

In the Beginning God: 13 Lessons from Genesis

Students 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.

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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.

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An *In the Beginning God: 13 Lessons from Genesis Leaders* Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (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, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Caring for Creation

Genesis 1:26-31; 2:15, 19-20a

Theme: God gives human beings responsibility for creation.

Introduction

"All the ills from which America suffers can be traced back to the teaching of evolution," said William Jennings Bryan in 1924 in an address to Seventh-Day Adventists. "It would be better to destroy every other book ever written, and save just the first three verses of Genesis."

The next year, he was locked in a heated court case known today as the Scope's Monkey Trial.

Bryan, a former Democratic Party presidential candidate, was the lead prosecutor in a trial in Dayton, Tennessee, over the teaching of evolution in public schools.

A young biology teacher, John Scopes, was charged with teaching evolution, which Tennessee, along with several other states, had outlawed. These states opposed Darwinism, a theory attributed to Charles Darwin, author of "The Origin of Species" (1859).

Thirty years later, Southern Baptists were rocked with another controversy over Genesis. Seminary professor Ralph Elliott said the first 11 chapters dealt with "theological fact, not day-by-day physical history." He soon lost his job.

Another Genesis controversy erupted eight years later over a Baptist commentary on Genesis. The author was accused of liberalism. The publisher withdrew his commentary.

Soon after the turn of the 21st century, Baylor University found itself engulfed in a heated debate related to creation. The university had appointed a faculty member who advocated an odd concept called Intelligent Design, what some said was a fancy name for creationism and another way to attack the theory of evolution.

Again and again, one of the great biblical stories has been played out in the public square in terms of religion versus science, heart versus head, fundamentalism versus modernism.

Fundamentalists have favored a literal reading of the creation stories, arguing that God created the earth in seven, 24-hour days. Some have embraced Bishop James Ussher's chronology that contended that the first day of creation was Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC.

Moderate Christians have expressed the belief that God created the earth. They have interpreted the cycles of creation in terms of periods of time. They have argued that the creation accounts are about who and why, not how and when. The creation account is about faith more than science. Some have spoken in terms of theistic evolution.

Simply put, Genesis has a number of controversial stories, one of which begins the book. It stirs deep passions among people of faith.

The Biblical Witness

Often missing from these intense debates over the creation accounts in Genesis has been the theme of human responsibility. After all, the creation accounts are about both divine creation and human accountability for it.

Genesis 1:26-31 Dominion, Not Domination

²⁶Then 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."²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God 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 the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."²⁹God 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. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and 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. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

The biblical witness tells us that God created the universe. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning when God created." Psalm 33:6 says, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made." Isaiah 40:26-28 says, "Lift up your eyes on

high and see: Who created these? ... The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

Toward the end of the cycle of creation, God created humanity. God created males and females in the divine image, giving both equal worth. God gave them life before God rested on the seventh day.

Divine Image. What does it mean that God created human beings in the divine image?

One answer is that human beings are distinct from and superior to the rest of creation, especially the animal kingdom. Animals are made according to their “kind” (v 25). Human beings are made after God’s image (v 26). Human beings have a dignity apart from the rest of creation, which is not to say that human beings have equality with their creator.

Human beings may be thought of as the crowning glory of God’s creation. But we are not the only jewel in the crown. God also values the rest of creation.

In Genesis 9, we find the account of God’s covenant with Noah after the Flood. One note is repeated. God’s covenant is established with the non-human order. “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, *and with every living creature that it is with you*” (v 9-10), said God to Noah.

A divine covenant with the animal world certainly suggests nature’s value in and of itself! Human beings do well to recognize the inherent value of the non-human world. While we have uniqueness, we must avoid the trap of destructive self-centeredness.

In bestowing males and females with the divine image, God gave us responsibility for the created order.

Herein is a sticking point: What does human responsibility mean for the environment? More pointedly, what does the assignment of “dominion” mean?

Dominion. The text says that God gave human beings “dominion.” Then, the text says that God told male and female to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion.

Many Christians interpret these words to mean that nature is at the disposal of every human whim. They use these words to justify unfettered economic development and unrestrained consumerism. They claim the Bible opposes population control. They really see the human race in a war with nature.

For them, the word “dominion” is translated “domination.” Dominion and domination sound similar. But they are two very different concepts.

Domination is the image of a conquering king trampling unmercifully on the neck of a subjugated enemy. Domination is oppressive rule.

If we interpret this passage as teaching domination, then we will think that we have a divine right to conquer nature, to press it down, to do to it whatever we desire to satisfy our immediate wants.

The creation text here is not about domination, however. It is about dominion.

Dominion, or rule, finds expression in Ezekiel 34, which contrasts the rule of the good shepherd with that of the bad shepherd. The bad shepherd rules with cruelty (v 4). The good shepherd feeds the flock with “justice” (v 16).

In Psalm 72, we find a prayer for King Solomon’s rule. The righteous king rules in a way that contributes to prosperity of the inhabitants and the fruitfulness of the land.

Dominion, then, refers to human rule over nature as a servant king rules with peace and justice. The responsible king seeks the welfare of the land.

The dominion text offers a beginning foundation for the construction of a biblical basis for pro-environmental ethics. People of faith have an assignment to be earth-keepers.

Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. Some Christians read these ideas as a biblical mandate against population control. Consequently, they argue against any efforts to slow deforestation and to halt species extinction. They say that God has told man to fill the earth.

Other Christians quickly reply to this claim that human beings have already fulfilled the mandate to multiply and fill the earth. They contend that overpopulation is endangering the environment and degrading the quality of life.

Genesis 2:15 Service, Not Subjugation

¹⁵The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

If Genesis 1:28 has been misunderstood, then Genesis 2:15 has been overlooked.

The word “till” can be translated “to serve.” As a righteous king serves his people, human beings are to seek the welfare of creation.

The word “keep” finds numerous usages in the Bible. Human beings are instructed “to keep” God’s statutes (Ex 15:26) and commandments (Ex 20:6).

The word “keep” may also be interpreted “to guard.” Psalm 121:7 uses this word in terms of God guarding us from evil. Numbers 6:24 also refers to the Lord’s protective care. The term “watchcare” captures the idea of our relationship with nature.

The message here is that God has given human beings an assignment to serve the created order, not subjugate it, and to guard nature from endangerment, not grind it into dust to feed our greed.

Genesis 2:19-20a What’s in a Name?

¹⁹So 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. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field.

In this creation account, after God formed animals and birds, God paraded them by “the man” in order that he would name them. In a way, human beings participated in the creation event through the assignment to name the animals. The name or character given the animal defined the animal.

Within the Hebrew tradition, naming had far more significance than it does within our Western Christian tradition. Naming attaches a special meaning, value or character to the recipient. To name an animal was to describe its essence.

The act of naming underscores yet another measure of human charge for the created order. It does not provide a proof-text for the idea that man catalogued every species. Instead, the underlying theme is that humans were given responsibility for the created order.

What becomes clear through each of these verses is that human beings are accountable for the welfare of the natural order. We are all given the assignment of environmental stewardship.

Practicing Earth-Keeping

The definition of earth-care is often as controversial as the interpretation of the creation stories.

When Jim Ball, executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network and an EthicsDaily.com columnist, launched a nationwide campaign focused on driving as a moral issue, one of my best friends, a Baptist minister, expressed outrage that anyone would question his ownership of an SUV. He thought that running television ads asking “What Would Jesus Drive?” was a stretch and expressed moral elitism.

From my vantage point, Ball, also a Baptist minister, forced a needed discussion within the Christian community about the environment as an ethical duty. Ball pressed the point, moving beyond moral abstraction to a specific activity in which almost all of us participate.

Although the “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign has been largely forgotten, the God-given responsibility to human beings for environmental stewardship remains as valid as it was millennia ago.

We have a moral mandate to practice environmental stewardship wisely as individuals and as a society. Those of us who are among the wealthiest citizens in the Christian community have an even greater duty. We consume more natural resources and create more waste than the poor.

In broad strokes, we need to engage in the three Rs:

- Revisit the scripture, learning what the Bible teaches about stewardship.
- Reexamine the issue, adjusting our political ideologies to fit our moral responsibilities for the environment.
- Rethink our individual and corporate lifestyles, practicing recycling, reducing unnecessary consumption and reinvesting in good public policy.

As Christians, we know about Jesus’ great commandment. Jesus told his followers to love their neighbors. When we think of neighbor love, we think in terms of space. We think about those who live next door and, more broadly, those living overseas.

Yet we need also to think in terms of time. Neighbor love includes our neighbors across time and extends to future generations.

Charlie Howell, a former commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Conservation, said, “The only way we can love our neighbors across time is to leave them a decent place to live.”

Our choices and decisions help shape the kind of world we will leave for our neighbors. Because God created us in the divine image, we can participate with God in relating to creation and help lead the world closer to its fullest possible potential. Much depends upon what we do with what God has entrusted to us. How will we respond?

As the Genesis accounts reveal, the earth is but one area of creation God expects us to nurture and sustain. Human relationships require ongoing care as well. While caring for creation might begin with our relationship to the earth, it doesn't end there.

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Assigning Blame or Accepting Responsibility?

Genesis 3:1-19

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

Introduction

Cole Bartiromo appeared to have it all. At age 18, he was on his high school baseball team. He had also made over a million dollars in the stock market.

Only one problem: the government determined that Bartiromo had obtained his profit through fraudulent activity. He was required to return all of the money. One might hope that Bartiromo learned his lesson, accepted his responsibility and got on with his life.

Sadly, this was not his course. One of the consequences of his court case was his suspension from extracurricular sports. Rather than accept this ban as his responsibility for his illegal actions, he blamed the school.

Bartiromo wrote and filed his own lawsuit against the school. He argued that he had planned on being a professional baseball player and being kicked off the team kept pro scouts from discovering his talent. Failing to be drafted would cost him a considerable salary over the years in the major leagues. Having lost \$50,000,000 in self-projected wages due to the school, he demanded a reimbursement

for that amount from them (www.stellaawards.com/2003format.html).

Although Bartiromo is an extreme example, humans have a tendency to place blame rather than accept responsibility for our actions.

The biblical witness is clear: passing the buck isn't something that began with modern politicians, Enron or children. The roots of our desire to blame others are entangled with the origins of human sinfulness.

No one likes to be wrong, and it seems to us that if we can just implicate others, our own culpability is lessened. Neither Adam nor Eve was willing to take responsibility for their sinful choice. Their immediate reaction was to point fingers and assign blame to others. If they lived in the modern world, they would have sued the snake. And if they were audacious enough, they might even have blamed God who made the serpent and the tree in the first place.

These attitudes prevent reconciliation from happening. Sin that separates us from God becomes even more fracturing when we add blame to the mix. Only when we accept responsibility for our sin and its consequences are we able to deal with it in ways that will produce healing and renewal. Forgiveness only becomes an option when we realize that we need it.

The Biblical Witness

Genesis 3:1-7 Eyes Wide Open

¹Now 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'?" ²The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but 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.'" ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶So 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. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

There is something about snakes that gives many people the willies. These cold-blooded, fork-tongued, slithering beasts just seem strange, foreign and dangerous to us. It is worth noting that the serpent is never identified as Satan in this passage. Equating the snake with the devil is a later interpretation put upon the text. Indeed, the text explicitly identifies the serpent as one of the animals God made and therefore explicitly pronounced good.

Yet the snake certainly is an animal that makes us uneasy at many levels. In the Jewish systems of classifying animals, the snake's characteristics place it among the most unclean animals (Lev 11; Deut 14). If there were any animal that would voice the possibilities of sin, it is not surprising that the writhing serpent would do the dirty work.

The snake's innocent question reveals its craftiness. It appears to have heard what God spoke to Adam (before Eve arrives): "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:16-17). And so its question reflects the language of

God, but changes the permission—“you may freely eat”—into a prohibition—“you shall not eat.” This reframes the command of God from a positive to a negative.

One might expect that Eve would tell the serpent that God did not say that at all. Instead, she told the snake that they could eat from all of the trees (permission which she did not recognize as coming from God) and then ascribed to God the prohibition against eating from the tree in the middle of the garden. Interestingly, she both failed to name the tree as God had and added the extra phrase that even touching it would lead to death.

In her answer, Eve effectively took words out of God’s mouth and put in an additional requirement. Although it is not generally observed, this may be the real entrance of sin into the world. Few consider that because Eve did not hear the original command we do not know whether she misquoted God or was merely repeating Adam’s misquoting of God to her.

“You will not die,” the snake assured her. It was right, of course, on one level. Adam and Eve would both eat, and they would not keel over immediately as a consequence for their disobedience. They would indeed know good and evil, as it assured them. The problem is that in willfully disobeying, the end of paradise is assured. They would eventually die, and knowing good and evil meant that they would have to choose between the two even though they lacked the wisdom to do so.

Why the woman trusted the serpent seems baffling, unless as already noted, she (or Adam) was ready to alter and edit the words of God to fit their thoughts. Three factors appear to clinch her decision to eat from the tree: (1) it appeared to be edible; (2) it looked appealing and (3) it promised wisdom. Perhaps much human sinfulness has similar

causes—desires of the flesh (hunger), desires of the eyes (lust) and desires to be like God (pride).

Many of us as children were taught in Sunday school that the serpent was Satan, the apple was the fruit and Eve tricked an unknowing Adam into eating. We were misled. The text here is clear. Adam was with Eve when she took the fruit, ate it and then gave some to him. Adam knew what was going on and was equally culpable. Not only did he let Eve risk herself, he chose to take the same chance.

The eating produced neither immediate death nor ascension into the rank of the divine for the first couple. The only immediate change for them after eating the fruit was that they realize they were naked. Hebrew writers enjoy word play, and we find a subtle example here. The word for “crafty” used to describe the snake sounds very similar to the word used to describe being “unclad.” Moving the word play into English, Adam and Eve wanted to be “shrewd,” but they ended up “nude”!

Genesis 3:8-13 **The Blame Game**

⁸They 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. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” ¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

Now possessing the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve were no longer eager to walk through their idyllic home (emphasized with the unusual detail of the evening breeze) with God. They recognized their sin and wanted to hide it and themselves from God.

The word “call” implies in Hebrew not only speaking, but also judgment. When the Lord spoke, it was not because Adam and Eve had been successful in their hiding, but to point to and thus judge their sin.

“I was afraid,” Adam said, showing that the fundamental relationship between creator and creature had been changed. With the creature’s willful disobedience came a fractured relationship that produced guilt. The pernicious power of sinfulness is that rather than owning up to eating the fruit, Adam suggested that his nakedness caused him to hide. He hoped that his lie would cover his transgression.

God, of course, was not fooled by all of this. The Divine Parent, like human parents, began to ask a series of questions that would lead to self-incrimination. And like children often do, Adam pointed to Eve and said loudly and self-righteously, “She started it.” Thinking he would further distance himself from responsibility, he added that God really was responsible because God was the one who made Eve in the first place.

God then turned to Eve and asked for her explanation. Eve would not accept responsibility for her actions either. It was the serpent who tricked her, she said. She seemed ashamed to add, as Adam did, that she was tricked by a serpent God made.

They ate from the tree because they wanted to be like God, but now they wanted to be like the other creatures. They wanted to be free from responsibility. Their claim was that rather than being in control of their destiny, they were

merely manipulated creatures. They ate the fruit in an effort to be more than God created them to be, but now they wanted to be less than God created them to be. These two desires are at the root of most human sinfulness.

Genesis 3:14-19 **Pain, Toil and Sweat**

¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵I 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.” ¹⁶To 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.” ¹⁷And 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; ¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By 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.”

The miserable episode reaches its conclusion when God addresses all three parties engaged in the disobedience. God began with the snake whom God curses. For tempting the humans to disobey God, the serpent is forced to eat dust (be subject to humiliation) for its life. The curse also invokes enmity between human beings and snakes. This can be taken to imply the ongoing battle that humans will have against temptation.

God then moves to Adam and Eve. It is important to note that while the snake and soil were cursed, no curse is

invoked upon the first couple. Eve's difficulty in bearing children would be a reminder of her disobedience. Her greatest blessing would be intertwined with pain. (Childbirth is still painful, but one must imagine it without epidurals and other modern procedures to understand the pain described here.) In addition, sinfulness upset the right relationship of equality between men and women.

Finally God pronounces the consequence of Adam's sin. Listening to the voice of Eve was not his sin, but listening to that voice rather than the voice of God was. As a result, the paradise of a rightly ordered universe had been upset. It is important to remember that the soil bears the curse, not Adam. It is not work that is the consequence of eating the fruit, but futile work. Sin would lead Adam into non-productive effort and much of what he did would be to no avail. Tilling God's garden provided abundance; farming the cursed land would be a continual challenge.

