noah, his family and the animals God instructed Noah to take on the ark. While God did destroy all but one portion of humanity and the rest of creation, God also preserved a portion and once again entrusted creation to this man and his family. Ask:

- *What did Noah embody for God?*
- *What did God hope Noah and his descendants would do?*
- *What do you think God meant by telling Noah "I will establish my covenant with you"? How do you think Noah understood this?*
- *What was Noah's response to God?*
- *What risks did Noah take in being obedient to God?*

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 9:9-10. Point out the larger context in which these verses appear (Gen 9:1-17) and how God requires that humanity manage the world's resources wisely and refrain from violence. Then ask:

- *Why is it significant that God established the covenant with all living creatures? What does this mean to you?*
- *What are some specific ways we can show that we are part of this covenant? How should this covenant affect the way we live?*

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Distribute a paper strip to each adult and ask each person, depending upon what is written on their paper strip, to think of a truth the account of Noah illustrates related to that concept. Allow a few minutes and then ask for volunteers to offer suggestions.

► Next, lead adults to consider the violence in our culture and our world and compare and contrast it with the violence in Noah's world. Ask:

- *Do you think Noah's world was any more violent than our world today?*
- *Why do people resort to violence?*
- *What does violence say about individuals, families and communities characterized by it?*
- *Can one person make a difference in a violence-plagued culture? Why or why not?*
- *Why do you think God continues to give humanity new opportunities? What does this tell you about God?*

► Close by reading aloud the following prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

O Lord, make me an instrument of Thy  
Peace! Where there is hatred, let me sow  
love; Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is  
discord, harmony; Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light, and  
Where there is sorrow, joy.  
Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not  
so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand; to be loved  
as to love; for it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

## Protecting the Innocent Leaders Guide

### Genesis 12:10-20

*<sup>10</sup>Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. <sup>11</sup>When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; <sup>12</sup>and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. <sup>13</sup>Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." <sup>14</sup>When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. <sup>15</sup>When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. <sup>16</sup>And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys and camels. <sup>17</sup>But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. <sup>18</sup>So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? <sup>19</sup>Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." <sup>20</sup>And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.*

**Theme: Self-preservation places those closest to us at risk and may harm the innocent.**

### Before You Teach

► Read Genesis 12, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by reading aloud the following: "If unimaginable evil and life-threatening disaster came crashing down on you, where would you turn for hope? Do you believe that, even if the worst thing happens, there is a benevolent God working things together for good, watching over you? Or do you think things are out of control, and there may not be any answer or rescue available?" (<http://promontoryartists.org/lookingcloser/movie%20reviews/Q-Z/signs.htm>).

Note that film reviewer Jeffrey Overstreet raises these questions in his evaluation of the 2002 movie "Signs."

Ask adults who have seen the film to summarize its plot. Supplement their comments with the following:

Graham Hess (played by Mel Gibson) is a former Episcopal priest undergoing a crisis of faith as a result of his wife's death. He lives with his two young children and younger brother in rural Pennsylvania. The film opens with Graham and his family discovering large crop circles in their cornfields, and suspense surrounding these discoveries runs throughout the film. But it is Graham's inner conflict with God that is most compelling.

As a result of his wife's tragic death, Graham has concluded that things happen for no particular reason and that God does not exist. Yet, in moments of anger, he lashes out at the very God whose existence he has denied.

Reviewers Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman note: “When a minister dedicates his or her life to the service of God, there is an all-too-human expectation that this should gain the minister certain protections or privileges. Whenever this proves to be untrue the crisis of faith that can result either forces a more mature understanding of God and life or it erupts into a tantrum of anger against God” ([www.cinemainfocus.com](http://www.cinemainfocus.com)).

Suggest in addition to these possible human responses a third: a selfish drive toward self-preservation that takes no thought about the risks and harms others might encounter as a result. Ask:

- *In addition to his “tantrum of anger against God,” does Graham Hess engage in behavior that puts others at risk? If so, how?*

Note that because of his disillusionment with faith and his anger toward God, Hess’s relationship with his children suffers. He becomes unable to give them the comfort and companionship they need from their father because he is so consumed with his own anguish. His innocent children suffer as a result of his preoccupation with anger and his conclusion that he alone is responsible for successful survival of his present circumstances.

► State that self-preservation is a typical human response when we feel threatened. The danger comes when we disregard the effects our actions of self-preservation have on others, especially when we put them at risk or cause them harm.

Reviewers Conklin and Wayman conclude that “God’s care is often seen as absent until the final moments when all the loose ends of our lives are tied together. The comfort and hope of being watched over by a God who can work all

things together for the good of those who love him is a message continually needed in a world that feels as though it is falling apart.”

► Connect these thoughts to the ill-advised and self-centered plan Abram concocted when he wrongly concluded that his world was falling apart.

Before you lead adults to examine the focal passage, read aloud Genesis 12:1-4. Note that while we do not know for certain the amount of time that lapsed between these events and the ones that follow in verses 10-20, their close proximity in recorded scripture suggests that God’s call and promise to Abram should still have been quite fresh in his mind.

Point out specifically that God initiated Abram’s journey to Canaan and called him to his unique role in God’s ongoing effort to redeem humanity. Note again God’s promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3; “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse ...”

Encourage adults to keep this promise in mind as you enter into a discussion about Abram’s subsequent actions.

### **Explore the Bible**

► Read aloud Genesis 12:10-13 and lead adults to discover the apparent complete disconnect between Abram’s present circumstances and the firm promise God had recently made to him. Ask:

- *What prompted Abram’s decision to leave Canaan and go to Egypt?*
- *Did God tell Abram to leave Canaan?*

- *What is significant about the word “alien” in verse 10 in reference to Abram?*
- *What did Abram ask Sarai to do as they were about to enter Egypt?*
- *What was Abram’s only concern?*
- *Why do you think Abram assumed harm would come to him because of Sarai’s beauty? Can you find any evidence that he had been threatened?*
- *When Abram said, “Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account,” what was he really saying?*
- *Do you see any evidence of faith on Abram’s part?*

► Emphasize the fact that the decision to leave Canaan and go to Egypt was Abram’s alone. God did not tell him to do so. Abram, for some reason fearing for his life, took matters into his own hands, although God had promised to protect him.

Ask adults to skim verses 10-13 and count the number of times Abram makes reference to himself. Note Abram’s complete self-absorption as well as his total disregard for Sarai’s safety. Also point out that Abram’s attitudes and actions assumed that God needed him but not Sarai to fulfill the earlier promise.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 12:14-16. Point out that again, the scriptures indicate no threat directed toward Abram. Pharaoh’s officials were so impressed with Sarai’s beauty that they took her directly to Pharaoh.

Then ask:

- *What is significant about the reference to Sarai in verse 15 as “the woman”?*
- *What do you think Abram’s reaction was to the fact that Pharaoh’s officials took Sarai into Pharaoh’s house? What do you think happened to Sarai?*
- *What did Pharaoh do for Abram?*
- *What does the list of lavish gifts Pharaoh gave to Abram (v 16) reveal about Pharaoh’s estimation of Sarai? Who do you think Pharaoh valued more, Abram or Sarai?*

Stress that as a result of Abram’s quest for self-preservation, Sarai experienced a loss of identity, a loss of personhood. She became, as verse 15 notes, “the woman.” While Abram preserved his life, his actions resulted in Sarai losing much of hers. She became little more than property.

► Read aloud Genesis 12:17-20 and pose the obvious question: *Why did God afflict Pharaoh with plagues instead of Abram?*

Suggest that Pharaoh was the only one in a position who could straighten out the mess Abram had created by taking his wife and family out of the land where God had told them to settle. Abram needed to return to Canaan with Sarai so that God could continue working through them. Then ask:

- *If you had been Abram, how would you have responded to Pharaoh’s charges?*

- *Do you think Abram said anything? Do you think he still felt justified in what he had done?*
- *Do you think Pharaoh was more upset about the plagues or about the fact that Abram's actions resulted in him becoming an adulterer?*

Stress that God did what was necessary to reunite Abram and Sarai, get them back to Canaan and restore Sarai's identity. Because Abram took matters into his own hands and lacked the faith to believe God's promise, he made a mess of things and put his wife at great risk. His unfounded fear led him to behave irrationally, ask his wife to lie, seek protection only for himself and use others for his own self-interests.

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Suggest that each of us has the potential to act selfishly and with no regard for the welfare of others when we believe we are threatened. Fear sometimes leads people to do otherwise unthinkable things and can cause people of faith to doubt God and God's promises. Yet it is in times such as these that we prove the depth of our faith. As Jeffrey Overstreet said, "In the end, we will need to reach for hope that goes beyond mere survival. We must find a power that can be victorious in spite of death" (<http://promontoryartists.org/lookingcloser/movie%20reviews/Q-Z/signs.htm>).

► Repeat the following observation from Conklin and Wayman: "God's care is often seen as absent until the final moments when all the loose ends of our lives are tied together. The comfort and hope of being watched over by a God who can work all things together for the good of those who love him is a message continually needed in a world that feels as though it is falling apart."

Stress that, like Abram, all we often see are loose ends in the fabric of our lives. We sometimes cannot imagine how circumstances can come together in any meaningful way. When we trust ourselves and our ill-advised schemes instead of God and God's promises, we in effect say to God that we know better than God how things should work out.

Encourage adults as they study the stories from the lives of God's people to believe that God knows best how to care for us, protect us and tie up the loose ends of our lives.

## Meeting Human Need Leaders Guide

### **Genesis 16:1-15**

*<sup>1</sup>Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, <sup>2</sup>and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. <sup>3</sup>So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. <sup>4</sup>He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. <sup>5</sup>Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" <sup>6</sup>But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. <sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup>And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." <sup>9</sup>The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." <sup>10</sup>The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." <sup>11</sup>And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has*

*given heed to your affliction. <sup>12</sup>He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." <sup>13</sup>So she named the LORD who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" <sup>14</sup>Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. <sup>15</sup>Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.*

### **Genesis 21:9-21**

*<sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. <sup>10</sup>So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ... <sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ... <sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

**Theme: God acts faithfully to meet human need and blesses in unexpected ways.**

## Before You Teach

► Read the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by asking adults who have seen the movie “Hope Floats” to summarize its plot. Supplement their comments with the following:

In their small-town Smithville, Texas, high school, beautiful Birdie Calvert (Sandra Bullock) and handsome Bill Pruitt (Michael Pare) were at the top of the social structure. She was a cheerleader and prom queen; he was the quarterback of the football team. No one was surprised when they married and sailed off into a bright future.

At the beginning of the film “Hope Floats,” we find Bill and Birdie 20 years later, married and living in Chicago. On a national TV talk show, Birdie’s best friend Connie reveals that she and Bill have been having a year-long affair and that Bill wants a divorce from Birdie.

