

Genesis Devotionals-Today in the Word

Today in the Word

Devotionals on Genesis

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Genesis 1:14-25

Carl Linné, better known as Carolus Linnaeus, loved botany and spent a great deal of his time in medical school studying it. In 1735, he published *Systema Naturae*, a system for classifying living things by using two Latin names--for example, humanity is "homo sapiens." This work continues to influence modern botanists, especially in their naming methods and use of hierarchical classification.

Linnaeus was motivated by a belief in the orderliness of God's world. He believed that creation would be like a fingerprint, revealing key aspects of the character of the Creator. In making a classification system, he was only discovering an order that was already there.

Today's Scripture reading confirms that God did indeed build a wise order or pattern into His world. On days four through six, we see the creation of the sun, moon, and stars, as well as of fish, birds (the term includes insects), and land animals.

One evidence of God's order in creation is that He made living things in "kinds" (v. 25), blessing them to be fruitful and reproduce (v. 22). He created animal species distinct from one another--a view quite different from that of conventional evolutionary theory. Nonetheless, an elaboration of the Moody doctrinal statement affirms: "God created everything 'after its kind' which excludes any position that allows for any evolutionary process between kinds."

More order is found in the purposes assigned to the sun, moon, and stars. They are to separate day from night, and to mark seasons and years (v. 14). Indeed, to this day we keep time according to solar and lunar calendars. These purposes may sound ordinary, but they contrasted strongly with how other Near Eastern cultures worshiped these heavenly bodies (cf. Rom. 1:25).

APPLY THE WORD Psalm 136 begins, "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His love endures forever." As we read on, we see that the first items on the psalmist's "thankfulness list" are from creation, especially in terms of what those reveal about God's wisdom and power. Today, why not write your own psalm of gratitude? Give thanks to the Lord for His goodness and love to you! In imitation of Psalm 136, begin with praise and worship based in the created world.

Genesis 1:26-27

TODAY IN THE WORD - James Watson and Francis Crick are credited with discovering the double-helix shape of the human DNA molecule.

The two scientists faced several barriers, including that they were supposed to be researching other things, and that Crick was still working on his Ph.D. But they also benefited from other people's research, in particular an x-ray taken by another scientist which Watson was shown without her knowledge. The two built several models of DNA before finding the right combination, and won the Nobel Prize in 1962.

DNA is at the heart of human genetics. Scientists have been working for many years to peer into the secrets of humanity's creation, and the more they discover, the better a Designer God turns out to be!

It all begins in today's reading, with the creation of Adam and Eve: God said, "Let us make man in our image," a formal pronouncement that signals the importance of the event (Ge 1: 26; cf. Gen. 5:1-2). ("Man" here includes woman, as verse two makes clear.)

We are the zenith of creation. This is not an egotistical statement, but simply what the narrative points to. Genesis 1 traces its way up the ladder from geographical features (land, sea) to plant life, then to animal life, and now finally to humanity, who is assigned rulership over the earth (Ge 1:26). Although we were created on the same day as the animals, this does not imply that we evolved from them. To quote from the previously mentioned Moody doctrinal statement: "The first human beings were a special and unique creation by God as contrasted to being derived from any pre-existing life forms."

Unlike the animals, we are made in the "image of God" (Ge 1:27). One commentator explains: "Being in God's image means that humans share, though imperfectly and finitely, in God's nature, that is, in His communicable attributes (life, personality, truth, wisdom, love, holiness, justice), and so have the capacity for spiritual fellowship with Him."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Since every human being on this planet has been created in the image of God, that makes every human life uniquely valuable! In light of this, here are several open-ended questions for you to reflect on today: Do you look for the image of God in people? Do you see their God-given value? What would change if you treated everyone you met based on this biblical truth? What you do with your answers to these questions is between you and God.

Genesis 1:29-31

My skin is too dark," one woman moans. Another whines, "I'm so pale." A man complains, "I'm too tall for this seat!" Another whispers, "I wish I was just a bit taller."