Moving Toward Reconciliation

Bill Keane has illustrated and written the popular comic strip "Family Circus" for almost 45 years. His family-oriented strips deal with situations that parents with young children know all too well. One of the recurring characters is a ghost child with a shirt that reads "Not Me." Invariably, something goes wrong in the home and the mom or dad will ask the kids who did it. "Not Me" is their reply, and the invisible little gremlin stands behind the accused and snickers into his hand.

It is instructive that this passage, the first story in scripture that includes two active human characters, includes that mystical troublemaker "Not Me." As soon as two people try to live together, their sin leads them to blame the other.

Also worth noting is the way that many interpreters through history have used this passage to blame Eve for the "fall." The irony seems to be lost on them that the story indicates that blame is a strategy to deflect responsibility for one's own sin. Their desire to pin it to Eve may well be a mask for their own sinful attitudes. By blaming the woman, they fail to recognize their own sin and bring even more sinfulness into the equation.

Blame has the consequence of distancing a person both from responsibility for their actions and from the person who is being blamed. It creates a rupture in relationship. It magnifies the original transgression, and like a rock in a pond creates ever-growing circles of discontent.

Most of us in a bad situation look for someone to blame. Even the church seems driven to assign blame for its difficulties. We relive time and again the story of Adam and Eve.

What if we stopped giving blame and started accepting responsibility? What if every church had a committee whose only assignment was to dole out credit for the successes? What if we stopped making the same mistakes over and over and decided consciously to avoid them?

Maybe the multiplication of taking responsibility and giving credit would result in reconciliation and hope. Maybe then we would begin to recapture our origin, the people God created for paradise.

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

Providing Hope

Genesis 6:11-22; 9:1-17

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.

Introduction

Spring rains often caused the creek that bordered our family farm to overflow its banks and flood dozens of acres. Viewed from the perspective of a child, the modest event seemed enormous and frightening. Dark water covered familiar ground. How high might it rise this year? Would it ever go down?

Even my parents and grandparents were daunted by the flood. They spoke of how easy it was to underestimate the current and be pulled into dangerous, deep water. My grandfather muttered grimly about how much soil the fields would lose and the possibility of losing livestock. They kept close watch on me, lest I slip away to play at the edge of the flood. Their mood was contagious. I remember how amazed and relieved I felt each year when the flood waters receded.

Later in life I learned the annual flooding was caused in part by the farming practices then in use. Overgrazing, excessive tree-felling and the like led to increased runoff of rain

water. The natural drainage system could not handle the additional load of water. Each year the annual spring floods grew worse in scope and severity. Remarkably, we had created conditions that aggravated the situation.

Floods of any kind are serious business whether they take the form of rampaging water or of developments that threaten to swamp us, society or even the planet. I've known people who were drowning in floods of their own creation: runaway debt, illness that could have been prevented by a change in lifestyle, relationships broken by dysfunctional living patterns.

Society itself seems threatened by floods of self-centeredness, discourtesy and apathy. We have created ecological problems beyond our ability to easily solve. Air and water pollution, soil erosion, ozone depletion and global warming are but the best-known examples. The proliferation of nuclear technology and other technologies of mass destruction threatens all of us. On my more pessimistic days, I sometimes doubt we will survive these "floods" of our own making.

Noah's story offers a counterpoint to despair. The Bible spins a tale of humanity-induced catastrophe mixed with God-provided hope. The story suggests that in spite of all the problems we make for ourselves and others, God continues to trust us, give us hope and work through us.

The Biblical Witness

Genesis 6-9 tells the story of the world's corruption, destruction and rebirth by focusing on a particular family. God, the creator, looked upon what creation had become and regretted having made it. God examined the heart of each

person and found that all, with the exception of Noah, had become corrupt.

God acted to judge creation by sending an unprecedented flood that destroyed all living things, cleansing the earth and providing opportunity for a fresh start. Even as God took such drastic action, God also acted to preserve humanity and the animal kingdom. God commanded Noah to build an ark, gather his family and representatives of the animal kingdom and ride out the storm.

When the storm ended and the waters receded, the ark's passengers emerged. God made a new covenant with Noah and his descendants. Never again would God destroy all life by means of a flood. Noah and his children were commanded to take up the task first given Adam and Eve, to bear children and be stewards of God's creation. Humanity was given the opportunity to start again, remain faithful to God and live in creation as God intended. Surprisingly, God continued to risk placing hope in humans.

Genesis 6:11-15a **Righteous Man, Violent World**

¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. ¹³And 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. ¹⁴Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ¹⁵This is how you are to make it:

Noah and his family lived in a troubled world. Indeed, with the exception of Noah, all men and women bent their minds

toward evil (Gen 6:5). Interestingly, the Bible does not provide a long list of specific transgressions. Only one item is mentioned: violence.

What kinds of violence? Based on the findings of archeology and reasoning back from the later complaints of the prophets, we can construct a set of likely items: murder of all kinds, revenge-driven clan warfare, human sacrifice, oppression of the poor and weak by the powerful, slavery, rape, unrestrained warfare and the like.

God judged such a violent society to be corrupt. Violence always runs counter to God's intent for creation. God is not impressed by the justifications behind which we shelter:

"They started it!"

"We had to defend ourselves."

"If we had not done it, someone else would have."

"I have to look out for myself."

The essential faithlessness of our self-defenses becomes evident the moment we throw such phrases down on paper.

Noah, in contrast, was judged to be a righteous person. He "walked with God" (Gen 6:9). We may safely assume Noah acknowledged and worshiped God; he prayed and he listened for the guiding voice of God. In the context of the passage, it seems likely Noah was judged righteous for another reason as well: he was non-violent in a world devoted to violence.

Try to imagine what it might have meant to follow God and refrain from violence in such a time. When all his neighbors supported going to war with a neighboring tribe over grazing or water rights or to avenge some wrong, Noah took the opposite stance. We can imagine him offering food or

shelter to an orphan or a widow when society at large probably left them to fend for themselves. Perhaps he was known for practicing honesty in his business dealings rather than the violence inherent in price-gouging. His neighbors must have thought Noah strange long before he began to build an ark far from any body of water.

God gave detailed instructions for the ark's construction and use. We do damage to the story's intent when we focus on questions of engineering, necessary diversity in a species' gene pool or similar concerns. The theological point of the account is that God took great pains to ensure the continuation of human and animal life on the other side of the coming destruction.

Genesis 6:17-19, 22 **Promise and Trust**

¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But 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. ¹⁹And 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.... ²²Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Given the history of humanity, God chose a surprising course of action: God would preserve a portion of the human race and once again entrust creation to it. God selected Noah, for Noah embodied God's dream for humanity. The faithful, non-violent Noah was selected in the hope that his descendants would emulate him. Noah and his family would face a time of unthinkable terror, but they need not despair. God would care for them, bring them through the flood and launch them into their new life.

Noah responded to God's initiative with trust-filled actions. He obeyed God. Think about the challenge of such obedience. Hitherto Noah may have been able to honor God quietly so that few of his neighbors noticed or cared. His faithful obedience to God certainly became a public matter when he started building the ark and gathering animals. Given the violent nature of his society, Noah risked more than being subjected to ridicule by his neighbors.

Genesis 9:9-10 **Covenant with Every Living Creature**

⁹As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you, and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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."

God kept his word. Noah, his family and the animals came safely through the flood. The larger scripture passage (9:1-11) outlines the covenant God offered, requiring that humanity manage the resources of the world wisely and refrain from violence. The rainbow was set as a sign of God's self-imposed restraint: never again would God destroy all life by means of a flood.

The scriptures teach that God makes this covenant with all living creatures. To modern ears, this sounds akin to the language of ecology. God expressed concern not only for humanity but for all creatures. In doing so, God set in motion the kind of theological reflection that leads many contemporary Christians to work to save earth's ecosystem. God, to put it another way, says: "Treat the world and the creatures in it gently and without violence."

Becoming Instruments of Peace

Noah's story packs a theological and ethical punch. Human responsibility and possibility, the price of irresponsibility, divine grace and daily hope are among the key themes. Consider the following four applications for starters.

First, the story focuses the problem of human sin around the issue of violence. Human violence runs counter to the intention of God. Violence springs from self-centeredness and from our unwillingness to trust God. We take self-preservation into our own hands, in effect saying to God, "You can't handle this aspect of life in the world; look the other way while I take care of it." Violence reflects a fundamental distrust of God. When we find ourselves opting for violence, we need to reexamine our relationship with God.

Second, violence exacts a price. Ironically, while violence is almost always undertaken in the cause of our perceived self-interest, it results only in more violence. In the Noah story, humanity's penchant for violence results in tragedy. Personal or corporate violence usually does the same. If violence seems to be the only answer to a problem, we probably need to take time to search for more answers.

Third, faith and obedience matter. Imagine how small and insignificant Noah must have seemed to others and perhaps even to himself. What difference could the faith and obedience of one person make in such a violent world? As the story reveals, an individual may make quite a bit of difference for the good. When we are tempted to give up and adapt to a violent world, we would do well to remember Noah.

Fourth, God gives us an opportunity to do better. Noah and his family were given a chance to forge a more God-honor-

ing way of relating to one another and the larger creation. True, in short order they botched the job, but even so, humanity lurched forward toward the series of events that would bring about the emergence of the children of Israel, through whom God would bless the world. The story reveals that God is willing to go on trusting and working through us. God's willingness to do so is the basis for hope.

In a world characterized by violence and little hope, the people of God may yet hope to become instruments of peace. We may embrace such a dream because it is God's dream, and God refuses to give up on the dream or on us.

Written by Mike Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Protecting the Innocent

Genesis 12:10-20

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

Introduction

Sir Walter Scott's epic poem "Marmion" tells the story of events leading up to the battle of Flodden Field between the Scots and the English. An ongoing story line of the epic is the twisted relationships among Marmion, his page (who turns out to be a woman and his paramour) and Clara (who is engaged to De Wilton, but succumbs to Marmion's advances).

When Constance, having hidden her identity as a woman during her service a page, realizes that Marmion is ready to drop her for Clara, she enters a convent, passing herself off as a nun. Later we learn that entering the convent was not her idea but Marmion's. He had hoped that by pawning her off on the church he could get her out of the way and provide for her welfare.

In yet another twist, we learn that Constance actually was a nun who had abandoned her vows. Entering the convent put her at risk of being immured (put to death). Constance sends a monk to poison Clara, so she can have Marmion to herself. Unfortunately the monk betrays her to the convent, and Constance is put to death.

Meanwhile, King Henry promises Clara to Marmion after the war. In a suspicious set of circumstances, De Wilton is accused of treason, and we learn that he is dead, only to discover later that he is really alive. We also later discover that Constance was behind the correspondence to the King that bore those charges. Her aim had been to maintain her influence over Marmion.

On the eve of the battle, both Marmion and Clara discover that De Wilton, who has been accompanying Marmion throughout most of the event of the epic disguised as a pilgrim monk, is not dead. In Canto 6th, Section 17, Marmion muses: "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

The story of the relationships among Marmion, Clara, Constance, De Wilton and others who are not who they appear to be is indeed a tangled web woven by people who are seeking to preserve their own interests. As do most of these tangled webs, this one comes undone, not just at the end, but all along the way. Throughout the tale, innocent people are brought into harm's way, and the law of unintended consequences reigns.

Self-preservation, while a typical response to threatening situations, puts truth in danger and leads to potentially deadly consequences for those caught up in its web.

The Biblical Witness

Genesis 12 begins with the call of Abram to leave his home and go to a land that the Lord will give him. In this land, the Lord promised, Abram would become a "great nation." God promised to bless Abram, to make his name great, to take care of him by blessing those who did good to Abram and to do harm to those who did harm to Abram. Further,

God revealed that through Abram all the people of the earth would receive God's blessing.

Notice several key themes:

- God initiated Abram's journey to Canaan.
- God called Abram to participate in God's continuing effort to redeem humanity.
- God promised to protect and prosper Abram.

So Abram set out and arrived in Canaan, surveyed the land, heard again God's promise and built an altar to the Lord.

In the text we are considering, events take a dramatic turn. In examining the narrative of Abram's sojourn in Egypt, it is important to remember the events at the beginning of the chapter, and to recall that they were not in the distant past, but were present reality for Abram.

Genesis 12:10-13 **It's All About Me!**

¹⁰Now 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. ¹¹When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Say 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."

The story begins innocently enough. Canaan was experiencing a severe drought. This threatened not only crops, but also livestock. Being used to the nomadic lifestyle,

Abram determined to pack up his household and head to Egypt where water was plentiful.

Commentators debate about whether Abram's intent was to simply ride out the drought in Canaan, or whether he intended to take up permanent residence in Egypt. Either way, many see the move to Egypt as his first mistake. Concerned about the severity of the drought in Canaan and its possible effect on his security, he took matters into his own hands and moved to Egypt.

Others, especially those who see the sojourn as a temporary measure, argue that Abram's move was a logical response to a desperate situation. If one remembers God's promise to take care of Abram, as well as the fact that God did not suggest this alternative, then it makes some sense to adopt the first position.

Seeking to preserve himself, his family, and maybe even the promise of God to him, Abram took matters into his own hands. He left the land of promise to take up residence in Egypt. The word "alien" in the text definitely connotes that Abram did not belong there.

As he approached Egypt, he became concerned that, because of Sarai's beauty, his life might be in danger. On the face of it, his concern and his proposed deception might seem innocent enough. After all, it is just a little lie, maybe even a half-truth. There is some evidence that Sarai might have been Abram's half-sister. Commentator Thomas Whitelaw reflects many people's response to Abram's plan and concern: "It is not necessary for a Christian in every situation of life to tell all the truth, especially when its part suppression involves no deception and is indispensable for self-preservation..."

Closer examination of the text reveals the ugliness of Abram's action. Notice how many references Abram makes to himself in this passage. It is clear that his concern is for his own welfare, not Sara's or his family's. He was worried that he might not make it out of Egypt alive; indeed that his days might be cut short quickly. His problem, as he saw it, was Sarai's beauty and the perceived treachery of the Egyptians. On what basis did he assume that they would act as he feared? No evidence existed that Abram had had any direct, prior contact with Egyptians. Was he operating on hearsay evidence, or was he projecting?

The last phrase of verse 13 is particularly troublesome: "...that my life may be spared *on your account*." We might say, "at your expense." Abram was saying: "My life counts; you are expendable. What happens to me matters." He asked Sarai to deny her identity, even her dignity, in order to preserve his life. Maybe she loved him that much. Maybe, given the status of women in that day, she had no choice. At any rate, even if Abram's approach to her was a request, not a demand, he still counted on her condition to save his skin.

Perhaps the most offensive presumption in Abram's conversation with Sarai was that God needed him but not her to fulfill the promises made at the beginning of this chapter. Abram made the story of God's call his story, taking matters out of God's hands and placing them in his own.

One is tempted to shout: "Abram, what are you thinking? Have you forgotten God's promise to bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you? Have you thought about the consequences of your deceptions? Sure, you may think you can avoid having to give her to an Egyptian by driving a hard bargain for the hand of your 'sister,' but what if someone takes you up on your hardest bargain?"

How are you going to get her out of that situation? Get your eyes off yourself for a moment and focus on what could happen!"

Of course, the truth is, Abram could not begin to imagine where this self-protecting deception would lead.

Genesis 12:14-16 And All Seems Well

¹⁴When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys and camels.

On the surface one could conclude that the Egyptians acted just as Abram feared they would. But on closer examination, the biblical writer reflects no threat in their praise of Sarai's beauty. In fact, they seem so impressed, that rather than trying to take her for themselves, they reserved her for Pharaoh. Even in the account of Pharaoh taking Sarai into his house, there is no account of Abram being under threat or duress.

One wonders what was going through Abram's mind after Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's house. Maybe he was relieved. His plan had worked. In fact, his plan worked better than he had anticipated. Not only had his life been spared, but he made out like a bandit. Pharaoh compensated Abram well for Sarai. The text indicates that Abram's household, though diminished by the loss of Sarai, greatly increased at Pharaoh's hand. One cannot help but see the irony of Pharaoh's estimation of Sarai's worth compared to Abram's.

While things went well for Abram, one wonders how Sarai got along. There is some dispute about what being taken into Pharaoh's house meant for her. Was she brought into the harem, where she would wait her turn to be a sexual liaison for Pharaoh in order to give him an heir? Was she given a special place in his household as a wiser, older woman who could guide the other wives? The biblical material gives us no insight, other than she was exiled from the house of promise. The sad thing is that the scriptures record no concern or remorse on Abram's part for the fate of his wife.