Completely humiliated and devastated, Birdie returns to her Texas roots with her young daughter. There she must deal with old friends and classmates who seem to delight in reminding Birdie that her life is not nearly as perfect as she and they once thought it was.

Hard as being back in Smithville is for Birdie, that is where she begins to rediscover hope. In one of the movie’s memorable lines, Birdie’s mother (Gena Rowlands) says, “Beginnings are scary. Endings are usually sad, but it’s what’s in the middle that counts. So, when you find yourself at the beginning, just give hope a chance to float up. And it will.”

She also reminds Birdie, “when the storms of life overwhelm us, ‘Hope Floats’ to the top of the torrent.”

► Commentators Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman point out that: “This film could have been greatly enriched had the spiritual and moral values of Bill and Birdie’s lives been explored. Instead they seem to be drifting directionless upon the currents of this world, victims of whatever is floating around them rather than grounded on a living hope. For us, the emptiness of Birdie’s life is also reflected in the void of this film. Hope is a great and marvelous thing. It is not just the wishful desire of a hurting person, but it is the gift of God to those who turn to Him for their second chance” ([www.cinemainfocus.com/Hope%20Floats\\_3.htm](http://www.cinemainfocus.com/Hope%20Floats_3.htm)).

► Suggest that one of scripture’s most compelling hopeless characters is Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sarai. A victim of cruel circumstances that seem to offer her no chance for hope, Hagar emerged with a surprising promise of blessings from a God she was unaware knew her name.

## Explore the Bible

► Remind adults of the drama in Hebrew scripture in God’s promise to Abram of many descendants and the apparent infertility of key women like Sarai and later Rebekah and Rachel. While Sarai’s attempts to take matters into her own hands showed a lapse in faith, their results revealed a God

who cares for all people and who works both within and outside the faith community to bless people.

► Read aloud Genesis 16:1-6 and lead adults to discuss it by asking such questions as:

- *What was unusual about what Sarai did?*
- *What was unusual about Abram's response?*

Remind adults that as a slave, Hagar had absolutely no say in the course of events Sarai's plan unleashed. In addition to being a slave, Hagar was racially and culturally different. She was no more than property for Sarai and Abram. The text here records them referring to her not by name but only as the "slave-girl."

Then ask:

- *What does it mean that Hagar began to look "with contempt" upon Sarai (v 4)?*
- *What did Sarai do as a result of Hagar's disrespect toward her? What did Abram do?*

Point out Abram's apparent indifference to Hagar's plight as a result of Sarai's harsh treatment toward her. Though Hagar was pregnant with his child, Abram refused to intervene and help resolve the escalating situation between Hagar and Sarai. Things eventually became so difficult for Hagar that she ran away, carrying the child that Sarai wanted Abram to have.

► Guide adults to examine God's care and specific intervention in Hagar's life. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 16:7-11. Point out that unlike Sarai and Abram, God called Hagar by her name. God knew where she was. Ask:

- *Where do you think Hagar was going?*
- *What did God ask her, and how did she respond? What did her response indicate about her plans for the future?*
- *What did God promise Hagar? Why and how is this significant?*

Note the similarities between God's promise to Hagar and God's promise to Abram (see 17:4) and the fact that God was concerned about Hagar's future even though she was not part of the "chosen people." Also call attention to verse 13, which indicates that Hagar recognized it was God who spoke to her.

► Fill in details from Genesis 17 as necessary to move along the story of Abram and Sarai as it relates to Hagar. Point out that Hagar did, in fact, return to Abram and Sarai as God had told her to do. Also note these facts:

- God promised Abram that he would be the "ancestor of a multitude of nations" and established a covenant with him (17:4).
- God changed Abram's and Sarai's names to Abraham (17:5) and Sarah (17:15). God commanded that Abraham and all males, including slaves, be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (17:10-14).
- God promised Abraham he would have a son by Sarah (17:16). At that time, Abraham was almost 100 years old and Sarah was 90.
- Abraham prayed to God on behalf of his son Ishmael (17:18). God promised Abraham that from

Ishmael would come a great nation. God also promised to establish God's covenant with Abraham's son Isaac (17:21), who was yet to be born.

► Note that scripture reintroduces Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21. Sarah gave birth to Isaac as God had promised.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 21:9-12, 15-17 and 20; then ask:

- *What happened that caused Sarah again to become wary of Hagar?*
- *What did she do as a result?*
- *Why did Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away? Did he want to do this?*
- *What happened to Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness?*
- *Why is God's intervention in the lives of Hagar and Ishmael so significant?*

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Suggest that Hagar's dire circumstances, which seemed from every angle hopeless, actually became for her a new beginning and opened the door to her future, one that God had prepared for her and her son. Then ask:

- *Have you ever been knocked so flat by life's circumstances that you became completely hopeless?*

- *What often happens when we try to take matters into our own hands rather than waiting on God to act?*
- *Do you think that "reaching the end of our rope" is sometimes necessary for us to see the way to a new beginning?*
- *In what ways have you experienced God's faithfulness in meeting your needs? How has God surprised you in this?*

► Close with the following illustration:

On the same day her husband and his running mate, John Kerry, conceded the 2004 presidential election, doctors confirmed earlier suspicions and told Elizabeth Edwards she had breast cancer. In a November 21, 2004, interview on NBC's "Dateline," Edwards talked with Katie Couric about her diagnosis, treatment and prognosis.

Couric referred to a statement Edwards had made earlier in *People* magazine: "This diagnosis is a reminder that this is the life you've got. And you're not getting another one. Whatever has happened, you have to take this life and treasure and protect it. In a sense, having cancer takes you by the shoulders and shakes you" (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6522712/>).

Edwards compared and contrasted her cancer diagnosis with the tragic death of her son Wade in an automobile accident in 1996, saying: "I can't change yesterday. But the truth is, there is another thing that Wade's death has given me in this. And that is this is so far not the worst week of my life, you know? It's given us a real sense of proportion in it. This is something we're given a chance to fight. And we

weren't given a chance to fight then. It makes all the difference in the world. And that's why I want the things I can do to make ... a difference in my future. ... The most you could hope for this is that you get the very best out of it that you can get. You know, I can't change the diagnosis. And in truth, only in little ways can I change the ultimate result. But I can change the effect of it."

Edwards affirmed the role of faith not only in life's darker times, such as this, but in the good times as well. The faith she and her husband share, she said, "is real personal. We rely on it, as so many people do. Not just, of course, in times of trouble, but all the times. You ... don't have to turn to God if you [are] already looking at him. ... There's not a single reason in the world to give up hope before you have to. Just not a reason in the world. So as long as you can hope, then you need to hold onto it."

Edwards recalled one of her favorite poems by Emily Dickinson: "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tunes without the words and never stops at all."

## Receiving God's Blessing Leaders Guide

### **Genesis 21:1-3**

*<sup>1</sup>The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. <sup>2</sup>Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.*

*<sup>3</sup>Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.*

### **Genesis 24:1-4, 12-14, 34-38, 49-51**

*<sup>1</sup>Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.*

*<sup>2</sup>Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh <sup>3</sup>and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, <sup>4</sup>that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac."...<sup>12</sup>And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. <sup>13</sup>I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. <sup>14</sup>Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master." ... <sup>34</sup>So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. <sup>35</sup>The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves,*

camels and donkeys. <sup>36</sup>And Sarah my master's wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. <sup>37</sup>My master made me swear, saying, 'You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; <sup>38</sup>but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.' ... <sup>49</sup>Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left." <sup>50</sup>Then Laban and Bethuel answered, "The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. <sup>51</sup>Look, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken."

**Theme: God works through different cultures to shape a redemptive future.**

### Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ Ideas from the following Third Way Café column by Melodie Davis may be useful to you as you lead adults to apply the truths of this scripture. You may wish to read the column in its entirety:

"Pass It On," ([www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=194&Submit=Go](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=194&Submit=Go)).

### As You Teach

#### Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Guide adults to begin thinking about the unusual circumstances surrounding Isaac's conception and birth by citing the following:

In June 2001, Associated Press reported a 62-year-old French woman had given birth a month earlier, becoming one of the oldest women ever to do so. The pregnancy was achieved by using a donor egg and the sperm of the woman's 52-year-old brother. Another child, also fathered by her brother, was born to a surrogate mother.

The woman, a retired teacher, underwent treatment at a Los Angeles hospital but returned to Frejus in southern France to give birth. A 1994 French law says that only couples can have "medically assisted procreation." She reportedly told the Los Angeles clinic that her brother was her husband.

"I couldn't pass on my genes because of my age, so I wanted to pass on his and give life so our line could continue," the woman told a reporter. She and her brother, both single and childless, were living with their 80-year-old mother at the time and were planning to raise both babies.

According to Guinness World Records 2001, two 63-year-old women have given birth: Rosanna Della Corte of Italy in 1994 and Arceli Keh of California in 1996.

- ▶ Suggest that scientific possibilities such as these can sometimes prevent us from realizing the miracle of Sarah giving birth to Isaac at her age and at the time in which she lived. Point out the two contrasting views of this story, using the explanations in the Students Guide.

Stress that our fullest understanding of the story comes when we view with equal importance God's promise to Abraham and the biological realities of Abraham's and Sarah's advanced years.

### Explore the Bible

► Keep in mind that some adults will not have been present for previous Bible studies leading up to this one. Review for them God's promise to Abram by reading aloud Genesis 12:1-2. Note also verse 4, which indicates that Abram was 75 years old at the time God made this promise.

Review additional verses that connect this promise to the events surrounding Isaac's birth, such as Genesis 15:1-6 and the story of Ishmael and Hagar, as found in Genesis 16.

Point out how God reminded Abram of the established covenant when Abram was 99 years old and changed his name to Abraham (see Gen 17:1ff). Also point out Genesis 17:15-17, which indicates that God's plan all along was for Sarah to be the mother of Abraham's promised son. It records that Sarah's age at this time was 90.

Next, read aloud Genesis 18:11-15.

► Point out that Sarah's earlier laughter inspired by doubt in Genesis 18 was soon replaced by laughter inspired by joy. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 21:1-3. Remind adults that although some 25 years had passed from the time of God's initial call and promise to Abram to Isaac's birth, God fulfilled the promise. Abraham would indeed have descendants through his wife Sarah.