Daily in our culture, men, women, and children are bombarded with messages that we're too fat, too thin, too tall, too short, too dark, too light. In order to sell us products to fix whatever is "wrong" with us, advertisers have capitalized off the oldest trick in the book: they've imitated the hiss of the enemy in the Garden of Eden!

In Genesis 3, the serpent suggests to Eve that things could be a little better for her if she just ate the fruit of the tree. Doubting the word of God, Eve took the bait. Eyes opened, Adam and Eve experienced shame for the first time. Shame is that voice that hisses that there's something wrong with us, that we're not quite acceptable the way we are. Our legs are shaped wrong, our teeth are too yellow, our hair is too gray, and our skin is too loose.

God's Word liberates us from this kind of shame, lies, and deception. Over and over in Genesis 1, God announces that His creation is good (vv. 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It wasn't a qualified good—that creation was only good on sunny days or when the land was particularly fruitful. It wasn't just good when men's muscles were firm and women's skin was flawless. No, God looked over all that He had made and without reservation or qualification called it good.

To cling to the truth that God's creation—children and women and men—have been created good, by God, is entirely countercultural today. This is truth worth holding on to tightly!

When Jesus was confronted by Satan and tempted to follow a lie, He responded with the truth of God's Word (see Matthew 4). When you hear the lie of the Enemy declaring, "You're just not good enough," remember that lies are silenced by truth. This week, speak aloud the truth of Scripture: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

Genesis 1:26-27

Here's a one-question Bible quiz for you to think about on this first Sunday of the new year. In what way was the creation of Adam and Eve distinct from all the rest of God's creative work?

The answer is in Genesis 1:26-27, the first verses of the Bible that mention human beings. God made Adam and Eve 'in His image.' Unlike any other part of creation, we possess a spirit that reflects God's essence as spirit. He has put within us a mind, will, and emotions that are an image of these perfections in His nature.

This may sound like we're reviewing our theological ABC's, and in a sense we are. But one reason it's important to keep touching base with the basics is that the basics of Christian truth are being challenged and discarded all around us. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Bible's teaching about the origin of human life.

The Scripture is clear. We are the product of God's creative hand, not simply the highest order on the evolutionary ladder. What's more, the text says God gave humankind a charge to 'subdue' and 'rule' over the rest of creation, which was given to us for our management and enjoyment (vv. 28-30).

This truth also answers the charge of those who say it is arrogant and wrong for us to assume that human life has any more innate value than, say, the birds or the whales (vv. 28-31).

So our convictions about human origins are critical to our view of life. This also applies to our view of human sexuality, another explosive topic today. Bible-believing Christians aren't the only people intensely interested in theology on this subject. Many of those who try to deny the Bible's teaching on sexuality and marriage go to great lengths to argue that Scripture makes allowance for homosexual unions. Genesis 1:18-25 clearly demonstrates that God designed marriage to be a union between a man and a woman.

The social and political pressure to accept such distorted ideas as simply another 'alternative' is tremendous and we're far from seeing the end of this debate.

Once again, it is refreshing to open God's Word and read about His wonderful creative power and purpose that result in blessing to those who believe and obey Him.

APPLY THE WORD It has been said that God created humankind in His image...and humankind has been trying to return the favor ever since. It's true that many people want to create a god in their image an easy-going, anything-goes deity who doesn't really require anything of us. But as believers, our calling is to bow before the God of Scripture. Today, let's praise God for His holy character, His great love for us, and His Word, which tells us the truth about ourselves and our world.

Genesis 1:31

If you've seen a hippopotamus at the zoo, you may have wondered why it seemed to be bleeding. In fact, what appears to be blood is actually sweat colored by a thick reddish-orange pigment. This special sweat functions as a natural sunscreen, helps regulate body temperature, and works as an antibiotic, fighting bacteria and helping hippos recover more quickly from wounds. God's creation is endlessly surprising and delightful! Our theme throughout this year will be A Life of Purpose: Fullness and Freedom in Christ. We're starting in Genesis, the "book of beginnings,"—in order to fulfill our purpose, we must know our origin. To understand how we end, we must know how we began. In fact, God Himself proclaimed, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Rev. 22:13).