Another aspect of this passage that is easy to overlook is the loss of Sarai's name. Notice that in these verses Sarai becomes "the woman." No longer the named wife of the father of the promise, she became nameless chattel to be exchanged for favor. Perhaps the most devastating consequence of Abram's acting to preserve his life was that Sarai lost hers; not physically, but in every other way that counts. Abram and Pharaoh are named in the verses, but not Sarai.

Genesis 12:17-20 **What Have You Done to Me?**

¹⁷But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why 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." ²⁰And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

Why did God choose to afflict Pharaoh and not Abram? After all, Pharaoh acted relatively innocently. Perhaps it was

because only Pharaoh could correct the situation. And correct it he did.

He confronted Abram with the truth of the situation and asked "Why?" In the face of Pharaoh's questioning, Abram was silent. Did he feel the rebuke of God in Pharaoh's words? Was he afraid that no answer would satisfy Pharaoh and would only make him angrier? Had he decided that the best way to get out of this situation was to act humbly? Or maybe Pharaoh did not intend to give him a chance to respond. The text simply records the confrontation followed by Abram's summary expulsion from Egypt.

One cannot help but notice that Pharaoh acted with more integrity than Abram. In fact, Pharaoh did not seem to be the ogre that Abram assumed all Egyptians to be. When Pharaoh asked, "What is this that you have done to me?" no doubt he was referring to the plagues. But in the back of his mind might have been the concern of being seen as an adulterer.

Most commentators agree that in the ancient world, taking another man's wife was universally condemned as a capital offense. No one, not even a king, was immune from the judgment. Abram had made Pharaoh an adulterer. (Of course, if Pharaoh had killed Abram and then taken Sarai, he would not have been guilty of adultery.) That is why he was so anxious to rid himself of Abram, Sarai and the rest of these troublesome people.

While God's intervention may seem unfair or harsh, God nonetheless acted to clean up a messy situation, to restore Sarai's honor and to get the family of the promise back where they belonged. Notice that verse 17 contains two significant items. First, Sarai got her name back. While the interchange between Abram and Pharaoh may have left her

nameless, God claimed her name and acted on her behalf. Second, because of what Abram did to Sarai, God acted.

So many actors in this drama could be asking Abram the question: “What have you done to me?” Sarai and Pharaoh are the most obvious. But God, above all, could be asking the same question. Abram’s fear, first of drought, then of his own safety, caused him to doubt God’s promise. Abram’s actions in Egypt caused God to have to afflict innocent people in order to save Sarai, protect Pharaoh’s reputation and get Abram back on track.

Seeking Good for All

On January 27, 1998, the President of the United States, faced with accusations that he had committed adultery with a White House intern, looked straight into the television camera, pointed his finger and declared, “I did not have sex with *that woman*” [emphasis mine]. A day or two later, his wife appeared on the TODAY® show repeating his denial and accusing his accusers of lying for political purposes. In the ensuing weeks, he had to confess his liaison with the intern, though initially denying it was everything it had been reported to be.

The results were catastrophic. One can only imagine what it must have been like to have admitted to his wife that her defense of him was based on lies she had been told. The White House staff was demoralized, many of them leaving and those staying being deeply affected by a sense of betrayal. As the story dragged on, other questions about the president’s truthfulness in other cases of sexual affairs were raised, and he was forced to testify before a federal grand jury. Eventually the nation was dragged through the spectacle of only the second presidential impeachment in its history. Besides the initial sinful behavior, most of what

spun out over the last years of his presidency was the result of the initial response to protect himself above all else.

Before judging this president too harshly, it is important to realize that all of us, when confronted with things that threaten our sense of well-being, feel the need to protect ourselves. Sometimes that can be an appropriate and necessary response. However, as this text reminds us, we need to be aware of our motive for self-protection, the actions self-protection will require and the effects of those actions on others.

When the impulse toward self-protection grows out of selfishness, trouble is on the horizon. When we are willing to sacrifice the truth, we are on a path that leads only to harm. When we are ready to involve or use others as cover in our self-protective behaviors, we have stepped far beyond the command to “love our neighbor.” The drive for self-protection can distort not only our behavior and relationships; it can also blind us to the true meaning and value of life.

Perhaps Jesus should have the last word on this subject. In his instruction about the nature of discipleship, he seems to imply that self-protection is at best a lesser value in the Kingdom: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 16:25).

Written by Jim Holladay, pastor, Lyndon Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky.

Meeting Human Need

Genesis 16:1-15; 21:9-21

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

Introduction

In the 2000 movie “Cast Away,” Tom Hanks plays a Memphis-based FedEx executive named Chuck who becomes the sole survivor of a plane crash that leaves him marooned on a deserted island in the South Pacific.

Chuck’s lone companion is a volleyball he salvages from one of the FedEx boxes in the plane’s wreckage and names Wilson.

In the course of his four years on the island, Chuck comes to realize his deep connection to and love for Kelly (played by Helen Hunt), his female friend in Memphis who believes he perished in the plane crash along with everyone else.

Chuck’s extended time on the island leads him to realize how little control he has over time and many of the circumstances that affect his life.

Miraculously, Chuck is eventually able to leave the island and return to Memphis, where he discovers that Kelly, though she mourned their lost relationship, has moved on and married someone else. While he is sad because he has lost Kelly, he now lives with a new sense of hope.

“One day logic was proven all wrong because the tide lifted, came in, and gave me a sail. And now, here I am,” he says. “I know what I have to do now. I have to keep breathing. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?”

Film commentators Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman wrote, “Though most of us will not experience the literal moment of becoming an island castaway, being ‘cast away’ is a common reality of modern relationships. If in those moments we learn to embrace the journey, we may find the destination taking us to the Creator of our souls” (www.cinemainfocus.com/CastAway.htm).

No one better fits the portrait of a castaway than Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sarai. And perhaps no one is a better example of one who, in spite of the cruelty of the circumstances that sent her adrift, learns to embrace the journey and in the process discovers a personal relationship with a personal God.

Most biblical scholars typically cast the story of Sarai and Hagar as a “conflict narrative” between the two women. If we’re not careful, we too will miss the bigger picture of Genesis and of scripture as a whole that helps us understand it as the story of God faithfully hearing and responding to meet the needs of a woman enmeshed in circumstances beyond her control and blessing her in surprising ways.

The Biblical Witness

Drama and tension surrounding the apparent infertility of key Hebrew women like Sarai, Rebekah and Rachel leave the uninformed reader of scripture wondering exactly how

and even if God will fulfill the promise of many descendants God made to Abram.

In the story of Hagar and Ishmael, we discover a God who not only delivers on promises to the “chosen people” but who also makes and keeps promises beyond and outside that faith community. We find a God who cares for the welfare of all people, has plans for them and works to bless them.

God clearly valued the lives of Hagar and Ishmael and acted both to meet their immediate needs and to provide them with a future and hope.

Genesis 16:1-6 **Sarai’s Plan**

¹Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, ²and 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. ³So, 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. ⁴He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵Then 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!” ⁶But 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.

In such a strongly patriarchal society, it is at first glance intriguing how deliberately and decisively Sarai acted to resolve her marriage’s childless situation. Even more intriguing is Abram’s lack of initiative and his complete compliance with Sarai’s plan.

Attributing her childlessness to God (v 2), she essentially dictated to Abram how she wanted to alleviate the situation, and he seems to have readily agreed.

While we find Sarai’s scheme unthinkable, what she did was not only acceptable but also expected within certain cultures of that day when a couple was unable to have children. The man would use a concubine strictly for the purposes of sexual reproduction, with the understanding that the child or children she bore would be considered the offspring of his wife.

Some scholars think that the reference in verse 3 to Hagar as Abram’s “wife” might indicate that the arrangement between the two was more formal than simply a man and his concubine. If so, this makes Abram’s later lack of responsibility and concern for Hagar even more disturbing.

As a slave, Hagar had no power, no rights and no choice in this arrangement. Not only was she a slave, she was also an Egyptian—an African—so she was an outsider on multiple fronts. It’s possible that Hagar viewed her liaison with Abram as an opportunity to improve her status. Nonetheless, she remained “property” as far as Sarai and Abram were concerned. The text here records neither of them ever referring to her by her name. She remained in their minds the “slave-girl.”

The arrangement was problematic from the beginning. When Hagar realized she was pregnant, she “looked with

contempt” (v 4) upon Sarai. We often understand “contempt” as meaning to disdain or despise, but a more accurate reading here might be that Hagar began to show less respect for Sarai and might even have become disobedient of her. Given that she was, after all, Sarai’s slave, this was no small infraction.

Sarai reported Hagar’s impertinence to Abram, expecting him to do something about it. But Abram refused to take any action and told Sarai to “do to her as you please” (v 6). Sarai responded by dealing harshly with Hagar. While scripture is not specific about what this involved, Hagar’s subsequent decision indicates that life became unbearable for her.

Given the fact that Hagar was pregnant with his child, Abram’s indifference is more than troubling. He could have done something at this point to ease the tension between the two women, but he refused to get involved.

Hagar eventually decided that the uncertainties and dangers of being alone and pregnant in the wilderness were better than continuing to live with Sarai and Abram. In spite of the possibility for great harm and even death both for herself and her child, Hagar ran away.

Genesis 16:7-11 **God’s Intervention and Promise**

⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And 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.” ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.”

¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will so greatly

multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” ¹¹And 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.”

Based on her location when “the angel of the LORD found her” (v 7), it appears that Hagar was trying to return home to Egypt. While Sarai and Abram apparently had little concern for the welfare of Hagar or her unborn child—Abram’s child—God did. The story noticeably shifts here from a focus on Sarai and Abram to a focus on Hagar and her conversation with God’s messenger.

As a slave, Hagar would likely have spent much of her time in silence, taking orders but rarely speaking. She certainly would not have expected any special consideration or conversation from the Hebrew’s God. Yet God not only knew where she was, God through the messenger called her by name and engaged her in dialogue. God spoke not just *to* Hagar but *with* her, asking her two questions: “where have you come from and where are you going?” (v 8).

Notice Hagar’s reply. She was concerned only with outrunning her past. Though she had no thought of her future, God did, telling her to return to Sarai and “submit to her” (v 9).

But God did not send her away to an uncertain future. Instead, God promised to “so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude” (v 10). Hagar, a single mother and an Egyptian slave, received from God the only promise to a woman of innumerable offspring recorded in Genesis, joining patriarchs Abram, Isaac and Jacob.

Though Hagar was not one of the “chosen,” God nonetheless sought and found her and made a promise to her very

similar to the one God would make to Abram. God's care for and involvement with the world's people extended beyond the faith community of Sarai and Abram.

God's special interest in Hagar and her unborn child included even the detail of the child's name. Ishmael means "God has heard" or "God hears." The very name of Hagar's son would serve as a daily reminder to her that God had heard and responded to her in her deep need. God not only delivered Hagar from her immediate circumstances, God also promised her a hopeful future filled with many descendants.

Hagar, in turn, responded to God in faith by giving God a name that reflected her personal experience. "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?'" (v 13). Hagar recognized it was God who delivered her and displayed understandable awe at her personal encounter with God.

Verses 15-16 indicate that Abram must have learned of Hagar's experience with God, because Abram named his son Ishmael, as God had instructed Hagar.

Genesis 21:9-12, 15-17, 20 God's Unexpected Blessing

⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So 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." ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But 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. ... ¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then 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. ¹⁷And 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. ... ²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

In the years following Hagar's return to Sarai and Abram, God appeared to Abram and established a covenant with him, promising that he would be "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (17:4). God changed Sarai's and Abram's names to Sarah and Abraham and promised that they would have a son, Isaac, with whom God would establish a covenant. God also promised Abraham that a great nation would come from Ishmael (17:20).

Following the often troubling stories of Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham's encounter with Abimelech, the narrative returns to record Isaac's birth. Hagar and Ishmael also reenter the drama.

At the feast celebrating Isaac being weaned from Sarah, Sarah observed Ishmael playing with Isaac. We might find touching the scene of a much older boy apparently entertaining his toddler half-brother, but Sarah found it threatening. Fearing that Ishmael might gain part of Isaac's inheritance, she demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away.

Abraham had no doubt grown quite close to Ishmael during this time and the thought of sending the boy and his mother away greatly distressed him (v 11). He knew the potential for danger the wilderness held. But God instructed him to do as Sarah had asked, reminding him that a nation would come not only from Isaac but from Ishmael as well (v 13). Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away with some bread and a container of water.

Outcast once again, Hagar's provisions soon ran out, leaving her stranded, alone and unable to provide for her son. Believing their death to be imminent, she put her son under a bush and went some distance from him, not wanting to watch her child die. Perhaps recalling God's earlier intervention, she "lifted up her voice and wept" (v 16). God heard her as well as Ishmael and once again intervened to save them.

God through the messenger again called Hagar by name (v 17), reminded her of the earlier promise of a great nation from Ishmael and provided a well from which they could draw water.

God had definite plans for Ishmael. From him descended the Muslim people, who, like the Jews, identify Abraham as their first ancestor, their father.

Valuing all of Humanity

To read the story of Hagar and Ishmael only through the eyes of Sarai and Abram is to ignore how God faithfully and deliberately acts on behalf of *all* people, not just the chosen ones. We have truly learned from their story when our thoughts and actions toward the world's castaways reflect God's thoughts and actions.

While it is much simpler for us to confine and define God's activity to us and "our kind," it is wrong. We show just how little we know about God when we limit God and God's activity to boundaries we create.

A more complete understanding of scripture acknowledges that God has plans for all of the world's people: Sunnis and Shiites, Afghans and Iraqis, Palestinians and Israelis, people of every national, ethnic and political distinction. They may not realize it or understand it, but God nonetheless desires that they too enter the kingdom.

God valued the lives of Hagar and Ishmael and intervened not only to save them but also to make and keep promises to them, promises that bear evidence to this very day. God works, sometimes through us and sometimes in spite of us, to do the same for all of the world's people.

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Receiving God's Blessing

Genesis 21:1-3; 24:1-4,12-14, 34-38, 49-51

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

Introduction

Growing up in a home where we didn't attend church regularly, I wasn't baptized as a Christian until age 19. Joining a relatively small church, there weren't many discipleship opportunities for my age group, so I joined a handful of others in the youth group who hung out there beyond high school.

Because I was older and had the zeal of a new believer, I emerged as a leader. When I graduated from college and took a job in another town, I had to tie up some loose ends. One was changing my car insurance. It so happened that a fellow church member, a single mother named Vera, worked in the office of my agent. We chatted in the moments before my appointment.

"Are you going to get a youth group of your own now?" she asked. The question caught me completely off guard. I had never entertained such a thought and didn't imagine I was qualified. I didn't forget the question however. When I joined a new church, the first thing I did was to volunteer to work with the youth.

A few weeks later, I offered to do one of those youth the favor of restringing and tuning his father's old guitar (about the extent of my musical ability). I had to drive to a larger town, about 30 miles away, to find a place to buy the strings.

That day I was feeling particularly homesick. After parking and heading toward the mall entrance, I heard a voice from behind me call out, "Bob!" In self-pity, I remember thinking, "There's no need to turn around. No one here knows me."

The voice came again: "Bob Allen!" That narrowed things down. It was Vera. She had just made the four-hour trip to drop her daughter off at a new college. She was pretty much a basket case, and had stopped at the same mall in search of a place to refill her thermos with coffee before returning home.

I can't say whether God directed our paths to bring us to an exact place where neither of us had ever been before at the exact same time, but I can say it was a blessing. We spent several minutes in the front seat of her car swapping tales of excitement and hope, doubts and fears. The most vivid part of the memory, however, is much laughter.

Scripture says that when Sarah learned she would give birth to a son in her old age, she laughed. It's a fitting response when God's blessing catches us by surprise, particularly in the midst of hopelessness and despair.

The Biblical Witness

Genesis 21:1-3
Isaac, God's promise

¹The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the

LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ²Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

The story of Abraham begins in Genesis 12 with God's promise, "I will make of you a great nation."

A nomadic shepherd early in the second millennium before Christ was the least likely candidate to become father of a "great nation." Owing no property of his own, he moved from place to place, his flocks grazing on borrowed land, where he could obtain the owner's permission.

This birth story of Judaism's second patriarch serves to heighten the element of surprise. Abraham's son, Isaac, the fulfillment of God's promise, was delayed until his "old age," a stage of life the New Testament describes as "as good as dead" (Heb 11:12).

References to the Lord "said" and "promised" in verse 1 reinforce this was a birth not brought about by natural processes. The text emphasizes two realities: God's promise and the birth of a child.