► Introduce the concept of marriage in the ancient Hebrew culture by noting the following:

- While numerous scriptural references to both monogamy and polygamy exist, the normal pattern or expectation seems to have been monogamy. Some bigamy came about as the result of levirate marriage, under which the closest male relative of a sonless deceased man should marry his widow in order to produce a son (Deut 25:5).
- Scripture does not indicate a specific age for marriage, although the average age for grooms at this time was probably between 14 and 18, and the average age for brides was probably between 14 and 16.
- Although the concept of arranged marriage is foreign to us, it was customary in Hebrew culture. God worked through this existing tradition, an ordinary and everyday event, to help shape the future.
- It was customary for the groom's father to select the bride for his son, although the son could make his own selection. It was also important that the bride's father and/or brothers approve of the marriage.
- Once the families of the prospective bride and groom made preliminary negotiations, the groom's family made a payment called the *mohar*, and the customary betrothal began. The woman was considered a wife at that time, although the marriage was not consummated until later. The families celebrated the betrothal at a feast, and the actual marriage followed sometime later. Scripture reveals no details about the actual marriage ceremony, but at some

point the couple received a benediction that the bride would give birth to many children.

► Note that chapter 24 is the longest in the book of Genesis. Its detail indicates to some degree the importance attached to the story of Isaac and Rebekah.

Read aloud Genesis 24:1-4. Note that Abraham probably sensed that he would die soon, so he felt compelled to find a wife for his son. Verse 1 indicates that he was “old, well advanced in years,” so he was probably physically unable to fulfill this expected obligation himself. He asked his oldest and most trustworthy servant to carry out this task for him. The gesture of putting the hand under the thigh was symbolic and indicated the seriousness of the vow Abraham asked the servant to take. Ask:

- *Why was it important to Abraham that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman?*

Stress that the good of the entire community was more important than personal choice or preference, and the choice of a wife for Isaac carried implications not only for him and his parents, but for an entire tribal family. Abraham’s insistence that Isaac not marry “a daughter of the Canaanites” reflected his concern not only for the subsequent lineage but also that the worship of God not be contaminated by Canaanite religion.

► Fill in details as necessary between verses 4 and 12 of Genesis 24. Note that:

- Abraham specifically instructed that Isaac not be taken back to his homeland in the event that the woman would not agree to return with the servant.

- The servant took all sorts of gifts on Abraham’s behalf, including 10 camels. It was at the watering hole where these camels knelt to drink that the servant prayed about the woman who might become Isaac’s wife.

Read aloud verse 12-21. Note that after the servant gave Rebekah gold jewelry as gifts and inquired about lodging at her home that night, he followed her home, where he was met by Laban, Rebekah’s brother. Laban, noticing the jewelry his sister had received, took special care of the travelers and their camels. He set food before them, but the servant would not eat until he had explained the purpose of his visit.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 24:34-38 and 49-51. Note how Laban and Bethuel, Rebekah’s father, referred to the circumstances as coming “from the LORD” (v 50). Whether or not they genuinely worshipped God, they agreed that Rebekah could become Isaac’s wife. While Laban and Rebekah’s mother asked that Rebekah stay with them at least 10 days and not return with Abraham’s servant, the servant did not agree to that plan. They agreed to let Rebekah make the decision, and she decided to go (v 58). According to scripture, Rebekah became Isaac’s wife and “he loved her” (v 67).

Ask:

- *Do you think that Rebekah was the only choice for Isaac’s wife? Why or why not?*
- *What might have happened had Rebekah refused to go with Abraham’s servant?*
- *What can you deduce about Rebekah’s character from this scriptural account?*

- *What is your opinion of Rebekah's father and brother?*
- *In what ways do you see God at work in the story of Abraham's search for a wife for Isaac?*

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Conclude by recalling the theme of blessing that undergirds Genesis 24. Ask adults to scan that chapter and note the occasions when one gives or receives a blessing.

Call attention to the questions that conclude the lesson in the Students Guide. Then cite the following challenge:

Third Way Café columnist Melodie Davis writes of helping move her daughters into their college dorm rooms and the frustration of having to assemble a particular kind of loft bed while also unpacking and meeting deadlines related to freshman orientation. She recalled the time when their oldest daughter moved into the dorm, and they had no idea how to assemble the bed.

"I ... remember my complete relief and thankfulness when some volunteers appeared about half way through the process and helped my husband and daughter piece the loft bed together. They were volunteers from one of the campus Christian groups and were going around helping people move in however they could. 'Oh, we've put lots of loft beds together, let us help.' My heart was close to tears in gratitude" ("Pass It On," [www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=194&Submit=Go](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=194&Submit=Go)).

By the time the Davis's third daughter moved into the dorm, the process was not quite so intimidating. Once they got her loft bed assembled, Davis's husband decided to leave

the unpacking to his wife and daughter and go find someone who needed help assembling the bed.

"He found a family at wit's end over a roomful of boards, bolts and washers and with little idea of what they were doing. My husband soon had them reorganized and re-charged and they finished the bed in good time, passing on the good deed done to us," she recalls.

Note that God blesses us so that we can in turn bless others. Often it is something that seems small or even insignificant, but to the person who needs the blessing, it can have both immediate and long-term impact. One of the ways God works to shape a redemptive future is by working through us as we are channels of God's blessing.

## Working in Spite of Imperfections Leaders Guide

### **Genesis 29:21-28, 31**

<sup>21</sup>Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." <sup>22</sup>So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup>But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup>(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) <sup>25</sup>When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" <sup>26</sup>Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup>Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." <sup>28</sup>Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. ... <sup>31</sup>When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

### **Genesis 30:1, 3-5**

<sup>1</sup>When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" ... <sup>3</sup>Then she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her." <sup>4</sup>So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. <sup>5</sup>And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.

### **Genesis 30:9-10, 15, 17, 19, 22-23**

<sup>9</sup>When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. <sup>10</sup>Then Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ... <sup>15</sup>But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? ... <sup>17</sup>And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. ... <sup>19</sup>And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. ... <sup>22</sup>Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup>She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my reproach."

### **Genesis 31:1-3, 17-18, 22, 26**

<sup>1</sup>Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." <sup>2</sup>And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favorably as he did before. <sup>3</sup>Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." ... <sup>17</sup>So Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels; <sup>18</sup>and he drove away all his livestock, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. ... <sup>22</sup>On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ... <sup>26</sup>Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword."

### **Genesis 31:44**

<sup>44</sup>Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.

**Theme: God works through imperfect people and dysfunctional systems, creating new life and offering fresh promises to the faith community.**

## Before You Teach

► Read Genesis chapters 29-31 for the fuller story of Jacob, Rachel, Leah and Laban. Also read the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► Consider the individuals in your Bible study group and their family dynamics as you prepare to lead this discussion. Prepare for honest dialogue that may become painful and emotional for some as you deal with dysfunctional families. Plan to stress the fact that God works through imperfect people and families and often in spite of them to redeem people and further the divine plan.

A discussion about families can take on a life of its own. While this discussion may be helpful, healing and necessary for some in your group, be aware that it might easily consume the entire time allotted for this Bible study. If necessary and practical, plan to extend the discussion surrounding this scripture to the following week. Be flexible and creative in order to meet the needs expressed by adults in your group. Take the time necessary to prepare adults to examine the scripture and the stories of Jacob, Rachel, Leah and Laban and make personal application.

► The teaching suggestions below include references to some movies that include themes of family dysfunction. These are intended as discussion starters; you may be aware of other examples from movies and television that are also appropriate.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Lead adults to begin to think about how dysfunctional behavior affects individuals, families and communities by asking such questions as:

- *What sources create conflict within families?*
- *What do you think most often creates conflict between brothers? between sisters? between fathers and sons? between mothers and daughters? among in-laws?*
- *What causes distrust to grow within families?*
- *How do dysfunctional families affect the community? How do they affect subsequent generations?*

► Suggest that pockets of dysfunction exist within all families. No family is perfect, and every family is subject to circumstances that cause conflict, create envy, encourage competition and even push individuals toward deception and scheming. Families who do not deal with their patterns of dysfunction tend to transmit those patterns to subsequent generations.

Stress that scripture reveals the lives of families honestly, with all their flaws. Scripture also reveals a God who works through such people in spite of their imperfections, character flaws and acts of deliberate disobedience.

► Recall for adults the 1999 movie “The Other Sister,” which focuses on Carla, the youngest of the Tate’s three daughters. Carla (Juliette Lewis), a mentally handicapped

young woman, spent her high school years in a special boarding school and has returned to the family home. Carla's imperfections are quite obvious, but it soon becomes clear that each of the other Tate family members has his or her own impairments.

Carla's father, Radley (Tom Skerritt), is an emotionally absent, recovering alcoholic. Her mother, Elizabeth (Diane Keaton), is a controlling woman whose behavior alienates her daughters and masks her feelings of inadequacy. Carla's sisters each have flaws as well.

Carla has learned at her special school to become fairly independent and to live responsibly. Reentering her family's day-to-day life is difficult for her. When she enrolls in a technical school to acquire job skills, she finds a soul mate in Daniel, a mentally impaired young man.

Carla and Daniel become intimate, but Daniel humiliates and angers her by exposing her publicly. This tears them apart, but they realize that they must forgive each other. This situation causes the rest of Carla's family to begin to deal with their own shortcomings and disappointments and, as a result, move forward.

Carla wants to marry Daniel, a wish her mother does not share. Carla admits that there are many things she cannot do and that Daniel cannot take care of her. But she helps her mother understand that one thing she can do is love and she and Daniel can take care of each other.

"Though we may not want to admit it," write film reviewers Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman, "all of us are impaired and in need of love. That love is found when we accept one another just as we are and commit ourselves to take care of each other" ([www.cinemainfocus.com/Other%20Sister,%20The\\_4.htm](http://www.cinemainfocus.com/Other%20Sister,%20The_4.htm)).

## Explore the Bible

► Set the stage for the examination of scripture related to Jacob by noting that at this point in his life, he was living away from his family. On the run from his angry brother Esau, Jacob stopped at one point at Bethel and had a dream in which God spoke to him and promised to be with him, protect him and provide for him (Gen 28). After waking from this dream, Jacob made a vow and declared his loyalty to God. He continued to travel, going to the land of his uncle, Laban (his mother's brother).

During this time, God continued to work in Jacob's life to correct some major character flaws. Jacob's life was far from perfect. His earlier sins caught up with him. Nonetheless, God did not desert Jacob, and God gave Jacob the opportunity for redemption and restoration.

► Read aloud key verses from Genesis 29:15-31 and lead adults to discuss the verses by asking such questions as:

- *What agreement did Jacob have with Laban that would allow him to marry Rachel?*
- *What happened when Jacob fulfilled his part of the agreement?*
- *What reason did Laban give for his deception?*
- *How did Jacob eventually get to marry Rachel? Whom did Jacob love more?*
- *What did God do for Leah? Why?*

► Note that Leah gave birth to four sons (see Gen 29:31-35). Then ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 30:1-5.