We've organized this month's study around characters in Genesis for two main reasons. First, we'll be able to see day-by-day how these people lived lives of purpose, and second, we'll be able to see how God's purposes for history and individual people work out in concrete ways. Major themes along the way include purposes and beginnings, sovereignty, faith, obedience, promises and covenants, sin, and salvation.

God's creation of the world is the first answer to our question of purpose. This key event and doctrine has been obscured in modern times by polarizing debates. In the middle of the dispute over how to interpret this first chapter of the Bible, some people forget the bottom line. What biblical truths must we understand and affirm? The central one is that God created. The existence of the universe is not the result of merely naturalistic occurrences or processes. This means we'll never find our ultimate purpose in creation, wonderful as it may be. We must look beyond it to the Creator Himself.

So what do we learn about God in this chapter? He's creative, orderly, and powerful. He fashioned things for both usefulness and beauty. Our world was made to sustain and reproduce life—plants, animals, and human beings. All that exists, exists because of God.

APPLY THE WORD We are reading about God's work of creation, and part of this includes the truth that we are made in His image. To reflect this, you could exercise your creativity, perhaps an artistic response to one or more of the six days of creation. You might write a poem, compose a song, paint a watercolor, design and illustrate a children's book, or put together a collage of photos and images cut out from magazines. "He founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding" (Jer. 51:15).

Genesis 1:1-31

TODAY IN THE WORD - In the early 1600s, pioneering astronomer Johannes Kepler published his three laws of planetary motion and a textbook supporting the Copernican model of the solar system. He was motivated by a fascination with God's creation, writing, "I am devoting my effort . . . for the glory of God, who wants to be recognized from the Book of Nature." He even saw the universe (as understood at that time) as a reflection of the Trinity, with the sun at the center representing God the Father, the outer stars representing Christ, and the space in between the Holy Spirit.

Wonder at God's creation has energized many a believer! Today we start to explore biblical principles and truths related to godly leisure, and we begin at the beginning. In Genesis 1, God brought substance from nothingness, order from chaos, and fruitfulness from barrenness. One of the repeating narrative patterns is the declaration "good," climaxing in the summary that it was all "very good" (Ge 1:31). "Very good" is a complete assessment, including both practical and aesthetic dimensions of creation. The trees in Eden, for example, were both "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (Gen. 2:9).

That God created a world filled with beauty and pleasure teaches us that He values these things. Did we really need color? Was He obligated to make lilies, giraffes, blueberries, ladybugs, rainbow trout, or spruce trees? Not at all. He did it in His good pleasure, for our thankful enjoyment. Genesis 1:28-30 are sometimes called the "creation mandate," but "mandate" sounds too cold. "Creation gift" better captures how God intended us to flourish and to enjoy life in His world.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - Why not respond today to God's "very good" work of creation? Do something that shows thankfulness for the beautiful world He's made.

Genesis 2:19-23

TODAY IN THE WORD - Modern American composer Charles Ives dreamed of creating a massive, open-air work of music that would reflect the grandeur of creation. He imagined two orchestras playing from neighboring mountaintops, with choirs singing counterpoint from the valley between. He said it would be an attempt “to paint the creation, the mysterious beginnings of all things, known through God to man,” and he sketched out pieces in which the sky would be represented by one group of instruments and the earth by another. The two groups would play simultaneously to illustrate the harmony of nature. Though Ives died with his Universe Symphony unfinished, he inspired another composer, Johnny Reinhard, to complete it, and it was finally performed in 1996, though in a concert hall.

Human creativity is often inspired by God’s creativity--creativity is part of His image in us. Creativity is the first of His qualities that we see in action, and it certainly dominates the context of today’s verse. Creativity is also at the core of the first specific task or responsibility God gave to Adam: naming the animals. God brought the animals to him “to see what he would name them” (v. 19). It’s instructive that Adam’s first act of stewardship over creation was imaginative--how much fun he must have had pondering the snail, the ostrich, and the hippopotamus!