Walter Brueggemann observes that this story holds together in both the eternal promises of God and concrete biological reality. He warns against twin temptations facing the church.

One is to view God's word in an excessively spiritual way and to minimize the "fleshly" element of the birth. This tends to romanticize the promise and remove it from the realm of historical reality. The other is to cling to the reality of the birth in a secular way and regard the promise as unimportant. This view does not believe that God acts in actual, world-changing ways.

Those two problems have historically been labeled Docetism, a belief that the Lord was a spiritual being who only appeared to have a physical body, and Ebionism, named after another early heresy that denied the divinity of Christ.

"Miracle is not the violation of natural order," Brueggemann says. "It is the concrete assertion that God is faithful to his promises."

Genesis 24:1-4 An Ancient Tradition

¹Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. ²Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh ³and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and earth, ⁴that 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."

Abraham's final task was to find a wife for his son. Today there is much discussion about "family values" as defined by scripture. Yet here is a "biblical" model that few of us would seriously consider.

Arranged marriage was common in ancient cultures, and makes sense in context of the times. Rather than an autonomous individual, Isaac was to become head of a tribal family, with implications for inheritance, character and identity. In his world, the good of the community took precedence over personal choice.

This corporate consciousness finds expression in verses such as Ezekiel 18:2, "The parents have eaten sour

grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." It is also no accident that the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother," includes the promise "you will be long in the land."

A similar concern is behind the Catholic Church's requirements for marriage and the nurture of children. Protestants who criticize these doctrines as too narrow sometimes instead treat religious preference as a non-issue in choosing a spouse.

"Put your hand under my thigh" reflects an ancient oath. The symbolism is now obscure. Nevertheless, the point is that this was a serious vow, demonstrated by the servant's refusal to eat or drink before fulfilling his mission.

The scene suggests that Abraham believed he was about to die. He asked the servant to fulfill an obligation he was unable to carry out himself.

Abraham's demand that Isaac not marry "a daughter of the Canaanites" reflects both a concern for lineage and the worship of God being contaminated by Canaanite religion. Noah's curse of Canaan in Genesis 9:25 already makes clear that the Canaanites were not to be trusted.

Genesis 24:12-14 **Grant Me Success**

¹²And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. ¹³I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴Let 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."

Few of us would advise a young person today to go to the local "watering hole" to meet a prospective spouse. Yet this is a common theme in the Bible. Moses met his future wife at a well. It is also where Jacob met Rachel in one of the Bible's best-known love stories.

This chapter walks a tightrope between competing realities of God's providence and human freedom.

The Lord would reveal his choice of Isaac's mate, but the possibility remained that she might refuse (vv 7-8). Verse 4 talks of finding a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's relatives, implying it might be any one of a number of young women who came out of the town to draw water (v 13). Yet verse 44 refers to "the one the Lord has chosen," implying a particular female.

Even after Rebekah offered water to the servant and his camels, fulfilling the sign by which she would be recognized, he "gazed at her in silence" (v 21) to determine if she is the one (perhaps waiting for her to identify herself).

Laban and Bethuel at first consent to Rebekah's marriage without consulting her. Later she decides for herself.

Unlike some scriptural accounts, there is no suggestion of God's direct intervention to accomplish the divine will. It is, as Brueggemann points out, a rather "secular" story where "the inscrutable guidance of God" is apparent only in hindsight.

Rebekah's hospitality to a stranger not only validates God's promise but also speaks to her character. The fact that she is described as "very beautiful" (v 16) is a bonus. The Bible

says she was a virgin. Jewish legend says she was 14 years old. Genesis 25:20 says Isaac was 40.

The rabbis described Rebekah as “a rose between thorns” who did not walk in the ways of her father Bethuel or brother Laban. Her piety, according to legend, was equal to Isaac’s.

Genesis 24:34-51

As the Lord Has Spoken

³⁴So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant. ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. ³⁷My 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; ³⁸but you shall go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.’ ...⁴⁹Now 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.” ⁵⁰Then Laban and Bethuel answered, “The thing comes from the LORD; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good. ⁵¹Look, Rebekah is before you, take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master’s son, as the LORD has spoken.”

When the servant shared the story with Bethuel and Laban, they portrayed themselves as worshipers of God. “This is from the Lord,” they concluded. “We can say nothing to you one way or another (i.e., cannot add a word).” Yet note that Laban saw the quarter-ounce gold nose ring and the two bracelets weighing 5 ounces bestowed by the stranger as

gifts. Whether or not Laban was a true believer, Brueggemann notes, he was no fool.

The chapter ends with the detail that Isaac married Rebekah and “loved” her. While this may suggest nothing more than conjugal rights, polygamy was common in the era. Yet Isaac apparently loved her as his only wife. That is in spite of the fact that not all of their years were happy. They were childless for 20 years.

Sharing the Blessing

Is this your favorite story in Genesis? Given the fact that this is the longest chapter in Genesis, those who first transmitted the story of Isaac and Rebekah from generation to generation must have viewed it with some importance.

While not as colorful as his father Abraham or his son Jacob, Isaac is a central figure because he fulfilled God’s promise: “I will bless you ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2-3).

According to Jewish legend, the words of the angel predicting Isaac’s birth were spoken on New Year’s Day, when the fortunes of men are determined in heaven for the whole year. The birth came a mere seven months later, on the first day of Passover.

Legend also says it was a day of rejoicing, not only for Israel but for the whole world. On that day, God remembered Sarah as well as all the barren women on the earth, in that all gave birth at the same time. The sun shone with such splendor as there had not been since the fall of man, and as there would not be again until the final Day of the Lord.

Regardless of whether these stories are to be taken literally, the message is clear: Isaac's birth was regarded as a day of blessing for the whole world.

The theme of blessing undergirds Genesis 24. The Lord blessed the efforts of Abraham's servant. He was greeted by Rebekah's brother, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord" (v 31). Verse 1 reminds that God had "blessed Abraham in every way." Rebekah's family sent her away with a blessing (v 60). The chapter ends with Isaac being comforted after his mother's death.

Consider these three questions in closing:

How am I blessed? Proverbs 10:6 says, "Blessings are on the head of the righteous." The old hymn by Johnson Oatman advised: "Count your blessings, name them one by one." It's an antidote to worries, conflicts and doubts.

Am I a blessing to others? An old saying goes, "If everyone in the church were like me, how would the church be?" Do the people I am closest to day by day most often view me as a blessing or a curse? Another hymn says, "Make me a blessing to someone today." Jesus said to bless even those who curse you (Lk 6:28).

Who are those in need and waiting on a blessing from God? What can I do to help?

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Working in Spite of Imperfections

Genesis 29:1-31:55

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

Introduction

One of my mentors has taught me that patterns of dysfunctional behavior in families are transmitted from one generation to the next, often with similarly disastrous effects. A casual reading of some of the great stories from Hebrew scripture validates this truth.

The story of Jacob's marriage and family life leaves a great deal to be desired. In fact, this passage reads much like a modern-day soap opera. The story told is one of competition between two women and their maids, which results in Jacob being shuttled from tent to tent. It is one of a suspicious, jealous and scheming father-in-law who eventually and reluctantly makes a covenant with his son-in-law.

At this point in time, Jacob was living outside the land of promise. While God had promised presence, protection and provision, God was also at work in Jacob's life to purge out many of the sinful patterns that had characterized him in the past. Consequently, while God was with Jacob, all did not go well with him in these days. Many of the consequences of his previous sins caught up with him. His choice of Rachel on primarily physical grounds and his

insistence that he have her, even after he had married Leah, led to a most distressing home and family life.

But a story like this gives beautiful illustration of God's sustaining grace. It reveals a God holding out for us redemptive possibilities, giving us opportunity to choose God's way over our own. As we claim those redemptive possibilities, God accomplishes divine purposes through all sorts of imperfect people and dysfunctional family systems.

The Biblical Witness

In the Jacob narrative of Genesis we find a conflicted call of God on the life of this great patriarch. Although he was a chosen one, an heir to the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob was a most unseemly character. His very name means "supplanter," "deceiver," or "one who grasps" at anything and everything that will accomplish his own desires.

His stories, as recorded in chapters 25-33, involve conflict and struggles between his parents, wives, uncle and especially his brother Esau. But they also depict episodes of genuine love and spiritual depth, as in the covenant between Jacob and God. How is it that such a mixed bag of a man stands in the long train of witnesses that passes on to us the faith once delivered to the saints? It's a story that bears examination.

We find much truth in the old axiom, "if the people of God are to have a history, then what one generation does for the next is important." Thus far in our study of Genesis we have seen this concern evidenced in Abraham to Isaac; however, Isaac did not show that same concern to Jacob. The result is a pattern of dysfunction that is only interrupted by God's

high calling and claim in Jacob's conflicted life. It is reminiscent of the old popular song by Harry Chapin, *The Cat's in the Cradle*: "He'd grown up just like me. My boy was just like me."

Genesis 29:21-28, 31 Deliberate Deception

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

After Jacob's epiphany at Bethel, he journeyed on to Haran and his Uncle Laban. There he met the beautiful and vivacious Rachel, the very sight of whom sent him reeling in love. Their encounter at the watering well caused Rachel to rush to her father, Laban, and tell him of their kinsman Jacob. His reception of his nephew reveals a man of familial love and compassion, for clearly Jacob had nothing to offer him. In fact, this display of affection makes the possibility of conflict seem quite remote. Eventually Jacob agreed to stay and work for Laban for seven years in order to secure Rachel as his wife.

That agreement shows a side of Jacob heretofore unseen. He worked for his uncle a month without raising the subject of wages. Then he made an extraordinary deal of seven years' labor for the woman he loved. In accepting Jacob's offer of seven years' labor, the reader begins to see a side of Laban that is capable of great deception.

But the text tells us, ". . . and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (v 20). One may rightly call it a "labor of love." Here is a Jacob of selfless love who may well have been the product of his "ladder dream" and the promises God made to him at Bethel. This is not the "schemer," "deceiver" character that was his namesake.

In the course of time and in the context of family, however, matters changed. The seven years completed, Jacob requested his wife and Laban throw an appropriate feast to elaborate the nuptials. However, the bride delivered was neither the bride expected nor wanted. Jacob awoke to discover that Laban's first-born daughter, Leah, was the one with whom he had spent his wedding night.

"What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why have you deceived me?" (v 25). The reader has to appreciate the wonderful irony of Jacob's protestations. The man who had crafted the fine art of deception was now on the receiving end. At one level, a just comeuppance! He was enjoined to complete the week with Leah and for another seven years' labor, receive Rachel as well. Two wives, one unwanted, one loved; fourteen years of hard work in a jealous family became the setting for conflict. Leah and Rachel vied for the affections of their husband in a "no holds barred" sibling rivalry.

"When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren" (v 31). Whether or not the

reader interprets this verse as God being the active causal agent of barrenness does not override the more important depiction of God who is on the side of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the underdog. One cannot help but recall God's care for Hagar and Ishmael of an earlier generation.

Leah bore Jacob four sons whose names all reflect the rivalry between the sisters: Reuben, "because the LORD has looked upon my affliction" (v 32); Simeon, "because the LORD has heard that I am hated" (v 33); Levi, "this time my husband will be joined to me" (v 34); and Judah, "this time I will praise the LORD" (v 35).

Genesis 30:1, 3-5 Driven by Envy

¹When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" ... ³Then 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." ⁴So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son.

By now the Bethel experience must have felt like a distant memory to Jacob, for we see a rather passive man seemingly under the directional control of his two wives. The narrative focuses on Rachel's barrenness—another painful irony in that she was the beautiful and loved one—which is similar to the predicaments of Jacob's grandmother and mother, Sarah and Rebekah.

In a humorous blame game reminiscent of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Rachel pointed the finger at Jacob who refused to accept responsibility for her barrenness. An important turn in the story occurs next as Rachel gave her

handmaid, Bilhah, to Jacob to bear children on Rachel's behalf. Insistent of her own way, Bilhah "bears upon the knees" of Rachel two sons: Dan and Naphtali. This curious phrase probably means that these sons were borne as if by Rachel herself.

The use of surrogate mothers also hearkens back to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, in Genesis 16. At this point in the narrative it is worth noting a familial truism: that patterns of behavior (for good or ill) are established and transmitted from one generation to the next. In Jacob's story, the reader sees repeated over and over episodes from earlier times that seek to control the ebb and flow of events to a desired end, thus usurping the sovereignty of God. But as Walter Brueggemann rightly puts it, "the future belongs to God. Both birth and barrenness, fertility and infertility are in the hands of God."

Genesis 30:9-10, 15, 17, 19, 22-23 **A Curious Competition**

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

The competition now heats up. Not to be outdone, Leah summoned her handmaid, Zilpah, and in order to further secure her husband's affections, gave her to Jacob.

She erroneously continued to think that the more children she gave to Jacob, the more his affections would turn to her. Thus were born Issachar, Zebulon and Dinah. Jacob now had ten sons and a daughter (whom in that strongly patriarchal society was fortunate even to be mentioned by name).

But the key verses in this section of Jacob's story are verses 22-23. Here Rachel, the loved one, at last gave birth to her own son, Joseph. Her conception, however, was not due to something magical as the aphrodisiacal qualities of mandrakes were thought to possess. Rather, it was possible because "God remembered!"

From one perspective, all the preceding events (sons of Leah, children of maids, the mandrakes) may be viewed as the very human struggle—the human machinations—to fulfill the covenantal promises of God. It is about the issue of faithfulness. Clearly, the continuation of the promise is not in human hands but rather is accomplished by God's faithfulness to that promise: "God remembered," "God heeded," "God opened," and Rachel's barrenness was removed.

Apart from the faithful memory of God, there is little hope of a future. It should not be overlooked that much of God's future was brought into being through women who in those days and in that patriarchal society were the disenfranchised!

Genesis 31:1-3, 17-18, 22, 26 **What Have You Done?**

¹Now 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." ²And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favorably as he did before. ³Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to

the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.” ... ¹⁷So Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels; ¹⁸and 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. ... ²²On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ... ²⁶Laban said to Jacob, ‘What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword.

After the birth narrative, the story abruptly returns to Jacob’s conflict with Laban. The remainder of chapter 30 moves in a rambling manner to introduce Jacob’s desire to return home, and not empty-handed as when he came to Laban. This section underscores the theological truth that God is the one who prospered both Laban and Jacob. The watchfulness of God brought about Jacob’s prosperity.

Chapter 31 records the call of God for Jacob and his family to return home. Like his grandfather Abraham (Gen 12:1), this call required an abrupt departure. And Jacob did not exit empty-handed.

While Laban and his sons were a three-day’s journey from Jacob’s family and involved in shearing their flocks of sheep, Jacob set his family in motion to his homeland. When Laban was finally told of Jacob’s departure, he set off after them, finally catching up to them in the hill country of Gilead.

After all of Laban’s deception and treachery toward his son-in-law, it is somewhat surprising to hear him ask, “What have you done?” Laban had been made to look stupid, thought of himself as cheated, deprived of his loving daughters and grandchildren, and—to add insult to injury—accused Jacob of stealing his household gods.

Jacob, far outside the shadow of his Bethel vows, replied honestly that he was afraid; afraid that Laban would forcefully take back his daughters. One cannot help but recall the anger of Esau from which Jacob fled years ago as well as anticipate his fears of the repercussions of his actions as he returned home. Here is a man who is honestly confronting and seeking to reconcile a difficult past.

In the end, however, even Laban cannot resist the power and promise of God as verses 24 and 29 record: “But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, ‘Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad.’ ... ‘It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.’”

In these verses is the clear affirmation, conceded even by Laban, that God has been at work to prosper and protect Jacob.

The memory of God’s promise is now stirred within Jacob who replies, “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands, and rebuked you last night” (v 42).

Yahweh is described as the one who takes the random dispersions of our lives and the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and brings coherence and order. Jacob’s God remembered the promise and turned events toward its fulfillment.

Genesis 31:44 A Covenant and a Witness

⁴⁴*Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.*

The cumulative effect of all this on Laban was perhaps a reproved conscience for his behavior toward Jacob, which moved him to seek peace with his son-in-law. He proposed a covenant of friendship between them, to which Jacob readily agreed, without insisting upon Laban's submission, much less his restitution. One may safely surmise that Jacob was more open to a restoration of familial love and peace as he anticipated his own journey home and, hopefully a reconciliation with his troubled past.

Laban and Jacob made and ratified a covenant with great solemnity, according to the usages of those times: a pillar was erected, and a heap of stones raised, to perpetuate the memory of the covenant. A sacrifice of peace was offered. They ate bread together as a token of a hearty reconciliation (covenants of friendship were anciently ratified by the parties eating and drinking together); and they gave a new name to the place (Laban called it in Aramaic, and Jacob in Hebrew, "the heap of witness").