Guide adults to make the connection between circumstances in the lives of Jacob and Rachel and those of Jacob's ancestors by asking such questions as:

- *What did Rachel have in common with Jacob's grandmother Sarah and mother, Rebekah?*
- *What did Rachel do to try to alleviate the situation she faced?*
- *How do Rachel's actions recall those of Sarah?*
- *What patterns of behavior in Jacob's family echo those of earlier generations?*
- *In what ways did members of Jacob's family try to control events and usurp the sovereignty of God?*

► Point out the continuing rivalry between Rachel and Leah as found in their "race" to provide Jacob with sons. Read aloud Genesis 30:8 to highlight their intense competition.

Note that once Leah thought she could no longer have children, she followed Rachel's pattern and gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob. Zilpah subsequently had two sons by Jacob.

Call attention briefly to verses 14-21 and summarize the incident of the mandrakes, which were thought to be an aphrodisiac. Leah seemed to believe that the more children she gave Jacob, the more apt he would be to love her. Her ten sons and one daughter surpassed Rachel's offspring, but Jacob still loved Rachel more.

Read aloud Genesis 30:22-23 and note that at last, Rachel gave birth to a son by Jacob, because "God remembered" (v 22).

► Note that Genesis 30:25-41 returns to the conflict between Jacob and Laban and records Jacob's desire to return to his homeland. Chapter 31 includes God's call to Jacob and his family to return, and the verses that follow detail the events leading up to their departure.

Read aloud selected verses from Genesis 31, including verses 1-3, 17-18, 22-26, 41-42. Lead adults to discuss the verses by asking such questions as:

- *What were Jacob's reasons for returning to his homeland?*
- *Why did Laban go after Jacob? What did he think Jacob had done to him?*
- *What changed Laban's mind about how he would treat Jacob?*
- *What did these circumstances cause Jacob to recall?*

► Read aloud key concluding verses from Genesis 31 that record the covenant Jacob and Laban made. Then ask:

- *What happened between Jacob and Laban?*
- *How did they commemorate this new turn in their relationship?*
- *What did Jacob promise Laban? What did Laban promise Jacob?*

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Note that at the beginning of Jacob's relationship with Laban, Rachel and Leah, he was an empty-handed fugitive.

At the end of this portion of scripture, he was a man of wealth, power and authority. Rachel started out as a childless woman but ended up with a much-loved son. In between, each tried to control and change their circumstances to suit their personal goals and ambitions. In spite of this, God worked to accomplish the divine plan. The common factor in each of their lives was God's faithfulness to earlier promises.

Suggest that while we might want to leave the struggles of Jacob, Laban, Leah and Rachel buried in the pages of Hebrew scripture, these struggles reflect our own. We, too, often try through our own efforts to secure ourselves and our futures apart from the divine plan while still wanting to lay claim on God's love.

► Cite the story of George Monroe from the 2001 movie, "Life As a House." George is a 45-year-old divorced man who is estranged from Sam, his teenaged son. Abused by his alcoholic father and damaged by this relationship, George was unable to express his love to his wife and son, repeating a pattern established in an earlier generation.

After his father and mother are killed in an accident resulting from his father's drunkenness, George inherits a shack on the beach. He also is fired from the architectural firm where he has worked for 20 years and learns that he has terminal cancer.

Without offering any explanation, George demands that his son come and live with him for the summer to help him tear down the shack and build a new structure in its place. In the process, George and Sam deal with long-held anger and other issues. As they physically dismantle the beach shack, they are also able to tear down their own internal walls that have prohibited the exchange of love.

George is able to heal his relationships with his ex-wife and son before he dies and prevent the family from continuing to repeat mistakes from earlier generations.

► Conclude by challenging adults with the series of questions in the closing section of the Students Guide.

## Revealing Divine Purposes Leaders Guide

### **Genesis 32:22-32**

*<sup>22</sup>The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup>Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup>Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.*

### **Genesis 33:1-17**

*<sup>1</sup>Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. <sup>2</sup>He put the maids with their children in front, then*

*Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. <sup>3</sup>He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. <sup>4</sup>But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. <sup>5</sup>When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." <sup>6</sup>Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; <sup>7</sup>Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near and bowed down. <sup>8</sup>Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." <sup>9</sup>But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." <sup>10</sup>Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. <sup>11</sup>Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want." So he urged him, and he took it. <sup>12</sup>Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you." <sup>13</sup>But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. <sup>14</sup>Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir." <sup>15</sup>So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "Why should my lord be so kind to me?" <sup>16</sup>So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. <sup>17</sup>But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a*

*house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.*

**Theme: Through the daily struggles of life, God confronts, challenges and convicts people and moves them toward new thoughts and directions.**

## Before You Teach

► Read the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► The following columns from EthicsDaily.com include illustrations and examples suggested for guiding this discussion. You may wish to read them in their entirety:

“Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble,” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4395](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4395));

“A New Journey,” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3805](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3805));

“Education and Transformation: An Interview with Carla Nelson,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4526](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4526).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Begin with the following illustration:

Palestinians and Israelis have been “extremely skilled at turning neighbors into enemies,” according to Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in

Bethlehem. A more peaceful future, he believes, depends upon a commitment to turning enemies into neighbors.

Raheb, an Arab, Palestinian and Christian, comes from a family who has lived in Bethlehem for hundreds of years. His life, lived completely under Israeli occupation, has consisted of an ongoing struggle between hope and despair. The hope, however, “is no longer something we see but rather something we practice, something we live, something we advocate, something we plant” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4395](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4395)).

Everyday life is and always has been a struggle for Raheb and his family and friends. Simple things like going to work, shopping for food and other necessities, going to school and seeking medical care happen within the context of daily trauma and violence. His book, *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble*, is his personal account of life lived under such circumstances.

He challenges readers to discard “Christmas carol images of Bethlehem, to confront the bleak and dangerous reality of life beyond the daily headlines and to commit to work alongside him for new relationships between Christians, Muslims and Jews.”

One has to wonder: Would Mitri Raheb’s goal of turning enemies into neighbors have come about without the struggle that has defined his life?

► Suggest that it is often through struggle in our lives that we encounter God and gain new insights and consequently new directions for our lives. Some struggles are corporate and involve an entire community, like Mitri Raheb’s. Others are quite personal and individual yet affect the broader community. That is the case for EthicsDaily.com columnist

Karen Johnson Zurheide (see “A New Journey,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3805](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3805)).

Only weeks after Zurheide and her family moved from Oklahoma to New Hampshire where her husband Jeff had accepted a new pastorate, Jeff was diagnosed with aggressive multiple myeloma. She was as prepared as she could be to help the couple’s two children adjust to a cross-country move and make new friends.

“But this new cancer experience is different,” she writes. “I have never walked this road before. My children and I will be taking this journey simultaneously, perhaps with me about one step ahead of them. . . . Adding to the strangeness of it all is that much of life will go on as normal, as before. And yet, in another way, nothing is normal now. . . . All four of us—the patient, the spouse and the children—will be impacted by this unwelcome guest in our midst. We will not be the same as individuals or as a family. That is scary to me, even though I know it will not be all bad.”

A lot of the family’s experiences “will be made up as we go along,” she states. “I already know it won’t be perfect. But it will be ours, and we will do as well with it as we can, one day at a time. . . . We are not the same as we were just a couple weeks ago. And yet we are the same. The same people who love each other. The same people whom God loves. Even cancer cannot change those amazing realities. For that my family and I are most grateful.”

Stress to adults that our lives can be both changed and enhanced as a result of daily struggles. It is often through everyday life situations with which we grapple that God teaches us new lessons that can change the course of our lives.

## Explore the Bible

► Keep in mind that not everyone in your group will have been present for earlier Bible study discussions that have implications for this one. Before you lead adults to examine this experience, recall the following facts:

- Jacob and Esau were twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah and grandsons of Abraham.
- They were born after years of apparent infertility for Rebekah, after Isaac prayed that God’s promise would be realized.
- Esau was the older of the twins and therefore entitled to the birthright and special blessing of their father. Yet Jacob was Rebekah’s favorite. She and Jacob deceived Isaac into giving the birthright and blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. This naturally resulted in a major conflict between the two brothers. Jacob, fearing for his life, ran away and went to the land of his mother’s relatives.
- There Jacob fell in love with Rachel and worked seven years to earn the right to marry her. But Rachel’s father, Laban, tricked Jacob; instead of giving him Rachel as his wife, he gave him Leah, Rachel’s older sister. Jacob was forced to work another seven years for Rachel.
- Jacob eventually decided to try to seek reconciliation with his brother, Esau. Upon learning that Esau appeared open to reconciliation, Jacob packed up his wives, children and livestock and began the long journey home. It was during this journey that he had a most unusual struggle.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 32:22-28. Acknowledge that this is a strange and difficult story. Note that Jacob was alone when his struggle occurred. He had sent his wives, children and belongings across a stream ahead of him.

Guide adults to dialogue about the following questions:

- *Why do you think the “man” wrestled with Jacob?*
- *What was the nature of the struggle?*
- *If the “man” was some form of the divine, why did he not win over Jacob?*
- *How and why could the “man” disable Jacob but not disengage from him?*
- *What happened following the struggle? Why was this significant?*

► Call attention to verse 28: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

Point out that within Hebrew tradition, a change in name often connotes a change in status. For example, when God established the covenant with Abram, God changed his name to Abraham (17:5). When God promised to give Abraham a son through Sarai, God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah (17:15). Years later, when Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt yet rose to power, Pharaoh changed his name to Zaphenath-paneah (41:45).

Jacob’s endurance during this unusual struggle resulted in his receiving the new name of Israel, marking his role in further fulfilling the divine plan.

► Call attention to the sequence of events in Genesis 32:29-31. Note that Jacob asked his partner in the struggle to identify himself. While he refused to do so, he did bless Jacob. At least at that point Jacob realized that his struggle had been of a spiritual nature. Then read aloud verse 30.

► Introduce the theme of reconciliation in Jacob’s story by recalling for adults the 1999 film “The Straight Story.” Based on the true story of Alvin Straight, the movie chronicles the lengths to which 73-year-old Alvin went to achieve reconciliation with his brother, Lyle.

Facing rapidly deteriorating health, Alvin (Richard Farnsworth) realizes that time is running out for him to make things right with his brother. Then he learns that his brother has suffered a stroke.

Alvin is determined to make the journey to his brother’s house in Wisconsin from his small Iowa town. But he can no longer drive because of failing eyesight, and his daughter Rose (Sissy Spacek) cannot drive either. So he sets out for Lyle’s house on his riding lawnmower, pulling a small trailer packed with supplies he’ll need along the way. It is a journey that will take six weeks.

“At first,” write reviewers Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman, “it seems that Alvin is forced into this foolish decision by circumstances, but it soon becomes clear that the difficulty of the journey is the penance his reconciliation with his brother requires” ([www.cinemainfocus.com/Straight%20Story,%20The\\_3.htm](http://www.cinemainfocus.com/Straight%20Story,%20The_3.htm)).