Another purpose was to look for a suitable partner for Adam, but none could be found in the animal kingdom. So God made Eve from one of the man’s ribs, and Adam had one more name to give. For the first time we hear what it is--“woman”--and learn the reason--because “she was taken out of man” (v. 23). As Adam obediently exercised his linguistic creativity to name the animals and Eve, He reflected the glory of his Creator. After all, God had done a lot of naming or “calling” of things during His work of creation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY - If you’d like to find out more about the “image of God,” we recommend a short article entitled, “Good Question: Reflected Glory,” by theologian J. I. Packer, from Christianity Today, December 2003. It is available online at this link: [Click here](#). Packer considers the evidence from Genesis, including Creation and the Fall, and then moves to the New Testament to ask how Christ’s redemption has changed our present and future in this regard.

Genesis 2:8-17; 3:1-7, 21-24

TODAY IN THE WORD - Robert Frost’s famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” tells the story of a man making a choice between two roads. The final lines speak to the consequences of taking one road over the other.

**I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.**

Genesis 2 speaks of the choice between two trees, and here, as in the poem, we see the haunting consequences of a single choice. Adam and Eve were free to eat from any tree in the garden, except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Any tree, including the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:16-17). Both trees stood in the middle of the beautiful garden in which God had placed them (Genesis 2:9). Why, then, did they not choose to eat of the Tree of Life? Why did they choose the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

This tree promised to give them, according to the serpent, God-like knowledge. If they ate of it, they would become “like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). The appeal to pride was strong: Eve saw that it was “desirable for gaining wisdom,” as well as “good for food and pleasing to the eye” (Genesis 3:6). This tree would give them, she thought, nourishment, pleasure, power, greater understanding, and increased status. She and Adam could break their dependence on the Creator and become independent, knowing things for themselves without His input. They could be moral judges. They could be “free.”

Every day we, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, have a choice: to eat from the Tree of Life, or to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Will it be Christian fellowship or a Sunday morning sleep-in? Ongoing, inward fellowship with Jesus or ongoing, inward criticism of self and others?

Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11

TODAY IN THE WORD - Last year, a U.S. News & World Report cover story described how work has come to control American life. We work more hours per week than people in any other industrialized nation. Two-income families are “needed” to pursue the desired standard of suburban living. Cell phones, pagers, and e-mail have made escaping the office all but impossible. One third of us feel overwhelmed or even crushed by long hours and heavy workloads. Stress levels are high, especially in a shaky job market--people feel they have no choice but to give up their quality of life in exchange for continued employment.

In such a climate, the principle of Sabbath feels like a fresh breeze. When God finished His work of creation, He rested. What did this mean? That may be a theological puzzler, since we know God doesn't become tired or fatigued. What we do know is why He rested--because He finished His work. It was done, and done perfectly. For this reason, He “blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (Gen. 2:3).

In the Mosaic Law, God commanded the Sabbath day to be kept as part of Israel's covenant responsibilities. God made it holy--now the nation was to keep it holy. How? By imitating God and resting from work. Saturday was to be set apart from the ordinary business of life. In the cycle of consecration, if the people kept holy what God had made holy--that is, if they obeyed the Sabbath and other covenant obligations--then in turn God would make them holy. But He also promised severe punishment for individuals and the nation if they failed to honor the Sabbath (see Ex. 31:12-17; 2 Chr. 36:20-21).

Examine yourself before the Lord today concerning your own patterns and habits in the area of work and rest. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you about any changes you need to make in your attitudes or actions.

Genesis 2:4-25

TODAY IN THE WORD - In 1963, a Gallup poll found that 65 percent of Americans agreed that the Bible represents the actual Word of God. Last year, however, this belief reached a much lower point, as only 27 percent affirmed this statement. Another 20 percent said that the Bible is just a human book of fables and moral precepts.

On the other hand, almost half the population was willing to say the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and about one-quarter claimed to read it at least once a week. Virtually every household owns at least one Bible.

These poll results display confusion in Americans' attitudes toward Scripture. Our goal this month is to give you fresh perspective and passion in your interaction with God's Word. Though composed of 66 books, the Bible tells a single story, the story of God's mercy--“The Greatest Story Ever Told.” This contrasts with the feeling many may have that the Bible is a series of familiar but loosely connected stories told in Sunday School.