But essentially in this covenant, Laban expressed how suspicious he was of Jacob. The idea of Mizpah ("watch") is "If you do wrong, God will see it and may He punish!" Hardly the sentiments of a loving father and father-in-law! Laban managed to get Jacob to swear before his God to several particulars.

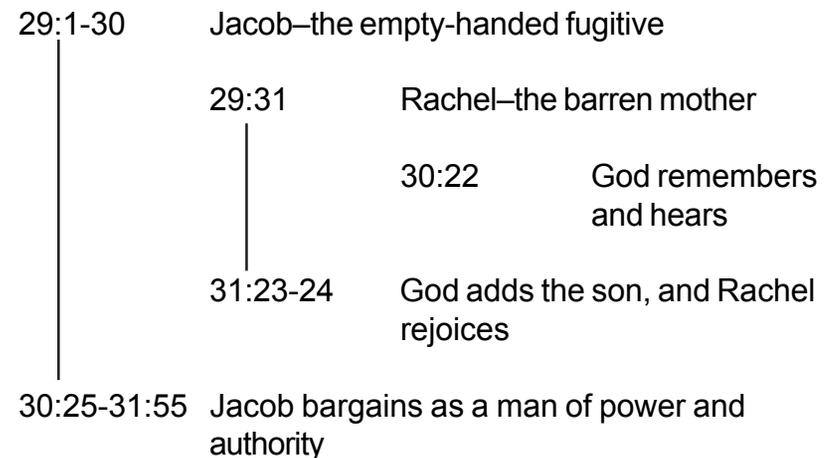
First, Jacob promised never to mistreat Laban's daughters and never to take any other wives in addition to them (v 50). Second, each covenanted that they would not pass the pillar and heap of stones to harm the other (v 52). Having agreed to these matters, Laban said a last farewell to his daughters and their children. Blessing them, he returned to

his home (v 55). The long and often stormy relationship between Laban and Jacob had come to an end.

Seeing Ourselves in the Story

We may be inclined to read this account of the struggles between Leah and Rachel, Jacob and Laban and think of it as the "long ago" and the "far away" and thus of little application to us. Such could not be farther from the truth. With all the subterfuge and deceit, the complicated relationships between them all, these people present a microcosm of our common lot.

Brueggemann points out a helpful inversion of sorts as one surveys the entirety of Genesis 29-31. Within it are the remarkable transformations of Rachel's barrenness and Jacob himself. This pattern of inversion is outlined as follows:



Nothing less than the power of God can account for such remarkable transformations. In spite of all the human machinations to secure prosperity, legacy and a future

promise, God's ultimate purposes were accomplished. This very imperfect and often dysfunctional family reflects much of the modern stories of our lives.

How often have we sought to affect our own will and way on events and people? Who among us has not—to some degree—attempted to convert a painful inheritance into something good? How many times have we reacted to circumstances with less than our best selves? How often have we not been clear about our own sense of self, our own values and beliefs? Who hasn't been mired in sibling rivalry and familial conflict? How many times have we functioned in self-serving and egocentric ways? How quickly have we often forgotten the promises of God and the vows we have made in light of those promises? All of these questions could be directed at Jacob and his family.

But our stories of faith unfold in just such a context. These same questions are our questions. We, too, are mixed-bagged individuals in and through whom God is seeking to accomplish God's "good and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). We, too, often want to claim the love of God but do so with hesitancy and less than full commitment.

The good news, however, is that our persistent God continues to reveal Godself to us and holds out redemptive possibilities for us to claim that will shape our lives—with all their talents, gifts, failings, strengths and weaknesses—into what we were created to be and do!

Written by Robert L. Dibble, minister to adults, River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond, Va.

Revealing Divine Purposes

Genesis 32:22-32; 33:1-17

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

Introduction

The story of Leena Lavanya, a young Indian Baptist woman, and how she became involved in "socio-evangelism" ministries has often been told. Not so well known is how God led Leena into a very meaningful ministry to people with HIV and AIDS.

Leena saw a pitiable wreck of a woman, Sultana by name, lying in the gutter of her home city. People were "walking by on the other side of the road."

Leena lifted up the desperate woman, cared for her immediate needs and like the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, took her to a place where she could be cared for, the public hospital in Guntur.

Told by the doctors that Sultana had AIDS, Leena admitted her and began caring for her and the 40 other neglected AIDS patients there.

While Sultana's was not an isolated case, her story is full of pathos. She recounted to Leena how, as a child, she had been abused by her stepfather and later sold into prostitu-

tion in Mumbai. She was then sold into a harem in one of the Gulf States until she contracted AIDS, after which no one had any commercial need of her.

Sultana was deposited back in India where, to survive, she had to resort to begging. Eventually, succumbing to sickness and hunger, she lowered herself into the gutter. Leena, who could not pass by a woman in such distress, provided a miracle of grace.

With the joy and pain that comes from caring for God's most needy children, Leena reached out to many in her own community suffering from HIV and AIDS. And with the help of a Baptist congregation in Virginia that had come to appreciate this remarkable young woman, Leena was able to construct an AIDS hospice in a very remote area 12 miles from her home.

Through Leena and a nurse, the AIDS hospice cares for inpatients dying from AIDS. Every week about 150 outpatients come for multivitamins, food, clothing and loving care. Leena tells the patients of God's love in Jesus Christ. To see the love Leena extends to these people is to see God's love in action.

Leena was visiting our home when news of Sultana's death arrived. She was very tearful but pleased that Sultana, whom she had found in the gutter of her city and in the gutter of life, had accepted Jesus Christ as Savior. Through this ministry Leena discovers God's purpose for her life.

The Biblical Witness

The book of Genesis is full of soaring sagas, amazing stories and accounts of the earliest interaction between God and God's children. To westerners approaching the

text with certain presuppositions and a different worldview than the author of Genesis, the stories will be different, mysterious and sometimes disturbing. Yet perhaps nowhere else can we begin to glimpse the mind of God as clearly as in the unfolding story of God's dealings with humanity throughout the pages of the first book of the Bible.

This is especially true in the story of Jacob's encounter with God and his own brother in Genesis chapters 32 and 33.

Genesis 32:22-28 A New Name

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

Jacob had been away from his ancestral home for some time and longed to be with his family and people again. He sent overtures to his brother, Esau, from whom he had fled years before, seeking to discover whether Esau had forgiven Jacob's treachery and whether it was therefore safe for Jacob and his wives and children to return home. Being reassured that all seemed well, Jacob set out to meet his brother.

In one of the really strange and difficult biblical stories, Jacob encountered a “man” who, as it turned out, was no mere mortal. It has been commonly assumed that somehow Jacob spent the entire night wrestling with this mysterious man. The text does not say that. Indeed, the encounter may have been brief, a sudden clash of titans, a sprint rather than a marathon, a moment in time, a one-rounder, not going the distance for 15 rounds as is generally suggested.

Crossing the ford at Jabbok with his large entourage of wives, children and servants must have been a lengthy process, especially in the darkness. Most of the night had probably passed before Jacob found himself alone (v 24).

Suddenly, Jacob was engaged in a fierce personal struggle that he could not win, but neither did he lose. All sorts of explanations about this encounter abound. Was Jacob wrestling with his own personal demons, still agonizing over his deceit of past days and worried over his meeting with Esau? If the “man” was some incarnation of the divine, how was it that he could not prevail over Jacob whose reputation was certainly not one of a finely tuned athlete? How could he disable Jacob, and yet not be able to disengage from him?

These are legitimate questions, but we should not allow them to obscure the fact that in some highly unusual way, divine forces were interacting with this ancient patriarch, interacting in a way that was to have enormous consequences. When the “man” saw he could not free himself of Jacob’s tenacious hold, he conceded, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (v 28).

Jacob was given a new name, Israel, a name that was meaningful then and that today still evokes tremendous

emotions of love and hate, admiration and despair. As the giving of a name was of profound importance to the Hebrews, history teaches that the giving of the name Israel to Jacob, son of Isaac, unleashed not only a national identity but an identity that has had enormous implications for the people of that name and those who have been arrayed against the Israeli people over the centuries.

Genesis 32:29-31 **Face to Face with God**

²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

The more the story unfolds, the easier it is to understand that Jacob’s protagonist was not merely a man. The text that refers to Jacob states, “You have striven with God...,” and we are left to wonder just the exact meaning. However, we do know that this was much more than some mortal-to-mortal combat.

After securing a new name, Jacob/Israel asked for the name of this man of mystery. With echoes of Exodus 3:14 when Moses asked the same question of God and the reply was, “I am who I am,” the divine presence with Jacob declined to offer a name. However, he gave Jacob a blessing that was of utmost importance to a man who revered God and who always sought recognition and approval.

Genesis 33:1-4 **The Brothers Reunited**

¹Now 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. ²He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. ⁴But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

Scripture includes many beautiful vignettes, and the previously estranged brothers' tearful reconciliation is surely one. For years Jacob had agonized over this meeting, and in the hours leading up to the fateful moment, he plotted and schemed, planned and prepared for every eventuality. But all his fears were swept away with a brotherly embrace.

Esau's magnanimity and Jacob's response produce a sigh of relief in us all. We are called to be ministers of reconciliation and, as believers in Jesus the Christ, rejoice when brothers are at peace.

Genesis 33:8-10 **Seeing God in His Brother**

⁸Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord."⁹But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself."¹⁰Jacob 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.

Just as Jacob had looked into the face of God the previous night (32:28), so in another way, he perceived in the face of his older brother the "face of God." Of course, he employed

flattery. He may have thought that his fate depended on the gifts he gave and the words he used. But that aside, when he looked into the aging, grizzled, red-faced Esau, he saw more than a brother; he sensed a divine reality. In his brother, he saw the "face of God."

Genesis 33:12-17 **Relationships Restored**

¹²Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you."¹³But 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. ¹⁴Let 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."¹⁵So 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?" ¹⁶So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.

After the euphoria of the meeting and the realization that harmony could prevail, (vv 12-14), the brothers had to work out the details of their relationship. Once more we see Jacob's caution, even distrust, whereas Esau seemed not only forgiving but open and accepting. But the brothers were at peace and Jacob's well-being and future prosperity as a father to the people of Israel was assured.

Some Lessons for Us

With all Jacob's faults, he was a man who truly wanted to acknowledge the God of his fathers, the God of Israel, and to receive God's blessing.

Jacob was a flawed man. He was duplicitous, scheming, manipulative and self-serving. He stole his brother's birth-right by deceiving his blind father, Isaac, and conspired with his mother to receive his dying father's blessing, normally given to the first-born. Jacob fled his brother's burning rage by departing the land of his birth and beginning a new life in "the land of the East." Jacob used those nearest him to his own advantage.

In contrast, Esau seems to have been an open-hearted, generous, appealing personality, who, unlike Jacob, naively thought well of people and who could forgive as easily as he could be provoked to anger. But Esau lacked one trait of character obvious in his brother. Nothing suggests that Esau had a heart for God, that he ever built an altar, that he sought to be obedient to or desired the favor of Israel's God.

A classic example of Jacob's piety was at Bethel, where, in a dream, he saw the angels of God ascending and descending on a ladder extending from heaven to earth. After this remarkable experience, Jacob built an altar and declared, "The Lord will be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house" (Gen 28:21b-22a).

The mysterious encounter with the man at Peniel with whom Jacob wrestled is another example of Jacob's sense of the presence of the divine—a strange encounter, but one full of divine-human interaction. Jacob built altars to express his devotion. He saw God in the face of his brother. Like another flawed Israelite leader, King David, Jacob had a heart for God.

We are all flawed people, and as appealing as Esau might appear, it is Jacob's dedication to the Lord God that serves

as a reminder of where our loyalty should lie. We are only (to quote from a well-known hymn) "sinners, saved by grace" and, despite our weakness, if we truly seek to be the people God wants us to be, if we are sincere servants of Jesus, we too will find favor with God.

If, like Jacob, we look into the face of God, through our personal relationship with God's Son, then perhaps in our neighbors, friends, indeed, in all God's children, we may be permitted to see the face of God, the face of the One who "had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Is 53:2).

Jacob had to wrestle with the presence of God to gain the strength for the wrenching task of reconciling with his brother. It is in the struggles of life, with God and sometimes with God's children, in our agonizing prayer, in the discipline of the Christian faith, that we begin to discern the purposes of God for our lives.

Written by Tony Cupit, director of evangelism and education and study and research, Baptist World Alliance, Falls Church, Va.

Living a Life of Faith

Genesis 35

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

Introduction

Most of us have come to expect the American middle-class way of life, perhaps even thinking of it as one of our rights. In fact, this right became one of the major issues in the 2004 US presidential race. We enjoy the comfort of such a lifestyle, but at what cost and to whom?

For example, while the United States makes up a very small percentage of the world's population, we use a huge portion of the world's natural resources to support our self-serving lifestyles. And not only that: our government and corporations across the country promote this lifestyle in other countries that are emerging from poverty and communism in the hope that we might profit from their adoption of this lifestyle as well.

Though writing long ago, the poet William Wordsworth made this observation about a then newly-emerging middle class:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

How long can we sustain this standard we have established for ourselves? How long, too, before those unable to achieve this standard because of their poverty demand, through violent means, their place in this scheme?

It was in a time just like this that the prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, said to the middle-class people of Judah and Jerusalem:

"I cannot endure [your] solemn assemblies ...; ... Your ... appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa 1:13b-17).

This is just the beginning of the prophet's lament. His critique would go on for years. Needless to say, his words were not popular. The people thought him pessimistic and unusually harsh, so they refused to heed his call for repentance. But his words later proved to be right on target, and the people's arrogance would later be replaced with terror as all they valued was destroyed by their enemies.

While history provides us with numerous lessons, it often tends to repeat itself. Yet, this need not be.

Living a life of faith requires that we set priorities and make purposeful decisions that reflect our dependence upon God, our pursuit of the divine will and the value we place on the lives of others. Personal faith is multi-dimensional, affecting our relationships with God, others, creation and even future generations.

The Biblical Witness

Before examining Genesis 35, recall the events recorded in Genesis 27-33. If you haven't already done so, read the lesson that precedes this one.

Esau and Jacob were twin brothers, but Esau came first from the womb and was considered by his father the firstborn son. Though the custom may seem odd to us now, firstborn sons in those days were the recipients of all of the father's possessions at the end of his life, as well as the father's blessing. Then when the father died, the firstborn became the family's new patriarch.

Isaac, blind and near death, asked his favorite son, Esau, to hunt for meat and to prepare a final meal they would share together, after which Isaac would give Esau the traditional blessing and all Isaac's possessions. When Esau left to hunt for the meat, Rebecca, mother of both sons, got Jacob, her favorite, to trick Isaac into believing that he was Esau.

Jacob went to his father, fed the dying, blind man his last meal and then stole from Esau their father's blessing and inheritance, both of which, because of custom, were non-transferable. When Esau found out what Jacob had done, he threatened to kill his brother, but Jacob fled, going far away to live with Laban, marrying into his family.

Later, longing for home, Jacob took his two wives, their children and the wealth he had acquired and headed back. Since he had no way to know how his brother would receive him upon his return, Jacob, in order to go home again, had to set aside his fear of what could happen.

We might look upon Genesis 35 as a journal of Jacob's journey home.

Living a Life of Faith

Genesis 35:1-4 Preparing for New Beginnings

¹God 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." ²So 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; ³then 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." ⁴So 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.

Bethel, according to Genesis 28:10-22, was the place of Jacob's first encounter with God after Jacob fled from Esau. He was told to return there in preparation for his journey home.

In order to return to make peace with his brother, Jacob had to set aside his fears of what Esau might do when the two met again. To prepare himself and his family spiritually for this meeting, he had his family set aside their foreign gods. (See Gen 31:33-35 for how he had not known until later that Rachel had stolen her father's household gods.) It was now time for Jacob's family to discard those gods and to purify themselves before God. (See also Ex 19:10-14, where Moses demanded the people purify themselves; this account details how purification was to be done.)

Besides this ritual of purification, however, God asked Jacob to perform another important task as he readied himself for his return. God asked Jacob to make an altar at Bethel.

Why an altar? An altar is an elevated structure on which a religious ceremony might be held. What ceremony was Jacob to have? Perhaps it was a ceremony of confession or spiritual healing or both—a place on which a rite of forgiveness might be enacted.

Building the altar gave Jacob reason to reflect intentionally on why he had to flee from his brother: he had stolen what rightfully belonged to someone else. So the altar at Bethel could have been a place on which Jacob offered to God an act of confession.