The reconciliation occurs without much dialogue, Conklin and Wayman note, but “is masterfully left to symbolic gestures . . . when Alvin pulls up to a dilapidated small house on the edge of a country road, and calls out to his brother. With

tense apprehension, the two brothers sit down on the porch and then Lyle realizes that Alvin has driven a lawn mower all that distance just to be with him. Words can never express the power of such a penitent act.”

► Connect this illustration to the story of Jacob and Esau’s reconciliation. Read aloud selected passages such as Genesis 33:1-4, 8-10 and 12-17. Lead adults to examine these events by asking such questions as:

- *For whom do you believe the journey toward reconciliation was more difficult, Jacob or Esau? Why?*
- *To what degree do you think that Jacob’s earlier intense physical and spiritual struggle prepared him for this reconciliation with Esau? What do you think he learned as a result of this struggle?*
- *What evidence do you find that Jacob was remorseful and repentant?*
- *Did Esau make it easier for Jacob to return home? How?*
- *What did Jacob mean when he told Esau that “truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor” (v 10)?*
- *Why do you think that Jacob and Esau parted ways again after reconciling?*
- *Why was Jacob’s return essential?*

## Apply Biblical Truth

► Stress that God can change not only the course of our lives as we experience life’s struggles, God can also use us to bring about positive change in the lives of others. We do this most effectively by living the gospel as Jesus did.

Using the Introduction in the Students Guide, summarize the story of Leena Levanya of India.

► Close with the following thoughts from Carla Nelson, education consultant for Canadian Baptist Ministries:

“Jesus says that we will be judged, not just by proclaiming Christ as Lord, but by living out the ethics of the Kingdom as well—by being his incarnation. . . . Our God and our world require followers of Christ who are able to think through the complexities of our world on a daily basis. It is a process of becoming rooted enough in Christ that we are not afraid of the happenings around us, becoming followers of Jesus Christ who take the Great Commission seriously and understand that we will be judged by how we fulfill the mandate that Christ chose to live by in Luke 4. It seems that we have spent the past 2000 years trying to explain why the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to us. A Christian mind knows it applies and must make choices to engage it” (see “Education and Transformation: An Interview with Carla Nelson,” [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4526](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4526)).

## Living a Life of Faith Leaders Guide

### Genesis 35

*<sup>1</sup>God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." <sup>2</sup>So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; <sup>3</sup>then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." <sup>4</sup>So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem. ... <sup>9</sup>God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. <sup>10</sup>God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he was called Israel. <sup>11</sup>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 spring from you. <sup>12</sup>The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." <sup>13</sup>Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him. <sup>14</sup>Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it. <sup>15</sup>So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. <sup>16</sup>Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. <sup>17</sup>When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to*

*her, "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son." <sup>18</sup>As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-o'ni; but his father called him Benjamin. ... <sup>22b</sup>Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. <sup>23</sup>The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's first-born), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zeb'ulun. <sup>24</sup>The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. <sup>25</sup>The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naph'tali. <sup>26</sup>The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.... <sup>28</sup>Now the days of Isaac were one hundred eighty years. <sup>29</sup>And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.*

**Theme: A life of faith requires putting away those things that are harmful to the community and establishing new priorities and patterns for living.**

### Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ The following columns from EthicsDaily.com include illustrations and examples you may find helpful in guiding this discussion:

"Finding God in the Questions," ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4497](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4497));

"The Making of a Real World," ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4354](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4354));

“New Beginnings,” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3864](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3864));

“The Changing Seasons of Life,” ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4312](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4312)).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Ask adults who have seen it to provide a synopsis and plot overview of the 2000 movie “The Family Man.” Supplement their comments with the following:

Jack Campbell (Nicholas Cage) is self-absorbed, single, Wall Street professional living a luxurious, fast-paced lifestyle. He has a swanky penthouse, a fast car, a great career and every expensive and exquisite thing he could possibly want. He is given the opportunity to have an extended look at what his life might have been like had he married his college sweetheart, Kate (Tea Leoni) years earlier. His decision to leave her behind to pursue a year-long internship in London resulted in his life going in one direction, and Kate’s in another.

Jack is able to explore and actually live this other life in an alternate universe some 13 years later. He falls asleep one Christmas Eve in his New York City penthouse but wakes up the next morning to find that he is married to Kate, has two children and is living in suburban New Jersey. His former life here doesn’t exist. Instead, he has a family to take care of and has to balance a budget, which terribly frustrates him.

At first Jack is completely turned off by his new life. It is all foreign and strange to him. But the longer he lives it, the

more he grows to enjoy and appreciate it. What he had once sought in materialistic pursuits but never found, he now actually finds in a loving family. At one point, Kate asks Jack, “How can you do that? How can you look at me as if you haven’t seen me every single day for the past 13 years?”

As a result of discovering love and family, Jack’s values and perspectives change. While the film does not credit God with giving these blessings, it does portray the values of love, marriage and family over money and prestige.

► Suggest that one of the appeals of films like this one is that they ask “What if?” Through the course of our lives, we face crossroads where we must make decisions, evaluate priorities and choose one path over another. It is natural to look back occasionally and ask ourselves what might have happened had we made a different choice. How might our lives been different?

Stress that each choice brings consequences, and each offers us the opportunity to reaffirm our priorities and make purposeful decisions that reflect our dependence on God, our pursuit of the divine will and the value we place on the lives of others. Living a life of faith means that our priorities and patterns for living reflect our relationship with God. We also must live with the realization that our choices have implications not just for us and our families but for the broader community as well.

► Cite as an example of one who tries honestly to integrate his faith with his life and work Dr. Timothy Johnson. Probably best known as the medical editor for ABC News, Johnson has written a book titled *Finding God in the Questions* that focuses on these three questions: Does God exist? What is God like? What difference does it

make? The book also explores Jesus' identity and teachings and the critical role of Jesus in shaping our priorities.

Johnson acknowledges that some people may find their way to God as the result of an intellectual acceptance of Jesus, but he argues that most of us would do better by following Jesus as best we see to do. He argues that those who attempt to follow Jesus even in the smallest ways will, over time, develop a genuine relationship with God.

Johnson ends the book by noting the difference his conclusions make in his personal life, declaring that following Jesus demands that we invest in ministry among "the least of these."

"I have decided," he writes, "... to rearrange my life so that I have much more time than I do now to give in direct service to those in need."

Acknowledge that the world is a complicated place, and integrating our lives and faith in this world can sometimes be complicated too. Our desire to do so is aided by examining the lives and faith of others who also struggled but whom God called, blessed and used to further the divine plan.

### Explore the Bible

► Ask adults to review the sequence of events in the lives of Jacob and Esau. Refer to earlier lessons in the Students Guide as necessary, and remind them of the following facts:

- Esau and Jacob were twins. Esau was the firstborn and therefore entitled to the father's blessing and inheritance. At his father's death, he would become the family's leader, its patriarch.

- Esau was his father Isaac's favorite son; Jacob was favored by their mother, Rebekah. Rebekah and Jacob tricked Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. Naturally angry over their scheming and deception, Esau threatened to kill Jacob, who ran away to live with Laban, his mother's brother. There he married Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel.
- After years of struggle, God prospered Jacob, who eventually wanted to return home with his family.

► Note that Genesis 35 records Jacob's journey home. Ask someone to read aloud verses 1-4. Then ask:

- *What did God tell Jacob to do to prepare to return to his homeland?*
- *What was the significance of Bethel?*
- *What specific things did Jacob instruct his family to do?*
- *How do you think Jacob changed?*
- *What did the actions of Jacob and his family signify?*
- *Why did God instruct Jacob to make an altar at Bethel? What did the altar symbolize in Jacob's life?*

► Read aloud Genesis 35:9-15 and note the new name God gave Jacob. Point out that while scripture continues to use both names interchangeably, the new name was significant. Then ask:

- *Why did God give Jacob a new name? What was wrong with the old name?*
- *What did Jacob's new name mean?*
- *What did God promise Jacob?*

► Call attention to Genesis 35:16-18 that record the birth of Jacob and Rachel's son and Rachel's subsequent death. Point out that while Rachel gave her son the name Ben-o'ni, which means "son of my sorrow" prior to her death, Jacob renamed his son Benjamin, which means "son of my right hand."

Next, point out specific verses including Genesis 35:22b-26, 28-29 that list the names of Jacob's sons. Point out that these verses seem to indicate that Isaac had not died shortly after he gave his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. Instead, it seems that he lived for some time, long enough to see reconciliation occur between his two sons.

### **Apply Biblical Truth**

► Suggest that, like Jacob, we can become distracted from God and the divine plan. In order to regain that focus, we too must put away our foreign gods and "arise and go to Bethel," a place where we can meet God, renew our commitment and seek forgiveness and God's blessing. Only when we do this will we realize what we have been missing all along as we have pursued other interests and have been distracted by material pursuits.

► Relate the following from Mark McEntire, EthicsDaily.com columnist and university religion professor, and challenge adults to apply these concepts to their lives. McEntire was asked to deliver an address to graduating high school

seniors, and in the process, surfaced some significant reminders for people of all ages and at all stages of life.

He reminded students and parents that contrary to what some people might tell them, college is, indeed, the real world, where they "will be forming the habits that will govern the rest of your life. At the first meeting of each course you take in college you will be handed a syllabus. People who see the syllabus for my courses often laugh at part of it. Under the section on essays it says this: 'All essays should be typed, double-spaced, and in a standard 12 point font with standard margins. They should be printed in black ink on one side of each sheet of paper and the sheets should be attached to each other with one diagonal staple in the upper left-hand corner'" ("The Making of a Real World," ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=4354](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4354)).

"I include this preposterous statement to make a point," McEntire said. "FINISH THE JOB. In every class I have students come on the day their first written assignment is due asking for a stapler. I have no idea how these students have found their way to campus when they are unable to figure out a way to get their paper stapled before coming to class."

He went on to remind students and parents alike that there is no "magic wand" that will one day wave over them to turn them into "punctual, responsible, dependable and fully engaged" people. The habits we cultivate early are usually the ones that we carry with us throughout our lives.

The decisions one makes even as a college student, McEntire said, matter a great deal. "Understanding how you fit into this world is the most important question for you to consider in the next few years. ... Pay attention and you will find your place in it."

► Stress that in order to live a genuine life of faith, we must establish patterns of living that will allow us to “finish the job.” Our culture will constantly distract us and will try to pull us away from our pursuit of the divine plan. Like Jacob and the other patriarchs of Hebrew scripture, we will make mistakes and poor choices. Yet God continues to give us opportunities to confess, repent and begin again.

## Realizing the Divine Plan Leaders Guide

### **Genesis 37**

*<sup>2b</sup>Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. <sup>4</sup>But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. <sup>5</sup>Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup>There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. ...<sup>17b</sup>So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to one another, “Here comes the dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” <sup>21</sup>But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” <sup>22</sup>Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand*

on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup>So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. ... <sup>26</sup>Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup>Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup>When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and they sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. ... <sup>31</sup>Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup>They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and he said, “This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.” <sup>33</sup>He recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” <sup>34</sup>Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup>All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. <sup>36</sup>Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.