In general, we've chosen for our study well-known narrative passages arranged in chronological order through Scripture. Because God's Word reveals His glory, we might have chosen worship as our theme. But we've chosen God's mercy as our main theme because this characterizes His dealings with humanity.

Our story begins with creation, specifically with the creation of Adam and Eve. God was intimately involved in this process (cf. Ps. 139:13-16 - [Spurgeon's notes](#)). He didn't just speak them into being; instead, he formed Adam from the earth and Eve from one of Adam's ribs. He made them in His own image. Gently and powerfully, He breathed into them the breath of life.

In your personal prayer time this New Year's Day, praise God for the glory and unity of His sovereign plan as revealed in Scripture. Thank Him for His love and mercy to you personally, and for His desire for a close relationship with you. The Lord of the universe is also your Shepherd!

Genesis 2:4-24

TODAY IN THE WORD - Two schools of rabbinical thought dominated the debate over divorce in Jesus' day. The followers of Shammai believed the Law permitted it only in cases of marital unfaithfulness, while the followers of Hillel allowed it any time a husband was displeased. One day, they brought this thorny issue to Jesus.

Jesus came down on the side of Shammai, and His answer goes back to creation. "Haven't you read . . . ?" This inquiry must have tweaked their scholarly noses. He quoted some verses from Genesis, reminding them that God created humanity and He intended two people—one man and one woman—to be united together as one. "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:1-12).

Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is rooted in the creation narrative. This is the final lesson or principle we'll consider from Genesis: God's original design for marriage.

Genesis 2 focuses on and retells with more details God's creation of humanity. Adam was "formed"—the Hebrew verb suggests pottery—from the dust of the ground, and God gave him the "breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). He placed the first man in a special setting, Eden; gave him special tasks: gardening and giving names to the animals (Genesis 2:15, 20); and laid down a special rule: not eating from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2:17).

God observed that it was "not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18), for practical and emotional reasons (such as procreation and companionship). That no "suitable helper" (Genesis 2:20) could be found emphasizes the uniqueness of both man and woman. To remedy this lack, God made Eve out of one of Adam's ribs (Genesis 2:22)—so today's verse is quite literal!

Genesis 3

TODAY IN THE WORD - In a famous Greek legend, the entire world was a paradise. The first woman's name was Pandora. One day a messenger brought a large chest to her house and left it there. Pandora was consumed with curiosity—what was in that box? Her husband told her to leave it alone, but she opened it anyway. The king of the gods, however, had sent the box to punish humanity for wrongdoing. It was full of diseases, sorrows, vices, and crimes; when she opened it all these evils escaped out into the world. Thus did sorrow, pain, misery, and wickedness become part of human existence.

Though it's a legend, it has the themes right. Humanity did live in paradise once, and our fall from innocence is the great tragedy of human history. Satan entered Eden, the perfect world God had created, and tempted our first parents to disobedience (cf. John 8:44).

How did he do it? First the Devil quizzed Eve on her knowledge of God's Word. She didn't quite get it right, adding "don't touch" to God's prohibition. Was she unsure? Was she trying to "over-obey"? It's not clear in the text what Eve's motives were, but attacking her mistake, the "serpent" contradicted the punishment God had stated, proposing instead that a good result would come from eating the forbidden fruit. The issue was faith. Whose version of cause and effect, whose version of reality, was more believable—Satan's or God's? Eve made the wrong choice, followed her desires, and sinned against God. Then Adam, who had been "with her" but silent the entire time, joined her. In effect, he chose his relationship with Eve over his relationship with God.

A number of consequences followed. Sin and death entered the world (cf. note Romans 5:12). Adam and Eve knew shame and guilt and were separated from God. But in the midst of this, He showed them His mercy—by giving them clothing, by barring the way to the Tree of Life so they couldn't be both sinful and immortal, and by making a promise of future redemption (v. 15). God's purpose of unhindered fellowship with humanity had already been marred but not thwarted. Hope remained because He was still at work.

In light of the Fall narrative, spend extra time in prayer today for protection from temptation.