Genesis 35:9-15 **A New Name**

⁹God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. ¹⁰God 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. ¹¹God 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. ¹²The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” ¹³Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him. ¹⁴Jacob 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. ¹⁵So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

So the altar at Bethel was just that: a place of new birth and new beginnings.

Once purified and forgiven, God gave Jacob a new name. *Jacob*, meaning “he takes by the heel,” (see Gen 25:26) was a name tarnished. Jacob had climbed from his

mother’s womb, grabbing his brother’s heel, and later took possession of his brother’s birthright (see Gen 25:29-34), his father’s blessing and all of the family inheritance. Since that time, he had lived in fear of what his brother might do to him should Esau ever come near.

Jacob had also deceived his father-in-law, Laban (see Gen 30:25-43). And his wife, Rachel, when they left her father’s house, stole her father’s household gods, an act loaded with all kinds of implications. Did she not, for example, trust in God to supply her family’s needs? Were other gods needed—just in case? And if so, is our god of materialism of a similar nature?

Like Saul of Tarsus, Jacob needed a new name for a fresh beginning. God chose “Israel,” which means “the one who strives with God.” (See Gen 32:22-32, the story where Jacob wrestles with God and is first renamed. His new name and old name, however, continue to be used interchangeably in the text.)

Endowing him with a new name and newfound forgiveness, God then spoke a new blessing over the new man, Israel. God commanded him to be fruitful and to multiply, telling Israel that he would be the father of a great nation.

Genesis 35:16-18 **A New Son**

¹⁶Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. ¹⁷When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, “Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.” ¹⁸As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-o’ni; but his father called him Benjamin.

As she was dying, childbirth too much for her body, Rachel named her newborn son Ben-o'ni, which means "son of my sorrow" (v 18). But after she died, Jacob, now called Israel, gave his son a new name, too—a name of hope and new beginnings. Benjamin means "son of my right hand" (v 18). The birth of the son gave Israel relief from his grief over his loss of Rachel.

Genesis 35:22b-26, 28-29 **A Long Lineage**

^{22b}Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. ²³The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's first-born), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zeb'ulun. ²⁴The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁵The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naph'tali. ²⁶The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.... ²⁸Now the days of Isaac were one hundred eighty years. ²⁹And 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.

We find here the names of all of Jacob's sons, born to him in fulfillment of the blessing God spoke to him at Bethel.

We are left with the impression by these closing verses, however, that Isaac, though near death when Jacob stole his brother's blessing and inheritance, did not die at that time after all. It appears that Isaac lived for some years, long enough, at least, to see his two sons reconciled. And once seeing them reconciled, Isaac then died and was buried by his two sons, a fitting ending to a story filled with brokenness but replaced with an at-peace completeness.

Establishing New Priorities

The time we spend working and going, getting and spending, doing and having in our overly busy lives leaves little quality time for developing healthy and meaningful relationships. The results: the divorce rate remains well over 50 percent, family brokenness is rampant and friendships go unfounded and unfostered.

As a pastor intimately involved in people's daily lives, I often find, too, that those with the most are living the least fulfilled lives. "Things" do not make us happy: momentarily, perhaps, but ultimately, never. And if our relationships with one another are suffering, then so is our relationship with God.

Finding regular time for worship and reflection, time to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, time for getting to know others so that we can be the human face of God to one another—these are our deepest needs.

How do we stop the busy-ness and the spending—the "laying waste our powers?" We need to "arise and go to Bethel," our first place of meeting God, that place where our commitment was fresh and new. We need to build an altar and on that altar we need to seek God's blessing again. But we need to do so knowing that this is very hard work and that every fiber of our culture will work against us.

But we have to start somewhere, so it might be helpful to name some very specific things. For example:

- I will not purchase any new clothes for the remainder of this year.
- For Christmas this coming year, instead of something he doesn't need, I will give my friend a dozen chicks through Heifer International.
- My next car will be a hybrid, one that is designed to be radically fuel efficient.

- Since I live in a big city with mass transit, I will sell my car and donate any money I might make from it to a nonprofit organization that helps those less fortunate than myself.
- I will spend one hour today talking to my son/daughter.

It is time to put away all of our foreign gods and to purify ourselves before the Lord, not simply because we have to, but even more because of what we are missing because we have chosen *not* to.

Written by Bob Ballance, pastor, Heritage Baptist Church, Cartersville, Ga.

Realizing the Divine Plan

Genesis 37

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

Introduction

A certain phrase continually echoes in my mind and heart. I first heard it spoken by an older Kenyan woman living with the affects of HIV/AIDS. "God is good," were her exact words.

She said the words as a greeting actually. I had arrived at the church that day to join a meeting of Guardians. That is what they call themselves. They are not the parents of the children in their care—the children who now sleep in their homes, eat their food, call out to them at night and ask for their reassurance and direction. They, rather, are the ones who are the safeguards, the vanguards, the ones who are called to protect the children's hopes, futures—their very lives.

"God is good" was not the incantation I expected to encounter that day. Certainly, neither did I expect to encounter its response.

She must have caught my surprise for, after I mumbled what must have sounded like a faith-lacking, half-hearted, somewhat-questioning, "Yes, He is," she proceeded to correct me. "No, child," she said. "You don't say 'yes.' You say, 'all the time.'"

We repeated it together. She declared, “God is good.” And I affirmed, “All the time.”

“All the time?” I questioned.

And she pronounced, “God is good.”

Together, back and forth, we declared the goodness of God.

How is it that this elderly woman, on her own after the death of her husband, with no means of income, who is now the soul provider for two grandchildren because her son and daughter-in-law have died of AIDS, could stand there and declare that, “All the time, God is good”?

It is because her affirmation of God’s goodness is not dependent on her circumstances alone. Her belief in God’s goodness is firm regardless of the physical suffering she encounters, regardless of the injustice of human systems that engulf her and regardless of even the best, or worst, intentions of those around her. Her affirmation of God’s goodness is a declaration that God’s good and perfect and just purposes are at work regardless of her current experience. She knows and declares that even the world’s most devastating disease cannot interrupt the ways of God.

The Biblical Witness

The ways of God cannot be stopped. Natural disasters, unexplainable diseases, even humanity’s unwise choices and sinful behaviors cannot and will not keep God from fully realizing the divine plan. The story of young Joseph is one of many stories that exemplify this truth. Neither the naivety of Joseph’s youth nor the narrow-sighted passion of Jacob,

nor even the vengeful acts of Joseph’s brothers could thwart God’s perfect and righteous ways.

Genesis 37:2b-8

Jealousy and Hate Will Not Stop God’s Ways

^{2b}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. ³Now 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. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. ⁵Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There 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.” ⁸His 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.

The family situation was not good. The father loved Joseph best—unashamedly and unapologetically best. Jacob seemed to make little attempt, if any, to keep this truth from his older sons. The declaration of his favor was a “long robe with sleeves” (v 3b). It was not a private note for Joseph to hide away. It was not a piece of jewelry that might not be noticed. It was a robe of royal proportions that demanded public recognition.

And the brothers were part of the public. Whether Jacob told them directly or not, the devotion of the father to his

young son, symbolized by the robe, was the devotion that was demanded of the other sons as well. Jealousy and hatred enveloped the brothers so thoroughly that even peaceable speech was impossible.

It did not help matters that Joseph was the youngest, that Joseph's domestic duties would have been the lightest and that Joseph was a tattletale. And, it certainly did not help matters that Joseph seemed oblivious to his brothers' scorn. If you were aware of another's hatred towards you, would you tell them about the vision you had been given of your coming dominance?

Was Joseph genuinely and innocently asking for his brothers' assistance to help him understand his dream? Or, did Joseph already have an insight as to the dream's prophecy and was therefore intentionally irritating his brothers even more with his whimsical recount? Either way, Joseph went public with the dream just as his father had gone public with his love for him.

Dreams are not public in themselves. Dreams are a private message and God chose to act privately. God gave Joseph a private vision of the divine plan and it was Joseph who made it public. God has the plan. God reveals it in God's own way and time. And God uses people, like Joseph, like Jacob, and like you and me, who are often naive or spiteful or even partisan, to bring it about.

Genesis 37:17b-24 **Conspiracy and Revenge Will Not Stop God's Ways**

17b So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. *18* They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. *19* They said to one another, "Here comes the dreamer. *20* 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." *21* But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." *22* 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. *23* So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; *24* and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

What if Joseph had not told his brothers about his dream? What if Joseph had clued into the fact that this dream would put him in danger? What if Joseph had never said a word about the dream that revealed to him God's plan? What if God had revealed more clearly to Joseph in the dream that this was God's plan and that Joseph ought to keep quiet and wait until God acted more directly?

Did God know that Joseph would tell his brothers? Or, is it possible that God had intended Joseph to keep the dream to himself and, in spite of the fact that Joseph revealed it, God still orchestrated events to allow Joseph to get to Egypt? We will likely never know, at least not in this lifetime.

A friend tells me that she is learning not to live in the "what if's" of life. Rather, she says, God is teaching her to live in the "even if's" of life. During a time when her son had been diagnosed with cancer, her mind and heart rushed into the "what if's" of life. "What if the doctors can't help? What if the cancer is too advanced? What if my son dies?"

Through much prayer and the support of her community, she came to understand that God's ways were sure. Slowly,

she is learning to live in the assurance that “even if” her son does not live in this world, he will live alongside his Lord and all of God’s promises will stand firm.

Even though Joseph told his brothers his dream, and even though they plotted to kill him, God’s plan was not thwarted. Reuben intervened and protected Joseph’s life.

We will not know if God had a completely different plan in place to get Joseph to Egypt. What we do know is that God’s ultimate plan was to have Israel secure under Joseph’s leadership. And, we know that God’s plan came to fruition.

Genesis 37:26-28 **Profit and Loss Will Not Stop God’s Ways**

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

As well as loudmouthed and naïve youth, conspirators and vengeful brothers, God can use those with selfish motives and wrong desires to ensure that the divine plan will be fulfilled.

Judah’s suggestion is yet another incidence of keeping their plot public. If the brothers hid their brother’s blood, how would they gain anything?

It is difficult to fathom that such selfishness, injustice and greed can be used to further the plan of God. But it was.

Judah, having adhered to Reuben’s plea not to kill Joseph, still looked for an angle from which he could gain and even perhaps demonstrate his power over Joseph.

He did so and convinced the other brothers to do so by cloaking his plan in compassion—“for he is our brother, our own flesh” (v 27).

Even impure desires will not stop God’s plan.

Genesis 37:31-36 **Deception and Grief Will Not Stop God’s Ways**

³¹Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. ³²They 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.” ³³He recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” ³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵All 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. ³⁶Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.

Numerous passages of scripture so carefully portray the image of loved ones grieving the loss of a child, relative or friend that their grief is palpable. Life is full of these images as well. What makes the account of Jacob’s grief so agonizing is the fact that we, the readers, know of the deception. We enter into this part of the story from the same perspective as that of the brothers. We stand alongside those in the know wanting to comfort, to genuinely console the father, as did the brothers. Yet we too, like the brothers,

would rather allow someone else's agony than face the wrath of our own sinful actions.

Why is it that Jacob took responsibility for Joseph's death? Why did he say that he would go down to "Sheol" in mourning for his son? Was he sorry for his actions—his favoritism of Joseph and his inability to protect him from predators? Or, was it more about God's seeming distance—God's favoritism of the people whom God had now seemingly abandoned and God's seeming inability to fulfill the earlier promise to the house of Israel?

Jacob refused to be comforted, for he thought the dream had been crushed. But, it hadn't. For "meanwhile" (v 36), Joseph had been sold and was indeed in Egypt.

Acknowledging God's Faithfulness

God's purposes will be realized—with or without Joseph, with or without the brothers, with or without you or me.

Too often our experience is like that of the psalmist as he cries out in Psalm 13. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (v 1). How long will you keep your presence from me? How long will you keep silent? How long must I go before I am given an experience of you? How long must I wait before I am given a glimpse that you are indeed fulfilling your promise? How long must I endure the wicked and selfish and deceptive ways of this world before being assured of your ways and your control and your presence?

The psalmist groans and agonizes and continues to question before he finally states, regardless of his empty and silent experience, "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." You are God and

I will trust in the work of your plan regardless of the fact that it seems to be going awry, regardless of my current situation and regardless of the many people who both unintentionally and intentionally try to keep it from being fully realized.

God is good. All the time. All the time. God is good.

Our prayer ought to be and, thankfully, can be, "Lord, work in us, work through us and work in spite of us. Amen."

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Recognizing God's Divine Hand

Genesis 40-41

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

Introduction

One of Harry Emerson Fosdick's most memorable sermons was titled "Handling Life's Second Bests." Fosdick accurately described our human condition: 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.

In his sermon, Fosdick noted that in biography this truth is almost taken for granted. Few people—even those notable enough to merit a biography—consistently get their "first choices."

Genuine success in life often consists of what we do with our second or third choices. How do we respond when our dreams are deferred and our plans detoured? As people of faith, how do we react when life throws us a curve?

Sometimes we discover that good things come from the unlikeliest sources and that some of life's greatest achievements emerge from the unlikeliest situations.

In 1674 a young Englishman married an orphan who was a Christian. The new bride led her husband to faith in Christ, and he was baptized. Soon, this new convert felt led to

preach. However, he was summarily arrested and thrown into prison for preaching without the required permission of the established church. For this crime, he remained in prison for twelve years.

During those twelve years, however, the preacher's muzzled voice found another outlet. John Bunyan penned *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a classic in Christian literature that has been printed, read and translated more often than any book other than the Bible. For more than three centuries, countless lives have been changed through Bunyan's simple, earnest story of the pilgrim named Christian.

Some 2,000 years before Bunyan, a talented but star-crossed Hebrew found himself in a foreign dungeon, imprisoned for an offense he did not commit. But today this great patriarch of the Hebrew people, and the protagonist in one of the most fascinating stories of the Hebrew scriptures, still stands as a model of faithfulness, perseverance and resourcefulness in response to the vicissitudes of life. In the drama of his life described in Genesis, we find encouragement for living faithfully as God's people. And we meet a God who works through an obedient individual to bless not only Joseph but multitudes of people.

The Biblical Witness

Genesis 40:5-8 About Those Dreams

⁵One 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. ⁶When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. ⁷So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's

house, “Why are your faces downcast today?”⁸ 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.”

As this chapter in Joseph’s life begins, Joseph sits in prison, the victim of a trumped-up charge by the wife of Potiphar, the Egyptian military officer who had purchased Joseph as a slave. For his integrity in literally fleeing from the brash attempt by his master’s wife to seduce him, Joseph was rewarded with imprisonment.

But Jacob’s favorite son had a knack for landing on his feet. With resilient resourcefulness, Joseph parlayed his good looks, natural charm and insightful understanding of human behavior to succeed where others would have succumbed to despair. After being sold into slavery, it didn’t take long for him to win the confidence and trust of his master, rising through the ranks in Potiphar’s service (Gen 39:4-6).

In prison, Joseph so impressed the head jailer that he was entrusted with responsibility for the other prisoners (39:22-23). When two of Pharaoh’s personal assistants, the head “cupbearer” (or butler) and the chief baker, were tossed into prison for some affront to the king, Joseph was given the assignment of attending to them. And once again opportunity emerged from bleak circumstances.

On the same night, the butler and baker experienced troubling dreams. Noticing their downcast demeanors the next morning, Joseph inquired about the cause of their concern. Pharaoh’s officers clearly believed there was some important meaning to their dreams but they had no one to interpret the dreams for them.

Everyone dreams. Dreams are common to the human experience. Our dreams have the capacity to frighten, to teach, to offer insights into human nature, to affect relationships and even to offer solutions to problems. As the works of Freud, Jung and others have taught us, dreams have the power to cross the boundaries of the physical, psychological and spiritual worlds.

The people of the ancient world believed they could know the spiritual world through dreams and visions. Beginning with Joseph’s great grandfather, Abraham, the Genesis narratives pay great attention to dreams as a means for the revelation of God’s will (20:3; 21:12; 28:12; 31:11, 24; 37:5ff). Joseph, derisively labeled “the dreamer” by his brothers (37:19), was never far from dreams, whether experiencing them himself and then lording them over his brothers (Gen 37) or interpreting the dreams of fellow prisoners (Gen 40) and even the king of Egypt (Gen 41).

Demonstrating a maturity that was absent in his egotistical and self-serving accounts of his dreams to his brothers, Joseph emphasized to his fellow prisoners that God is the interpreter of dreams (40:8).

Genesis 40:12-15 **Remember Me**

¹²Then Joseph said to him, “This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; ¹³within 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. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵For 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.”