**Theme: People’s unwise choices and sinful behaviors can frustrate but not ultimately stop the divine plan.**

## Before You Teach

► Read Genesis 37 in its entirety. Then read the related lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► The following online columns from Third Way Café columnist Melodie Davis can provide additional insights into sibling relationships as you lead adults to explore the relationships among Joseph and his brothers:

“Siblings As We Age,” ([www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=201&Submit=Go](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=201&Submit=Go));

“Getting Along as Adult Siblings,” ([www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=202&Submit=Go](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=202&Submit=Go)).

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Pose this question:

- *How far will some people go to gain revenge?*

To stimulate discussion, recall for adults the movie “Changing Lanes.”

The film follows the story of two men, Gavin Banek (Ben Affleck), a wealthy Wall Street lawyer, and Doyle Gibson (Samuel L. Jackson), an insurance telemarketer and recovering alcoholic. As each man is on his way to court for a different reason, they have a traffic accident. The accident spawns extreme measures on both of their parts as they struggle with right versus wrong, good versus evil. Each also struggles with whether to help or hurt the other.

“In all of our lives,” write film reviewers Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman, “there are moments when we make decisions to either care for one another in honesty and love or destroy one another with whatever resources we have at our disposal. Though ‘Changing Lanes’ doesn’t provide the answer it hints at throughout the film, it clearly presents the choices we are called upon to make” ([www.cinemainfocus.com/changinglanes.htm](http://www.cinemainfocus.com/changinglanes.htm)).

► Point out that revenge is but one of the threads in the difficult and complicated relationship of Joseph and his brothers. Also present are threads of jealousy, hate, conspiracy and deception. At many critical junctures in the story of their lives, both Joseph and his brothers make some wrong choices.

Note that in writing about adult sibling relationships, columnist Melodie Davis cites author Jane Mersky Leder, author of “Brothers and Sisters: How They Shape Our Lives.” Leder says that “while few adult siblings have taken the drastic and unfortunate step of severing ties completely, about one third describe their relationship as distant and contentious” (“Siblings As We Age,” ([www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=201&Submit=Go](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=201&Submit=Go))).

Davis notes that the sibling relationship is “usually the longest of any human relationship: we know our parents for perhaps 50-70 years, our spouses (if we are lucky) for 40-60 years, but our siblings (if we are born close together) we may know for 80-90 years. ... Since the earliest days of the Bible, siblings have been trying (and failing) to get along.”

She believes that “the key to getting along as adult siblings is to understand how the rivalries and relationships we had as children may still be affecting us” (“Getting Along as Adult Siblings,” [www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=202&Submit=Go](http://www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=202&Submit=Go)). She notes that “favoritism is the single most common

cause of sibling rivalry, and memories of that favoritism can fuel rivalry later in life, too.”

The relationship among Joseph and his brothers is certainly a case in point.

Stress that God’s plan for Israel’s future involved Joseph, but his brothers seemed determined to take Joseph out of the picture, not because they were concerned about or even aware of God’s plan, but because they were jealous of him and their father’s love for him.

In spite of everything they tried, the divine plan moved along and Joseph continued to be a part of it. For his part, he was sometimes impulsive and naïve and probably brought some of his problems onto himself. Still, God worked in, through and around the unwise choices and sinful behaviors of Joseph and his brothers to further the divine plan.

### Explore the Bible

► Set the stage for the familiar story of Joseph and his brothers by asking someone to read aloud Genesis 37:2b-8. Then ask:

- *Why were Joseph’s brothers jealous of him? Was their jealousy justified? Why or why not?*
- *What did Joseph do that contributed to his brothers’ contempt toward him?*
- *Why do you think that Joseph told his brothers about his dream?*
- *What do you think God intended for Joseph to do as a result of having the dream?*

► Continue the story by reading aloud Genesis 37:17b-24. Call attention to the questions in the first two paragraphs of the related section in the Students Guide. Read aloud these questions and encourage adults to suggest possible responses.

Note the contemporary example in this section of the Students Guide related to learning not to live in life's "what ifs." Stress that even though Joseph told his brothers about his dream and further provoked their anger toward him, and even though they plotted to kill him, God's plan was not stopped. Then ask:

- *How did God spare Joseph's life when his brothers wanted to kill him?*
- *Why did God spare Joseph's life? What was the ultimate reason?*

► Read aloud Genesis 37:26-28 and ask:

- *What motivated Judah's actions?*
- *How did Judah convince his brothers to go along with his plan?*

Point out that God even used the selfishness, injustice and greed of Joseph's brothers to further the divine plan. What they intended for harm, God used for ultimate good.

► Conclude this episode in the life of Joseph and his brothers by asking a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 37:31-36. Then ask:

- *Why did Jacob take responsibility for Joseph's death?*

- *Do you think he regretted showing favoritism toward Joseph?*
- *Why would Jacob not allow his children to comfort him?*

### Apply Biblical Truth

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 13. Then ask adults to consider on what occasions and how often they have asked questions similar to those raised by the Psalmist, such as:

- Where are you, God?
- Why will you not answer me?
- How can I know you are working in my life?
- How can I know of your control and your presence?

Note that at this point in his life, Jacob was likely asking these or similar questions. Like Abraham and Isaac before him, he had been assured of God's presence, provision and protection and had received God's promise and blessing. Yet life's circumstances regularly caused these people of faith to question how, when and even if God would fulfill those promises. Often their circumstances grew from unwise choices and sinful behaviors. Other times, they lived with the consequences of others' poor decisions. Still, God remained faithful to divine promises and the divine plan.

Call attention to the Psalmist's conclusion in verses 5-6: "But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me."

## Recognizing God's Divine Hand Leaders Guide

### Genesis 40

*<sup>5</sup>One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup>When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. <sup>7</sup>So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" <sup>8</sup>They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me." . . . <sup>12</sup>Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; <sup>13</sup>within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. <sup>14</sup>But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. <sup>15</sup>For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon." <sup>16a</sup>When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream. . . ." <sup>18</sup>And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; <sup>19</sup>within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a pole; and the birds will eat the flesh from you." <sup>20</sup>On the third day which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his*

*servants. <sup>21</sup>He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; <sup>22</sup>but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. <sup>23</sup>Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.*

### Genesis 41

*<sup>1</sup>After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile. . . . <sup>8</sup>In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. <sup>9</sup>Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my faults today. <sup>10</sup>Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. <sup>11</sup>We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. <sup>12</sup>A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each according to his dream. <sup>13</sup>As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged." <sup>14</sup>Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. . . . <sup>16</sup>Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer. . . . <sup>28</sup>It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>29</sup>There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. <sup>30</sup>After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. <sup>31</sup>The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be*

very grievous. <sup>32</sup>And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. <sup>33</sup> Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. . . . <sup>37</sup>The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. <sup>38</sup>Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God". . . <sup>40</sup>You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you." <sup>41</sup>And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt."  
<sup>42</sup>Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck.  
<sup>43</sup>He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.  
<sup>44</sup>Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." . . . <sup>53</sup>The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end. . . . <sup>57</sup>Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

**Theme: Divine blessings often flow through obedient human channels and extend to the entire human race.**

## Before You Teach

► Read Genesis 40-41 in their entirety. Then read the related lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by reading aloud the following statement and asking adults to explain whether they agree or disagree with it and why:

*Genuine success in life often consists of what we do with our second and third chances.*

After several have responded, point out the conclusion of Harry Emerson Fosdick from the Introduction in the Students Guide: Few of us live our lives on the basis of our first choice. Most of us instead live on the basis of our second or third choices.

Suggest that everyone eventually faces circumstances that cause them to defer or even let go of dreams. Each person must occasionally alter their life plans. The difference for us, as people of faith, is in how we respond to these situations.

► Ask: *What is your initial reaction when life throws you a curve?*

Guide adults to explore their personal responses by citing the example of Carl Brashear, whose life experiences inspired the 2000 movie "Men of Honor." If adults in your group have seen the movie, ask them to summarize its plot. Supplement and make application with the following details:

Carl Brashear (played by Cuba Gooding Jr. in the film) was born in 1931, the son of sharecroppers. He was determined to become the Navy's first African-American diver. But Brashear joined the Navy only shortly after the armed

services were desegregated, and he endured unimaginable hazing, prejudice and cruelty.

Brashear was placed on permanent kitchen duty, where it seemed he might stay forever. But he was determined not to languish there and instead make something more of his life. In spite of efforts on the part of other sailors and officers to keep him down, he managed to display superior swimming ability and gained a spot on the swimming team. That was but one of the first obstacles he overcame. He next set his sights on becoming a Navy diver.

After a long process, the time finally came for the final test that would determine whether he would make the dive team. Brashear had been warned not to bother showing up for the test, because he would not be allowed to pass. The commanding officer had been ordered not to pass him. But Brashear showed up for the test anyway.

To pass the test, each prospective diver had to assemble a piece of equipment under water. They were tossed the tools they needed once they dove in. But Brashear's materials were sabotaged. Although it took him more than 9 hours in very cold water to complete the task, he succeeded and completed his task perfectly.

The officer had been ordered not to assist Brashear from the water once he was finished, but some of his peers came to his assistance, something they had seldom done before.

Regardless of the obstacles that came his way, Brashear seemed to overcome them with determination, courage and honor. Though his dream was deferred and his plans often changed, he eventually reached his goal.

► Connect the experiences of Carl Brashear to those of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob who suddenly found himself not only a slave in a foreign country, but also tossed in prison for something he did not do.

Suggest that from Joseph's example of perseverance, obedience and integrity, we find an example of how to respond when life throws us a curve. Through Joseph's life, God worked to bless an entire nation of people. While Joseph probably often thought his dreams were dashed and his life would never change for the better, God was all along working in and through those circumstances to use Joseph to bless others.

### **Explore the Bible**

► Before examining Joseph's experiences in prison, recall for adults the experiences that ultimately led him there. Note especially the following:

- Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, bought Joseph in Egypt from the Ishmaelites, to whom his brothers had originally sold him.
- "The LORD was with Joseph" (39:2), and he became very successful, even though he was a slave. He became overseer of Potiphar's house, and Potiphar put him in charge of all that he had.
- God blessed Potiphar because of Joseph.
- Scripture says that Joseph was "handsome and good-looking" (39:6). He eventually caught the eye of Potiphar's wife, who tried to seduce him. Joseph refused, although she persisted "day after day" (39:10).