If you wish, go even further and make this a prayer focus throughout the day. To help yourself remember, you might carry with you all day a physical prompt, such as an apple or another piece of fruit. Having this in your pocket or on your desk can serve as a concrete reminder of how serious the question of obedience or disobedience truly is.

Genesis 3:1-10

TODAY IN THE WORD “Name and Shame” is a common but often controversial approach taken by governments or civil action groups to use embarrassment as a tool for reform. Sex offenders, money launderers, juvenile criminals, and e-mail spammers have all been subject to the penalty of seeing their crimes publicized on a list or “Wall of Shame.” The United Nations even adopted a resolution to name and shame nations or groups who used warfare tactics that harmed or killed children.

Criminals (and common sinners) almost always fail to consider shame as an immediate natural consequence of their actions. We become distracted, as Eve did, by the deceptive glamour of sin.

Someone playing devil's advocate might argue that the serpent didn't lie to Eve at all. According to Genesis 5:5, Adam lived a total of 930 years; neither he nor Eve faced execution. And the serpent's argument in verse 5 of today's reading echoes God's later statement in verse 22 almost verbatim. The key to the serpent's deception was not simply how much truth he included in his words. His lie came from goading Eve to set her eyes on what God had forbidden and by portraying God as a selfish overlord who was withholding the very best from mankind.

Scripture doesn't tell us how much time, if any, elapsed between the serpent's conversation with Eve and her decision to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the only tree in the middle of the garden that Eve mentioned). She ate the fruit because of its appeal and gave some to Adam, and immediately their shame prompted them to cover their nakedness. The wisdom Eve sought turned out to be guilt, shame, and fear. Instead of desiring to be with God, they were frightened by His presence and hid when they heard Him coming. The death that the serpent promised did indeed show up in the form of a swift and devastating separation from the Lord.

APPLY THE WORD As the saying goes, “A clear conscience is the world's most comfortable pillow.” The feelings of shame and guilt that accompany wrongdoing—and the sudden need to hide our sin from others—cause disunity, separation, and loneliness. Is there anything you are hiding from people you respect or from God? You will suffer under the weight of concealed sin. Confess it, and flee from the temptation to repeat it. Is anything this world offers worth the inevitable stress and loss of divine intimacy?

Genesis 3:1-24

TODAY IN THE WORD - The success of J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings series is phenomenal. To date, his books have sold millions of copies, and the three recent movies based on these books were huge box office successes. People love a good compelling story, and Tolkien's is one of the best. But even this masterpiece pales in comparison with the greatest story ever told—the story of God's redemption of fallen humanity and His utter defeat of evil through His Son Jesus Christ.

Genesis 1-2 tells us that in the beginning, God created the heavens, the earth, and all living creatures. The emphasis is on God, who alone created the universe and is qualified to rule over it.

Equally amazing, however, is that humanity is the climax of God's creation. God intended for men and women to worship Him and to cultivate the garden in which He had placed them. It's essential to grasp God's great purposes for humanity; otherwise it's hard to understand why God would go to such lengths to redeem humanity.

In Genesis 3, we see that God alone knows the difference between good and evil. God's prohibition concerning the tree in the garden was intended to protect Adam and Eve from knowledge that created beings could not bear. But the serpent tempted Eve with the very thing that had ruined him—the desire to be like God (Ge 3:5). The results were disastrous. Adam and Eve experienced shame (Ge 3:7), alienation from God (Ge 3:8), and deception (Ge 3:12). Eventually they would suffer death as well. But notice that the serpent was cursed (Ge 3:14), not Adam and Eve. Although there were consequences for their rebellion, Adam and Eve actually received a promise—that an offspring would crush the head of the serpent.

There are many distorted views of humanity around. Some claim that humans are just the result of random mutations. Others claim that a person ceases to exist at death. Yet the Bible presents a high view of humanity. Genesis 3 shows that God provides a way of redemption for humans, but not for the serpent.

In other words, God reveals that the climax of His creation, humanity, is worth saving. This doesn't mean that we somehow deserve this great gift; instead, it shows the depths of God's grace and mercy.