After hearing the description of the butler's dream, Joseph shared the interpretation. The dream signified the butler's destiny. In three days, Joseph explained, Pharaoh would restore him to his previous position in the king's court. Joseph then followed the interpretation with a personal appeal, asking the butler to put in a good word with Pharaoh on Joseph's behalf. Notably, Joseph did not try to use his insight into the meaning of dreams as a bargaining chip *before* providing the interpretation to the butler. Rather, he allowed his case to stand on its own merits and trusted the butler to do the right thing.

"I don't deserve to be here," he informed the butler. In the first case, he explained, he was "stolen" from his homeland and sold into foreign slavery. Second, he was innocent of the charges against him and had been unjustly imprisoned—an appeal that should have resonated with someone whose employment rested on the whims of the king. Joseph wasn't simply conniving a way out of jail. He wasn't merely asking a personal favor. He wanted justice—even from a foreign administration.

Genesis 40:16a, 18-23 Just As Joseph Said

¹⁶When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream. . . ."

¹⁸And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; ¹⁹within 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." ²⁰On 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. ²¹He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; ²²but the chief baker he

hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. ²³Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

The delighted smile on his colleague's face emboldened the baker to share his dream with Joseph. The interpretation, however, was a stark contrast to the positive reading of the butler's dream, portending instead the baker's execution in three days. Sure enough, three days later Joseph's interpretations of the dreams were confirmed when Pharaoh decided during his birthday bash to celebrate by re-employing the butler and hanging the baker. Unfortunately, however, the butler forgot Joseph's request.

Thus, in terms of his personal circumstances, Joseph at the end of this chapter is just where he was at the beginning—in prison. Only now he is not only imprisoned but forgotten. To be jailed unjustly was bad enough; to be jailed and forgotten was even worse.

Joseph was expecting a return favor in the form of a ticket out of jail and perhaps a few job interviews, only the butler forgot to make good on his IOU. Instead, Joseph was left to face another two years of incarceration. The fact that he had earned an internal promotion from the head jailer was of little consolation ("been there, done that, at Captain Potiphar's house, and look where it got me"). He may have had responsibilities and even a few freedoms not enjoyed by the other prisoners, but he was *not* free, and things were anything but fine.

However, this story is not ultimately about dreams and the ability to interpret them. The dreams are a means through which God chose to work the divine will through the person of Joseph. Throughout the roller-coaster experiences of fortune and misfortune, the narrator emphasizes God's presence in Joseph's life (39:2, 8; 39:21).

God was present when Joseph was on the rise, and God was present each time he hit bottom. God was present when Joseph enjoyed the status of being his father's favored son. God was present when Joseph sat—with a bruised body and a bruised ego—at the bottom of the pit, dumped there by angry and jealous brothers who gave serious thought to murdering him instead. God was present when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver, and he was carted off to a foreign country. God was present when Joseph gained Potiphar's trust and rose to a prominent position in his master's service. God was present when that same master was deceived by his wife's false accusations against Joseph and unjustly had Joseph tossed into prison.

Now, as the butler absentmindedly forgot all about the Hebrew prisoner who had accurately interpreted the meaning of his dream—and Joseph languished in the dungeon for another two years—God did not suddenly go AWOL. God was still present and still at work.

Genesis 41:1, 8-14a **Send in Joseph!**

¹After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile. . . . ⁸In 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. ⁹Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my faults today. ¹⁰Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. ¹²A 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. ¹³As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged." ¹⁴Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon.

Two years later, it was Pharaoh's turn to be troubled by a pair of dreams. He sensed their significance, but no one was able to interpret them for him. At that point, the butler's memory got a jolt. Choosing his words carefully, lest he again incur the king's wrath, he told Pharaoh about the young Hebrew who had correctly interpreted the dreams of the butler and baker in prison. The butler held an important office in Pharaoh's court and served as a trusted advisor to the king, so it is not surprising that Pharaoh immediately acted on this information.

Hurriedly escorted out of the dungeon, Joseph barely had time for a quick shave and change of clothes before he was ushered into Pharaoh's presence. Joseph in this narrative showed no signs of shaking in his sandals, but he may well have had a knot in his stomach as he stood before the king. After all, it was the long arm of the military law that, however unjustly wielded, had locked him away in the first place.

Like the dreams of the butler and baker in Chapter 40, Pharaoh's dreams were concrete and specific. Likewise, their content related not to current situations but to future events.

Genesis 41:16, 28-33 **Not I, But God**

¹⁶Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer. . . . ²⁸It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹There

will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. ³⁰After 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. ³¹The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. ³²And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. ³³Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.

Again, Joseph proved to be more than a clever interpreter of dreams. Unlike the other experts in Pharaoh's court, he was no mere magician or seer. Rather, Joseph dared to make the audacious claim before the king that dream interpretation belonged to God and God alone. The power to understand these dreams lay beyond any human wisdom, expert analysis, imperial might or courtly magic. Joseph's God—the God of the Hebrews—was the giver of this gift and the source of a deeper wisdom that lay beyond the empire's limited knowledge. This theological affirmation is at the heart of the Joseph story.

Joseph then offered the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. First, he reported, a severe famine would sweep across the land. Again, Joseph asserted, feast and famine, plenty and want, lie ultimately within the sovereignty of God (41:32). Although nothing could be done to prevent the famine (41:21), something could be done to prepare for it (41:33-36).

There are some things we encounter in life that we cannot avoid and cannot change. But we can choose how we respond to the unfolding destinies of our lives. In this ancient narrative, this truth runs on parallel tracks. Joseph could not change his circumstances; he could not control

the events that led to his imprisonment. At another level, Pharaoh, even with all his wealth and power, could not avoid the impending famine.

Genesis 41:37-38, 40-44 In Joseph's Command

³⁷The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. ³⁸Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God". . . ⁴⁰You 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. ⁴¹And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." ⁴²Removing 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. ⁴³He 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. ⁴⁴Moreover 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."

The narrator does not record any response Pharaoh may have made directly to this brash young Hebrew, but the king quickly sized up both the interpretation of the dreams and the intelligence and capabilities of the interpreter—or, more precisely, the Interpreter's obedient messenger. With breath-taking suddenness, Joseph was promoted from the lowly status of prisoner to the Number 2 man in all of Egypt.

Genesis 41:53, 57 Blessed to Bless Others

⁵³The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end. . . . ⁵⁷Moreover, all the world came

to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

As this chapter in the saga closes, Joseph is blessed with authority, possessions and power. But the story of the scriptures is that God blesses one—an individual or a nation—in order to bless others. Echoing God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), God now used Joseph as an instrument through which God blessed others.

Although we may never experience the dramatic rags-to-riches story of Joseph, we too are recipients of God’s blessings, and that is never an end in itself. Like Joseph, we are called to be conduits of God’s love and blessings to others.

Living in the Meantime

The great saint, Teresa of Avila, sold all she had to build an orphanage for needy children. A flood came and destroyed the orphanage. Teresa rebuilt it. A storm destroyed it a second time. She rebuilt it. Then a fire burned the orphanage. Teresa prayed, as only a saint can, “God, if this is how you treat your friends, it’s no wonder that you have so few.”

Like Joseph, the true test of our faithfulness and obedience comes when things are not fine, when life is not going as we had planned. Sometimes we come to know God best during hardship. Indeed, it is in God’s silence that we sometimes discover new depths to God’s steadfast love and abiding presence. We often recognize God’s guiding hand in our lives only in retrospect. The true test of faithfulness and trust comes “in the meantime,” when we cannot see our way around the next corner, when we are unable to see the clear evidence of God at work.

Many centuries after Joseph, the Apostle Paul would eloquently express his complete confidence that God is able to bring good out of whatever life brings to those who love God (Rom 8:28) and that absolutely nothing has the power “to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

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Making Twisted Lives Straight

Genesis 42-45

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

Introduction

In 1913, the federal government held a fiftieth anniversary reunion at Gettysburg. For three days, thousands of survivors camped out in the old battlefield swapping stories, rediscovering old friends, mourning fallen comrades and being grateful to God they had survived.

The climax of the gathering was a reenactment of Pickett's doomed charge. Thousands of spectators gathered to watch as the Union veterans took their positions among the rocks up on Cemetery Ridge and waited as their former adversaries emerged from the woods on Seminary Ridge.

Philip Myers witnessed the event as an 18-year-old. He wrote, "We could see not rifles and bayonets but canes and crutches. We soon could distinguish the more agile ones aiding those less able to maintain their places in the ranks."

During the actual reenactment of the battle, the Union veterans waited behind the rocks on the ridge while the Confederate veterans started marching toward them across the field below, as they had in the battle fifty years earlier. Then something extraordinary happened. The Union vets rose up out of their places on the ridge and ran down

to meet the Confederates who were hurrying—as best they could—up the hill.

As the old men up on the ridge began to rush down at the old men coming up the field, a great cry went up. This time was different, however; instead of doing battle as they had half a century earlier, they threw their arms around each other. They embraced each other and openly wept. The horror of war was transfigured into a moment of healing by our God.

Our congregations hold numerous stories of people whose lives are twisted by bad decisions—theirs, or other people's—in whose lives God still works. Brad is such a person.

A trucker by trade, he was married to Debbie, and they had two children together. Brad drank heavily for years until, almost without noticing what had happened, he was an alcoholic. Still a young man, his health was not compromised, but his marriage suffered greatly. When he came to his senses, Brad started attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and working through the program. With God's help, he stayed clean and sober, becoming more responsible about his family, work and relationships.

His sobriety did not come soon enough, however, to save his marriage. Debbie left him after he had over two years of sobriety, saying that "too much damage had already been done." Brad understood that relationships can bend and break.

Now with over 10 years' sobriety, Brad is a strong Christian leader in his church—a teacher, mentor and deacon. He can connect to those dealing with an addiction in ways most people cannot. His weakness has become a place where God is strong. He said, "I did what I could to screw

up my life, but God kept unscrewing all the torque and twists.”

The Biblical Witness

Now 30 years old, Joseph, by correctly interpreting the Pharaoh’s dreams, was given immense power (40:1—41:52) and all the symbols of authority: Pharaoh’s signet ring, a gold chain for his neck, fine linen clothes, a chariot behind the Pharaoh, a wife and a new name, Zaphenath-paneah.

Joseph’s new name meant, “The God Speaks and He Lives,” a name appropriate to this story. By ordering careful agricultural practices so as to preserve the grain harvests of Egypt during the seven abundant years, he was able to store grain against the coming famine. Just as he had said, the seven years of famine came severely and spread all over the Middle East. Because of his foresight, Egypt had grain enough for all. The last verse of chapter 41 notes that “the entire world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain.”

Genesis 42:1-4 Off to Egypt

¹When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you keep looking at one another? ²I 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.” ³So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him.

Joseph’s father, Jacob, heard (literally in the Hebrew, “he saw ...”) that there was grain in Egypt, so he told ten of his

remaining sons, “Why do you keep looking at one another?”

It’s a question fathers have asked sons for generations: “Why are you just standing there? Do something, even if it’s wrong.” He sent his sons on an errand much more dangerous than a trip to the supermarket: they were to leave the southern part of Israel to go to Egypt and there try to buy grain. “So that we may live and not die,” the father said to his sons, words that became a refrain (43:8, 47:19), guiding choices as they sought to choose life over death.

Benjamin, the youngest, remained behind so that no harm would come to him. Once burned is twice careful—Jacob would not be so careless with another precious son of Rachel’s. But there is more than a hint of foreshadowing in this mention of Benjamin.

Genesis 42:6-9, 15, 18-20 The Test, Part A

⁶Now 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. ⁷When 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.” ⁸Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹Joseph 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!” ... ¹⁵Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ... ¹⁸On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹if 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, ²⁰and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die.” And they agreed to do so.

Ancient stories within Hebrew tradition help flesh out the sparse biblical narrative, and many of the oldest stories are collected in supplemental volumes called Rabbah. Rabbis explained that, since Joseph hoped to be reunited with his family, he put guards at all the gates with a list of his brothers' names. Thus he would know when they entered the city. Other rabbis suggested he left instructions with the guards to ask everyone who entered the land to give the name of his or her father and grandfather. In this manner, Joseph knew when his brothers were on their way to him. [*Genesis Rabbah* 91.4-6]

Just as in his dream from many years earlier, Joseph's brothers bowed down to him when they approached him. Joseph recognized them, but they did not know him. Joseph was harsh (42:30), accused them of being spies and threw them into prison for three days. Then he explained to them the rule of the test: All the brothers must work together to save one, and one must sacrifice for all.

At this point, Joseph's motive is unclear: revenge, cruelty, justice or something else? Judah reminded the other brothers that he told them so (43:33), but Genesis 37 does not remember his actions as so selfless.

Genesis 42:26-27, 29, 36-38

Back in Canaan

²⁶They loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed. ²⁷When 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. ... ²⁹When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had

happened to them. ... ³⁶And 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!” ³⁷Then 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.” ³⁸But 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.”

Jacob's sons explained the rules of the test to him and became upset when they discovered that their food money was returned in the sacks of grain. “They lost heart” (42:28), fearful that the angry Egyptian would accuse them of being thieves. This test recreated their original crime, only this time they must protect a son of Rachel by taking him, not selling him, to Egypt. Sad to say, Jacob seemed ready to let Simeon languish in prison in order to protect Benjamin against the angry Egyptian lord.

Genesis 43:1-2, 11-14, 26-30

Joseph Meets Benjamin

¹Now the famine was severe in the land. ²And 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.” ... ¹¹Then 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. ¹²Take 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. ¹³Take your brother also, and be on your way again to the man; ¹⁴may 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." ... ²⁶When Joseph came home, they brought him the present that they had carried into the house, and bowed to the ground before him. ²⁷He inquired about their welfare, and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" ²⁸They said, "Your servant our father is well; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and did obeisance. ²⁹Then 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!" ³⁰With 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.

The famine continued, forcing Jacob to finally agree to send Benjamin to Egypt. He also sent rich gifts in an attempt to placate him. Jacob had sent gifts before to assuage someone's anger, in Genesis 33.

The brothers returned to Egypt, Joseph saw Benjamin and wept again (43:30), for the second time in this story. Still in disguise, he gave his brothers a big banquet, seating them in their birth order, a fact which deeply troubled them.

Genesis 44:1-5, 10-11 **The Test, Part B**

¹Then 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. ²Put 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. ³As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. ⁴When 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? ⁵Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.' ... ¹⁰He 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." ¹¹Then each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack.

Benjamin, who was given five times as much food at the banquet as the others, was framed by Joseph. The brothers departed for home, not knowing the money had been covertly returned to their sacks and that Joseph's silver cup had been planted in Benjamin's sack. Egyptian guards pursued them and sprung the trap. Joseph instructed his guards to ask the brothers the key question of the entire narrative, the question he had been waiting years to ask them: "Why have you returned evil for good?" The scene echoes Rachel's theft of the family gods in Genesis 31.

Joseph's steward informed them of the "theft" and decreed that the thief must die. Overconfident of their innocence, the brothers agreed and offered to become Egyptian slaves (again, foreshadowing Israel's future) if one of them had taken the cup. The goblet was found in Benjamin's sack, of course, and the brothers tore their clothes in grief. They returned to the harsh Egyptian lord, expecting slavery and death.

In a remarkable and ardent speech (44:18-34), Judah pled for Benjamin's release, perhaps the most heartfelt in the entire story of Joseph. Judah offered his own life in place of his younger brother, in order that their father might not die with grief. Here the karma of the crime is undone, and the brothers' repentance is shown to be genuine: one brother offers his life for another.

Genesis 45:1, 4-8, 25-28 God Sent Me Here

¹Then 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. ... ⁴Then 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. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For 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. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So 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. ... ²⁵So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. ²⁶And 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. ²⁷But 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. ²⁸Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."

Judah's speech broke Joseph's self-control. He sent away his servants so that he could reveal himself to his brothers, but he cried so loudly that the Egyptians heard him anyway. As he revealed his identity, Joseph affirmed two truths: God sent him ahead to preserve life (45:6); and his family must come and live in Goshen to survive the famine that would rage another five years. God had been working behind the scenes to change the evil actions of Joseph's brothers into

a path of salvation for the entire family. Joseph cried again and kissed his brothers, beginning with Benjamin.

Thus is the beginning of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers. He made his brothers pay for their earlier cruelty with his own vindictive charade. Yet in the process, he came to believe they had indeed changed and repented. The plan has cost him time with his father, however, as the final part of the Joseph narrative will show.

Joseph credited God for sending him to Egypt, for three times he said, "God sent me" (45:5,7,8). They meant it for evil, but God changed the evil into good.