- One day, when he was in the house to carry out his duties, Potiphar’s wife caught Joseph alone and again tried to seduce him. He refused. She had grabbed hold of his clothing, and when he turned to run away, his clothes came off in her hands.
- Potiphar’s wife told other members of her household and her husband that Joseph had seduced her. Potiphar was enraged and threw him in prison.
- “The LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer” (39:21). The chief jailer placed Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners and did not concern himself with anything, “because the LORD was with him (Joseph); and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper (39:23).
- The king’s cupbearer and baker did something to offend the king, so he threw them in prison, where they were placed in Joseph’s charge.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 40:5-8. Point out that Joseph noticed that the cupbearer and baker were “troubled,” so he asked them what was wrong. Remind adults that particularly in the ancient world, people placed great value on their dreams and believed that they could know the spiritual world through their dreams. It was extremely important to the cupbearer and the baker to learn the significance of their dreams. Ask:

- *How was Joseph’s attitude in response to the cupbearer and baker about their dreams different from his attitude when he told his brothers about his own dreams?*
- *What does this tell you about Joseph?*

► Read aloud Genesis 40:12-15. Then ask:

- *How did Joseph interpret the butler’s dream?*
- *What did Joseph ask the butler to do? What was Joseph really seeking in making this request?*

Next, read aloud Genesis 40:16a, 18-23 and lead adults to respond to questions such as these:

- *What was the chief baker’s dream?*
- *What did Joseph say that it meant?*
- *What did Pharaoh do?*
- *What did the cupbearer do?*

► Point out that because the cupbearer failed to remember Joseph, he remained in prison another two years. Then read aloud Genesis 41:1, 8-14a and summarize the sequence of events. Ask:

- *What purpose did these dreams serve in God’s overall plan?*

Continue by reading selected verses from Genesis 41 to advance the story, including verses 16, 28-33, 37-38, 40-44, 53 and 57. Note that Joseph was careful to tell the king that dream interpretation belonged only to God. Then ask:

- *How did Joseph interpret Pharaoh’s dream?*
- *What was Pharaoh’s response?*
- *How did Joseph’s situation change? Why was Joseph put in this position?*

## Apply Biblical Truth

► Call attention to the experiences of Teresa of Avila, as told in the Students Guide. After selling all she had to build an orphanage, floods destroyed it. She rebuilt it, only to see it again destroyed, this time by a storm. She rebuilt it again, and it was destroyed by fire.

Close by summarizing the thoughts in the last two paragraphs of the lesson in the Students Guide.

## Making Twisted Lives Straight Leaders Guide

### Genesis 42

*<sup>1</sup>When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why to you keep looking at one another? <sup>2</sup>I have heard,” he said, “that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.” <sup>3</sup>So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. <sup>4</sup>But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. ... <sup>6</sup>Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. <sup>7</sup>When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. “Where do you come from?” he said. They said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food.” <sup>8</sup>Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. <sup>9</sup>Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, “You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!” ... <sup>15</sup>Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ... <sup>18</sup>On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: <sup>19</sup>if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your household, <sup>20</sup>and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they agreed to do so. ... <sup>26</sup>They loaded their donkeys with their*

grain, and departed. <sup>27</sup>When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ... <sup>29</sup>When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them. ... <sup>36</sup>And their father Jacob said to them, "I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has happened to me!" <sup>37</sup>Then Reuben said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." <sup>38</sup>But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

### **Genesis 43**

<sup>1</sup>Now the famine was severe in the land. <sup>2</sup>And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little more food." ... <sup>11</sup>Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry them down as a present to the man—a little balm and a little honey, gum, resin, pistachio nuts, and almonds. <sup>12</sup>Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the top of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. <sup>13</sup>Take your brother also, and be on your way again to the man; <sup>14</sup>may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, so that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved." ... <sup>26</sup>When Joseph

came home, they brought him the present that they had carried into the house, and bowed to the ground before him. <sup>27</sup>He inquired about their welfare, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" <sup>28</sup>They said, "Your servant our father is well; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and did obeisance. <sup>29</sup>Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" <sup>30</sup>With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there.

### **Genesis 44**

<sup>1</sup>Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the top of his sack. <sup>2</sup>Put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him. <sup>3</sup>As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. <sup>4</sup>When they had gone only a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, "Go, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup? <sup>5</sup>Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.'" ... <sup>10</sup>He said, "Even so; in accordance with your words, let it be: he with whom it is found shall become my slave, but the rest of you shall go free." <sup>11</sup>Then each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack.

## Genesis 45

*<sup>1</sup>Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ... <sup>4</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup>And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup>For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup>God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup>So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ... <sup>25</sup>So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. <sup>26</sup>And they told him, "Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt." He was stunned; he could not believe them. <sup>27</sup>But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. <sup>28</sup>Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."*

**Theme: Though people often make choices that diminish life, God faithfully works to preserve and to protect life.**

## Before You Teach

► Read Genesis 42-45 in their entirety. Then read the related lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► Determine ahead of time which portions of scripture you will read aloud. While this lesson covers four chapters of Genesis, the story line is probably a familiar one to you and to some adults in your group. Be selective in which verses you will read aloud and how you will fill in the gaps to advance the story so that you can allot adequate time for dialogue and application.

► The following film review from EthicsDaily.com includes ideas for helping adults apply this scripture. You may wish to read it in its entirety at:

"Shattered Glass" ([www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3415](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3415)).

► Note that the closing section of the Students Guide includes a powerful image and application from Christian author Frederick Buechner. Consider using this to close your Bible study. If you prefer, make application using the other option suggested in "Apply Biblical Truth," below.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

► Acknowledge that many decisions that we make have the potential either to enhance, preserve and protect life or to diminish and even destroy life. Sometimes our decisions affect only us; other times they are far-reaching and affect not only our immediate families but our larger family and community.

Note that as the stories from Genesis have illustrated, families often pass along dysfunction and unhealthy patterns because family members repeatedly make poor decisions.

► Recall for adults the family in the movie “Pay It Forward.” Arlene McKinney (Helen Hunt) is a struggling single mother whose alcohol addiction controls her life. Formerly married to an abusive alcoholic, she is also the daughter of an alcoholic mother, Grace (Angie Dickinson).

The film realistically portrays the effects of alcohol addiction on generations of people. Trust dissolves in the wake of broken promises; parents become children and children must become parents; hope dims and all but fades.

Trevor (Haley Joel Osment), Arlene’s 12-year-old son, has every reason to despair and allow his life to take the same futile direction, yet he seems determined to break the cycle of poor choices. Inspired and challenged by an unusual teacher, Mr. Simonet (Kevin Spacey), Trevor decides to change the world.

Trevor creates a concept he calls “pay it forward.” If he helps just three people who in turn help three other people, who would then help three more people, a movement would begin that could change the lives of countless individuals.

Trevor’s classmates laugh at his idea, and he is frustrated when he doesn’t see immediate results. But in this he learns, and we are reminded, of a difficult truth: it often takes time for people to change the direction of their lives.

► Stress that in spite of people’s bad choices that result in twisted, problem-filled lives, God continues to work to preserve and protect life. The ongoing story of Joseph in Egypt offers a clear example of this truth.

## Explore the Bible

► Set the stage for exploring this large portion of scripture by noting the following:

- Because he correctly interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph rose to extreme power in Egypt and acquired all the symbols of authority that went along with it. Pharaoh gave him a signet ring, a gold chain, fine clothes, a chariot preceded only by the one carrying Pharaoh and a wife.
- Pharaoh also gave Joseph a new name: Zaphenath-paneah, which meant, “The God Speaks and He Lives.”
- Because of Joseph’s wise agricultural practices, he was able to store enough grain during the years of abundance to offset the lack during the years of famine. Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream was accurate, and famine did indeed come, spreading throughout the Middle East. But Joseph’s careful management of the grain supply meant that Egypt had enough grain for everyone in the surrounding countries, so that “all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain” (Gen 41:57).

► Read aloud Genesis 42:1-4 and remind adults of Joseph’s family, including his father, Jacob and his brothers who had sold him into slavery. Jacob, for all these years, had mourned Joseph, thinking he was dead as a result of the treachery of his other sons. Ask:

- *Why did Jacob not send Benjamin with his other sons to Egypt to get grain? What was special or different about Benjamin?*

► Ask volunteers to read aloud selected verses from Genesis 42 to advance the story, including 6-9, 15 and 18-20. Then ask:

- *What was Joseph's role in Egypt?*
- *What was Joseph's response to his brothers when they came to him to buy grain?*
- *What test did Joseph give his brothers?*
- *What do you think Joseph's motive was in testing his brothers this way?*

Point out that although Joseph "spoke harshly" to his brothers and put them to an extremely difficult test, he nonetheless gave them grain to take back with them.

► Advance the story by noting selected verses such as Genesis 42:26-27, 29, 36-38. Point out that Joseph had set up his brothers so that they would appear to be thieves. Then ask:

- *What was Jacob's response when his sons told him what was required?*
- *Why do you think Jacob seemed willing to let Simeon remain imprisoned in Egypt?*

Continue by noting events from Genesis 43:1-2, 11-14, 26-30. Then ask:

- *Why did Jacob send his sons to Egypt again?*
- *What did he send with them, and why?*

- *Why do you think Jacob agreed for Benjamin to go to Egypt this time?*
- *What was Joseph's response to seeing his brother Benjamin?*
- *What did Joseph do at the banquet that disturbed his brothers?*

► Review events from Genesis 44:1-5, 10-11. Then ask:

- *How and why did Joseph frame Benjamin?*
- *What was really at the bottom of Joseph's plan?*
- *What did the brothers think would happen to Benjamin?*
- *What did Judah do when the brothers returned to face Joseph?*

► Finally, read aloud selected verses from Genesis 45 and guide adults to answer questions such as these:

- *What effect did Judah's speech have on Joseph?*
- *What two things did Joseph emphatically say?*
- *What was the purpose of Joseph's earlier cruel charade with his brothers?*

► Stress that although Joseph's brothers had originally intended harm for him, God had all along been working in Joseph's life to change their evil actions into a path of salvation for the whole family. Joseph saw to it that his brothers paid for their earlier cruelty to him, but in the

process, he realized that they seemed to have genuinely repented.

### Apply Biblical Truth

► Summarize for adults the insights of Frederick Buechner as noted in the Students Guide. Or, use the following ideas to conclude your Bible study.

Steve Glass was a successful reporter for the political magazine *The New Republic*. Well-liked by his colleagues, he was so respected that other magazines tried to lure him to work for them.

In May 1998, Glass wrote a story about computer hackers that caught the attention of another reporter, Adam Penenberg, who checked into the facts of Glass's story. In the process, Penenberg discovered a number of conflicts in the article and raised questions about Glass's integrity. Glass's editor stood behind his reporter as long as he could, "until the conflicts become so great that even he begins to question where the truth ends and lies begin" ("Shattered Glass," [www.ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=3415](http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3415)).

The story of Steve Glass's entanglement in a web of lies is told in the 2003 film "Shattered Glass." EthicsDaily.com film reviewer Roger Thomas calls it "an exceptional film with at least two important messages. The first echoes that old saying, 'One lie leads to another.' As the noose of the truth tightens around his neck, Glass uses lies as defensive weapons to ward off his enemies and to earn sympathy.

"The other message is that true repentance means more than an apology. Each time Glass is close to being caught in a lie, he childishly blurts out, 'Are you mad at me?' When

he is caught, his standard response is, 'I'm sorry.' This is symbolic of a culture that believes 'I'm sorry' is the placebo for all personal conflicts.

Christians have perpetuated this philosophy by claims that forgiveness follows a verbal request—without a change in lifestyle. Ultimately, does God honor insincere requests for forgiveness? An apology to keep peace—or as a distraction, as Glass uses it—is not one with authentic remorse; therefore, it is meaningless. Spoken apologies are authenticated by actions displaying true regret and repentance."

► Suggest that in spite of the horrible decisions Joseph's brothers made, they appear to have been truly remorseful and to have changed their lives and priorities, to the point that one of them was willing to give his life to spare Benjamin's life.

Joseph's story affirms the fact that God works to turn our evil actions into good that preserves and protects life.

## Journeying Toward Reconciliation Leaders Guide

### Genesis 46

<sup>1</sup>When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. <sup>2</sup>God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, “Jacob, Jacob.” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>3</sup>Then he said, “I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. <sup>4</sup>I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph’s own hand shall close your eyes. ...<sup>b</sup>and they came into Egypt, Jacob and all his offspring with him. ... <sup>29</sup>Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to meet his father Israel in Goshen. He presented himself to him, fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while. <sup>30</sup>Israel said to Joseph, “I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive.” <sup>31</sup>Joseph said to his brothers and to his father’s household, “I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, ‘My brother’s and my father’s household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me. <sup>32</sup>The men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have.’ <sup>33</sup>When Pharaoh calls you, and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ <sup>34</sup>you shall say, ‘Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our ancestors’ –in order that you may settle in the land of Goshen, because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.”

### Genesis 47

<sup>5</sup>Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Your father and your brothers have come to you. <sup>6b</sup>The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them live in the land of Goshen; and you know there are capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock.” ... <sup>13</sup>Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. <sup>14</sup>Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh’s house. <sup>15</sup>When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, “Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone.” <sup>16</sup>And Joseph answered, “Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone.” <sup>17</sup>So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock. <sup>18</sup>When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, “We can not hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord’s. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. <sup>19</sup>Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.” <sup>20</sup>So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt

for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. ...<sup>27</sup> Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.<sup>28</sup> Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life were one hundred forty-seven years.<sup>29</sup> When the time of Israel's death drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "If I have found favor with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal loyally and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt.<sup>30</sup> When I lie down with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place." He answered, "I will do as you have said."<sup>31</sup> And he said, "Swear to me"; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed.

#### **Genesis 48**

<sup>3</sup> And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.'<sup>5</sup> Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are. ...<sup>11</sup> Israel said to Joseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also."<sup>12</sup> Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.<sup>13</sup> Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them near him.<sup>14</sup> But Israel stretched out his

right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn. ...<sup>18</sup> Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head."<sup>19</sup> But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

#### **Genesis 49**

<sup>33</sup> When Jacob ended his charge to his sons, he drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.

#### **Genesis 50**

<sup>1</sup> Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. ...<sup>4</sup> When the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph addressed the household of Pharaoh, "If now I have found favor with you, please speak to Pharaoh as follows:<sup>5</sup> My father made me swear an oath; he said, 'I am about to die. In the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.' Now therefore let me go up, so that I may bury my father; then I will return."<sup>6</sup> Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do."<sup>7a</sup> So Joseph went up to bury his father. ...<sup>14</sup> After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone with him to bury his father.<sup>15</sup> Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"<sup>16</sup> So they approached Joseph,

saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup>'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup>Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup>So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them...<sup>24</sup>Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

**Theme: God pursues goodness, reconciliation and unity within the human family, working in and through our failures.**

## Before You Teach

- ▶ Read Genesis 42-45 in their entirety. Then read the related lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ This lesson covers five chapters of Genesis. Be selective in which verses you will read aloud during your Bible study and how you will fill in the gaps to advance the story. Plan carefully to allow adequate time for dialogue and application.

- ▶ Make individual assignment sheets with questions for each person in your group (see below). Plan to divide adults as equally as possible between the two assignments.

## As You Teach

### Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Guide adults to begin thinking about reconciliation as a journey by relating the following true story from Jim Wallis, editor in chief and executive director of *Sojourners* magazine.

Following the 2004 US presidential election, Wallis wrote poignantly about a personal story of conflict and reconciliation between himself and Bill Bright, the late founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ. Though both were evangelical Christians, Wallis and Bright disagreed on many political issues.

"In 1976, Bill Bright joined a far-right member of Congress named John Conlan and other conservatives in a project to mobilize evangelical prayer and cell groups for political purposes. It was, in fact, the first attempt to create a 'Religious Right' in American politics—several years before the founding of groups like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition," Wallis wrote in the November 2004 issue of *Sojourners*.

"We at *Sojourners* decided to investigate. It became the most extensive investigative project we had ever undertaken, and resulted in a cover story in the magazine titled 'The Plan to Save America.' Bright was publicly embarrassed by our expose and the whole experience. Though we had been scrupulously careful, backing up every fact in

the story with at least three sources, Bright angrily denounced me.”

Wallis and his Sojourners staff invited Bright and others to respond both prior to and following the publication of the article, but they declined. “Because we also differed on almost every political question from Vietnam to domestic issues, a bitter and public polarization grew up between Bill Bright and myself,” he recalled.

The rift continued for many years. A particularly difficult time for Wallis occurred at a dinner for evangelical leaders when Bright again publicly attacked him, calling him a “liar.”

More than 20 years later, Wallis said, he and Bright were again at another dinner. Wallis spotted Bright across the room, although Bright did not recognize him. Wallis approached Bright and apologized for not having approached him years earlier to mend the rift between them.

“The now-old man reach out and wrapped his arms around me. Then he said, ‘Jim, we need to come together. It’s been so long, and the Lord would have us come together. . . . I’m so worried about the poor, about what’s going to happen to them. You’re bringing us together on that, and I want to support you.’”

The two men agreed to get together again soon, which they did. They had a lengthy conversation and agreed that part of fulfilling the Great Commission involves caring for the poor. Bright prayed for Wallis and for his ministry through Sojourners.

Bright became ill shortly after that, and Wallis received a letter from him, which said, “Congratulations on your great ministry for our Lord. I rejoice with you. An unexpected gift

designated to my personal use makes possible this modest contribution to your magazine. I wish I had the means to add at least three more zeros to the enclosed check. Warm affection in Christ. Yours for helping to fulfill the Great Commission each year until our Lord returns. Bill”

Bright’s letter included a check for \$1,000. As Wallis was reading the letter, one of his colleagues went into his office and informed him that Bill Bright had just died. Writing Wallis the letter was evidently one of the last things Bright did.

“Bill sent a \$1,000 gift to the magazine that had exposed his most embarrassing moment more than 30 years before, as an affirmation of the ministry of another Christian leader who he once regarded as an enemy. . . . The experience of my relationship with Bill Bright has taught me much about the promise and power of reconciliation.”

► Affirm the fact that God desires and works toward reconciliation and unity among humanity. The journey of Jacob’s sons to Egypt to buy grain during a time of severe famine was actually a journey of reconciliation with the brother they had cruelly sold into slavery years earlier. Their story of reunification and reconciliation with Joseph in Egypt offers many lessons to us about reconciliation.

### **Explore the Bible**

► To facilitate the examination of this large volume of scripture and maximize the time allotted for your Bible study, give each adult in your group one of the following assignments. Refer them to the corresponding scriptures and exposition in the Students Guide and encourage them to work either individually or within small groups to answer the questions.

Be prepared to direct questions in logical order, moving between the two groups. Also be prepared to move along the story by pointing out significant verses and filling in details.

### **Assignment 1: Jacob and Joseph**

- *Before Jacob entered Egypt and was reunited with his son Joseph, whom he had long thought to be dead, what did God promise him?*
- *Why was it important to Jacob to have God's assurance that God would go with him into Egypt? What was the source of Jacob's fear?*
- *What were the reactions of Jacob and Joseph when they were reunited?*
- *How long did Jacob live in Goshen?*
- *What became of Jacob's family in Goshen?*
- *What did Joseph promise Jacob as he approached death?*
- *Why did Jacob offer the greater blessing to Joseph's younger son instead of to his older son, as was the custom?*
- *What did Jacob promise Joseph about his sons?*

### **Assignment 2: Joseph and his Brothers**

- *What strategy did Joseph give his brothers for gaining Pharaoh's approval and settling into Goshen?*

- *What advantages did Joseph's family have in settling in Goshen?*
- *In his efforts to provide thousands of people with food and keep them from starving, Joseph in effect established a feudal system in Egypt and took the profits of their money, livestock and land to Pharaoh's treasury. Was what Joseph did heroic and noble or was it symptomatic of materialistic empire-building?*
- *What effect would this system have on Joseph's descendants later?*
- *After Jacob's death, what were Joseph's brothers afraid of? What did they do to protect themselves?*
- *What was Joseph's response to his brothers' fears?*
- *What did Joseph's brothers promise him?*
- *How was Joseph able to put his difficult and troubled past at the hands of his brothers behind him?*

► After allowing adults enough time to consider their assigned questions and related scriptures, review the details of the story by asking adults to respond with answers to the questions. Fill in details from scripture as necessary to advance the story.

► Note that the reunification of Jacob's family with Joseph in Egypt was but the beginning of their process of reconciliation. They had to dissolve old rivalries, forge new alliances and learn to trust each other. Joseph was able to put the past behind him because he had seen God's promised

blessing in action in his life. He repeatedly acknowledged that God had led him to Egypt, turning the evil deeds of his brothers into good not only for their whole family but for an entire nation.

### Apply Biblical Truth

► Conclude by calling attention to “Embracing the Possibility of Reconciliation” in the Students Guide. Review the lessons the story of Jacob and his sons teach us about reconciliation. Ask adults to consider privately their answers to the following questions as you read them aloud:

- *When reconciliation is necessary between another person and me, how apt am I to initiate it?*
- *How willing am I to commit to an ongoing and lengthy process of reconciliation?*
- *How willing am I to forgive human failings—both my own and someone else’s—in order to achieve reconciliation?*
- *How often do I tend to hang onto past misdeeds and hurts and thus stall the process of reconciliation?*
- *With whom do I need to seek reconciliation today?*
- *What is the first step I should take in seeking reconciliation between another person and myself?*

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