Working with and in Spite of Bad Decisions

During the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII greeted a Jewish delegation from New York in Hebrew with the words, "I am Joseph, your brother." Since Pope John's name—Giuseppe (Roncalli)—is actually the Italian equivalent of "Joseph," his quotation of these simple words from the book of Genesis (Gen 45:3-4) took on special meaning.

With one humbly spoken sentence, Pope John succeeded in establishing a familial bond with the members of the Jewish delegation. With one sentence, he built a bridge over years of mistrust and enmity. His words helped establish an atmosphere that opened the door to a new relationship between Catholic Christians and Jews.

The well-known Christian author Frederick Buechner has said that our Bible amazes him on two levels. First, Buechner says he is struck by the utter honesty of scripture. Even the greatest heroes are depicted with all of their great strengths as well as their most serious flaws.

Even more significant to Buechner is a motif he discovered as he worked his way through the stories of scripture: with this God called Yahweh, the terrible things were never the last things. God always seemed to have something else God was able to do. In fact, the image of an ingenious alchemist is the one that came to Buechner.

Alchemists, of course, were ancient “scientists” who tried to manipulate lead and transmute it into gold. Repeatedly throughout scripture, when people were at the absolute end of their ropes, this Alchemist God had a way of doing something even with the worst that human beings had done, bring life from death and from despair bring redemption.

God does not dictate our actions or decisions. We are not at in the hands of fate or kismet. Each person is a free moral agent, free to act as he or she wills. Human freedom, however, does not mean that God is not at work in the world in ways we humans cannot understand. However difficult it is to understand, God’s ways are not our ways, and God is at work in the world and in our lives using mysterious methods and esoteric modes.

Joseph’s story is a reminder that God takes horrible decisions people make—like selling a brother in slavery—and uses them to accomplish great things. God’s specialty is taking evil and transmuting it into good—as God did on the cross of Christ.

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Journeying Toward Reconciliation

Genesis 46-50

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

Introduction

A few years ago while preaching in a series of revival services in a church in the beautiful Appalachian Mountains, I met a gentleman whose surname was Hatfield. Because I had grown up hearing folkloric stories about the Hatfields and McCoys, I felt compelled to ask him if he happened to be related to the infamous Hatfield family from West Virginia.

To my surprise, he answered with an enthusiastic yes. In fact, he was preparing to attend a reunion of the two families scheduled for eastern Kentucky.

“A reunion!” I exclaimed. And he updated me on the “reconciliation” of these two families previously renowned for their lethal feuding. Throughout the week during my occasional conversations with Mr. Hatfield, he continued to tell stories about the legacy of the historic feud.

In the 1860s the Hatfields of West Virginia and the McCoys of Kentucky became embroiled in one of our nation’s most bitter and deadly feuds. Historians differ on the original source of the feud, but the conflict was fueled by disputes

related to the war, logging rights, livestock theft and an interfamily romance. From the 1860s to around 1900, at least 12 family members were killed.

In the early 1900s the feud gradually lost its impetus and over time, some members of the two families reconciled and others even developed business partnerships.

In recent years, members of both the Hatfield and McCoy families have gathered annually for a Hatfield and McCoy reunion. Rather than fight, the families feast together and celebrate by competing in various fun activities, telling stories about their ancestry and even raising money for charitable causes.

For the Hatfields and McCoys, reconciliation did not come quickly, but progressively, as family members put the past behind them and the future before them.

The Biblical Witness

The precedents of the nation of Israel had their own share of infighting. Life among the patriarchs was often characterized by dysfunctional family relationships and devious behavior.

Lot parted ways with his uncle Abraham over a real estate disagreement. Abraham and Sarah dismissed Hagar, Sarah's servant and surrogate wife to Abraham. Sarah feared Ishmael, Hagar's son, might get some of the inheritance of her son, Isaac. Ongoing conflict arose between Jacob and Esau when their birthright was traded during childhood and their order of blessing exchanged for a lifetime.

And this familial discord continued when Jacob, through diligent and honest labor, earned a wife but learned after the veil was lifted that he had been deceived by his father-in-law, Laban. So Jacob earned a second wife, and the feverish competition for favor between the two wives was passed along to their offspring.

Therefore, when Jacob's favored son, Joseph, was sold into Egyptian slavery, Jacob slid under a cloud of depression and the other sons sustained the family estate. Years passed; when the famine came and the brothers journeyed to Egypt to barter for supplies and commodities, they did not know that they were actually setting out on a journey of reconciliation.

Where friendships or family relationships have been fragmented because of personal indiscretion, broken communication, family dysfunction or even deviant behavior, it is God's will that human beings work toward reconciliation and restoration.

Genesis 46:1-4, 6b Do Not Be Afraid

¹When 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. ²God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am." ³Then 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. ⁴I 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. ...^{6b}and they came into Egypt, Jacob and all his offspring with him.

Elevated anxiety seems to be a natural component of any journey, and the journey toward reconciliation is no exception.

When Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to scout out the rumored supply of commodities, little did he know that his sons would discover that their long lost brother was not only alive but employed in the upper echelon of Egypt's administration as the Prime Minister of Distribution. When the sons of Israel returned to Jacob with the far-fetched story, Jacob doubted its accuracy.

Nonetheless, Jacob, weary and aging, embarked on a journey to Egypt to escape the famine and to investigate the alleged reports about his son, Joseph. At the onset of the journey, Jacob worshiped God by offering sacrifices. Shortly thereafter, while en route to Egypt, Jacob experienced a series of dreams or night visions where the voice of God alleviated his fears and brought him assurance. These theophanies convinced Jacob that he would have a safe and blessed journey.

Jacob was well acquainted with the promise of blessing given by God to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, and to his father, Isaac. But because the concept of god in the ancient world evoked perceptions of territorial boundaries for the divine, Jacob probably would have understood the promise of blessing as a promise connected to the land. For Jacob, this meant that to leave his land was to forsake the promise and to leave his God behind. This perception would have been a primary source of Jacob's fear.

Often when we confront our fears, we experience a broader understanding of life and of God. To Jacob's great surprise, in these God-given visions, God instructed Jacob not to fear because "I will make of you a great nation there," in

Egypt (v 3). In other words, the promise was still in effect. And secondly in these visions, God promised, "I myself will go down with you to Egypt" (v 4). This must have been a welcomed revelation to Jacob, the news that God would indeed journey with him into Egypt.

God also validated the sons' accounts of their encounter with the long-lost Joseph as God told Jacob that "Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes," indicating that Joseph would be present at the time of Jacob's death (v 4).

So the caravan, with Jacob's entire family, forged on toward Egypt.

Genesis 46:29-34 From Aliens to Shepherds

²⁹Joseph 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. ³⁰Israel said to Joseph, "I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive." ³¹Joseph 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. ³²The men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have.' ³³When Pharaoh calls you, and says, 'What is your occupation?' ³⁴you 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."

When Jacob's entourage was within an appropriate distance of Egypt, probably near Goshen, Jacob dispatched

Judah to go ahead of the group to announce their arrival to Joseph. Rather than awaiting their arrival, Joseph departed for Goshen to intercept his family, visit with his father and provide an orientation for their encounter with Pharaoh.

Jacob's gloom and depression, characterized by countless nights of tears and the innumerable hours of worry since the mysterious disappearance of the young Joseph, seem to have been eradicated by this emotional reunion as Jacob and Joseph embraced and wept for an extended period of time. Then Joseph began to instruct his brothers on the protocol of their upcoming meeting with Pharaoh.

Joseph prompted his brothers with a strategy that would enable them to gain Pharaoh's approval to settle in this land called Goshen. They were to highlight their vocation as shepherds and to detail their experience tending livestock so that they would receive Pharaoh's consent for them to make Goshen their new home.

They entered Egypt as aliens but would immediately find a new home in Goshen and resume their previous vocation as shepherds.

Genesis 47:5-6

The Best Part of the Land

⁵Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you. ⁶The 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."

Without question, mere shepherds entering Egypt to seek

refuge from the severe famine would not have received such preference. But the sons of Jacob would not be homeless or unemployed for long. Obviously, Jacob and his sons were shown partiality because of Joseph's important position in the administration of the Egyptian empire.

Their new home was Goshen, a prime parcel of Egyptian real estate. Goshen is described as "the best part of the land" and was historically "the land of Rameses" (47:11). Goshen was renowned for being fertile territory. But there were other advantages to living in Goshen as well.

This region was on the Egyptian border, near the mouth of the Nile River and nearest to Palestine. Joseph may have realized that, in the event of a conflict, this would have been the most convenient escape route for his family to their homeland. Also, by keeping the family of Israel in tact in Goshen, Jacob and his sons maintained a polite segregation from the Egyptian populace, minimizing the potential for racial conflict. However, this segregation probably contributed to a more intense servitude under a future Pharaoh years later, after the benevolent administration of Joseph had long been forgotten.

Jacob and his sons were not only given a prime geographic locale, but the tasks for the members of Israel's family were assigned according to their capability and experience. They would be responsible for overseeing Pharaoh's stockyards. Surely there were many tasks considered more menial. The writer of Genesis intended to connote that God was looking out for the best interest of Jacob's family, just as Jacob's dreams had indicated.

Genesis 47:13-20

Politics and Provision

¹³Now 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. ¹⁴Joseph 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. ¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶And Joseph answered, "Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone." ¹⁷So 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. ¹⁸When 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. ¹⁹Shall 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." ²⁰So 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.

During his days in prison, Joseph had been called upon to interpret the unusual dreams of Pharaoh, the dreams that forewarned that the seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine (41:29-30). Now the years of famine have arrived. The land had not born fruit and the people were becoming desperate.

The famine became so severe and the land so destitute that the people came to Joseph at various intervals of their desperation, first bringing all their money, then bringing all their livestock, then all their land and finally offering their lives in servitude in exchange for life-sustaining food.

Some theologians and historians attribute heroic status to Joseph for his shrewd administration of resources, in essence establishing a feudal system in Egypt that would function there for years to come. Without Joseph's leadership, they insist, thousands would have starved, including Joseph's own family.

Other theologians and historians scrutinize Joseph's provision of food for the population at such a high cost. They note that Joseph brought the profits into Pharaoh's treasury (47:14), increasing the wealth of the empire. To extract wealth from a helpless populace to enlarge the coffers of the empire is not representative of the values of the God of Israel but symptomatic of materialistic empire building.

Although it is probable that the methods Joseph employed were consistent with common economic and political practice in Egypt, this same system would become severely brutal for Joseph's descendants years later. Perhaps this is a reminder that there is an ethical tension for anyone who lives out their vocation between the secure promises of God on the one hand and security proffered by the empire on the other.

Genesis 47:27-31 **A Promise**

²⁷Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly. ²⁸Jacob lived in the

land of Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life were one hundred forty-seven years.

²⁹When 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. ³⁰When 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." ³¹And he said, "Swear to me"; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed.

After Jacob's family settled in Goshen, the famine ran its course, and the family of Israel began to regain financial stability and increase their census prolifically (v 27). This fulfilled God's affirmation in Jacob's earlier visions that the promise of blessing given to the patriarchs, a blessing extending to succeeding generations, would indeed follow Israel into this foreign land.

Jacob received the promise from his ancestors and passed it along to his descendants. Despite his frail health upon traveling to Egypt, Jacob lived to be one hundred forty-seven, including the final seventeen additional years in Goshen. When Jacob perceived that the day of his death was approaching, he conveyed his burial wishes to Joseph. Jacob made Joseph promise to take him to the burial place of his ancestors. This fulfilled the other component of the promise Jacob received from God in the dreams at the onset of his journey to Egypt, a promise that "I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again" (46:4).

Genesis 48:3-5, 11-14, 18-19 **Blessing and Surprise**

³And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, ⁴and 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.' ⁵Therefore 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. ...¹¹Israel said to Joseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." ¹²Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. ¹³Joseph 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. ¹⁴But 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.... ¹⁸Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." ¹⁹But 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."

Prior to Jacob's death, at Jacob's request, Joseph presented his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, to Jacob for the customary blessing. Jacob, however, defied tradition and crossed his hands, offering a blessing to each, but a greater blessing to the younger son. When Joseph interrupted Jacob to protest, Jacob listened patiently but refused to correct the seeming faux pas.

Perhaps Jacob remembered his own contentious experience with Esau. Maybe he was cognizant that his father,

Isaac, received a greater blessing than Isaac's elder brother, Ishmael. And surely Jacob was conscious of his own personal favor toward Joseph and Benjamin over all of his other sons. Or perhaps, it was divine providence that led Jacob intuitively to offer the richer blessing to Ephraim.

Jacob declared to Joseph that both sons would become a nation, but that the younger would be greater and his offspring would become a multitude of nations (48:19). The blessings of God take surprising turns at the major intersections of life.

Genesis 49:33-50:1, 50:4-7a, 14-21, 24 God Will Come to You

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

¹Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him... ⁴When 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: ⁵My 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." ⁶Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do." ^{7a}So Joseph went up to bury his father... ¹⁴After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone with him to bury his father. ¹⁵Realizing 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?" ¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before

he died, ¹⁷'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. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even 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. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them... ²⁴Then 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."

At the death of Jacob, Pharaoh granted Joseph permission to take personal time off and make the sojourn to bury his father. But the absence of Jacob created a new and frightful possibility for Joseph's brothers.

Had Joseph been hospitable and generous toward them only because of Joseph's loyalty to Jacob? What would become of them now? Would the brothers of Joseph have responded as favorably to Joseph had Joseph not been in a position of power and had they not been in need of commodities?

Reconciliation can be a messy business. As the brothers guessed at Joseph's future actions, they also revisited their past manipulative actions toward Joseph. Painful memories were resurrected. Motives were questioned. Contingencies were plotted. To be on the safe side, the brothers fabricated a story about Jacob's final instructions in order to protect themselves should Joseph seek revenge on them after Jacob's death.

As the brothers appealed to Joseph to forgive their misdeeds from the past, they had an emotional moment of rededicating their alliance into the future. The brothers promised to continue their faithful service under Joseph's administration. And Joseph alleviated their fears, pointing out that God had transformed their harmful deed into a good deed that resulted in the preservation of an entire nation (50:20).

The reunification of Jacob's family upon the occasion of their entry into Egypt evolved into the solidification of the family during the years in Goshen. Old rivalries faded and new alliances were forged. The passing of time, a belief in God's sovereign purpose and witnessing the promised blessing in action allowed Joseph to put the past behind him and the future, his future and future of his people, before him.

Embracing the Possibility of Reconciliation

This segment of the patriarchal narrative reflects the overarching scriptural theme that God initiates and urges reconciliation on both the divine and human levels. Reconciliation is dually interpersonal and intrapersonal; that is, it occurs both within and between individuals.

The story of the reunification of Jacob and his sons with Joseph teaches us many lessons about reconciliation.

First, reconciliation is a journey, not an event. Deciding to reconcile or initiating the process of reconciliation may be a definite event, but the process of reconciliation is ongoing as the misdeeds of the past are confessed, intentions for unity are expressed and new bridges of trust are built.

Second, human failure does not disqualify individuals from the possibility of reconciliation. From earlier passages in the Genesis narrative, we are reminded that in their adolescence Joseph's brothers had actually conspired to kill him, but Judah came to Joseph's defense, and the brothers settled for selling Joseph into slavery. It is with these manipulative brothers that Joseph is reconciled.

Third, not all parties invest themselves equally in the process of reconciliation. This is particularly true of Joseph and his brothers. Though providential circumstances may have provided the opportunity and occasion for reconciliation, it is obvious in the biblical narrative that the brothers do not bring equal energy and commitment to the process.

Fourth, reconciliation does not erase the past; it builds on it. Reconciliation does not roll back the clock and undo the hurt of past misdeeds. Rather, reconciliation helps us to learn from our mistakes, to heal, to rebuild trust and to embrace the future with wiser motives and a stronger faith.

Thousands of years after Jacob's journey from Canaan to Egypt, estranged human beings may still embark on a journey toward reconciliation. Reconciliation can occur between estranged spouses, rivaling siblings, alienated colleagues or quarreling friends. Reconciliation can occur across racial boundaries, supersede economic categories and transcend religious dogmas.

Years after the passing of Joseph, yet another descendant of Israel launched the ultimate ministry of reconciliation: "All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that

is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor 5:18-19).

How does the journey toward reconciliation begin? Some historians report that the intensity of the feud between the Hatfields and McCoys diminished somewhat when one of the central figures, Anderson “Devil Anse” Hatfield, converted to Christianity and was baptized. To commit one’s life to Christ may be the first step toward genuine reconciliation. And a willingness to begin a journey toward reconciliation with others may be the second.

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