Genesis 3:1-24

TODAY IN THE WORD Too Late the Phalarope, by Alan Paton, depicts many ways in which relationships can be torn apart. The first one comes from the opening lines of the novel, which show how the walls that blockade communication tend to destroy us rather than protect: “Perhaps I could have saved him, with only a word, two words, out of my mouth. Perhaps I could have saved us all. But I never spoke them.”

Of all the lessons about the Fall of Man in Genesis 3, of which there are many, the one that speaks the loudest about Adam and Eve's relationship is what is not said. In fact, in all of Scripture there isn't a scratch of recorded dialogue between Adam and Eve. Adam made general statements and spoke to God, Eve did the same and conversed with the serpent—but the Bible doesn't mention a single conversation or even a quote directed from one to the other. Certainly they spoke to each other at some point during the many centuries they spent together, but the biblical evidence may suggest that their communication level was sorely lacking. Two observations show us that Adam probably told Eve about God's command against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. First, only Adam was present when God gave that commandment (Gen. 2:16-18). Second, Eve failed to recall the commandment as God stated it. She added to it, saying they were forbidden to touch it. She removed the word freely from her description of what they could eat. She changed the construction of how God had stated the penalty for sin. Through this failure to communicate as a couple, obedience lost its value in Eve's eyes. She succumbed to the serpent's lies and her desire for the one fruit she could not have.

Adam took the fruit without a word. Suddenly, the dynamic in Eden changed. God became an object of fear. Adam and Eve sought cover. The accusations flew. God's penalty fell on them and their heirs and all creation with them. Why? Because Adam and Eve functioned as two isolated individuals, each vulnerable to sin. Their lack of communication kept them apart from each other and from God.

APPLY THE WORD Even without a prior inclination to sin, Adam and Eve's love story went horribly wrong because they each operated as if they were alone. Communication in several key areas can help guard us from deception and temptation. It begins with knowing God's Word and uniting with Him in prayer. We can't expect to stay true to God without talking to Him. We also need other people we can trust—share the lessons you learn from the Word, voice your problems, and strengthen each other with wisdom.

Genesis 4

TODAY IN THE WORD - One of Aesop's lesser-known fables serves as a poignant introduction to the story of Cain and Abel. “A man committed a murder, and was pursued by the relations of the man whom he murdered. When he reached the river Nile, he saw a lion on its bank—and being fearfully afraid, climbed up a tree. He found a serpent in the upper branches of the tree, and again being greatly alarmed, he threw himself into the river, where a crocodile caught him and ate him. Thus the earth, the air, and the water alike refused shelter to a murderer.”

How did Cain, the first child of Adam and Eve, come to the fearful state of being a murderer? Cain and Abel both brought offerings to the Lord. It is not recorded that God had given any specific instructions about this, but no doubt Adam had taught his family about maintaining a good relationship with Him. Abel, being a shepherd, made an offering from the firstborn of his flock. Cain, being a farmer, brought some of his produce. God was pleased with Abel's sacrifice, but not with Cain's.

Why? The text does not give us a reason to think the difference lay in the content of the sacrifices. Rather, the problem was one of heart attitude and motivation. Abel's offering showed honor to God, true gratitude, and worship (cf. note Hebrews 11:4). Cain's offering was at the least careless—he didn't offer his firstfruits—and his response revealed an even deeper bitterness or anger. Despite a warning from the Lord about sin “crouching at your door,” he lured his brother out to a field and killed him (Ge 4:6).

God punished Cain professionally (farming would become difficult), personally (exiled from home and family to be a “restless wanderer”), and spiritually (“hidden” from God's presence). But He also showed him mercy. He had already been gracious in warning him against temptation and implicitly offering him a second chance to “do right” (v. 7). After the murder, He showed more mercy by putting some kind of mark on Cain to protect him from vengeance. He also showed mercy to Adam and Eve by giving them another son, Seth, after the loss of their son Abel.

Though Cain does not appear repentant in today's reading, God still showed him mercy.

How has He shown mercy to you? We were all sinners deserving death before Christ stepped in, so we should all be able to give many examples. Today, share with someone a personal testimony of a specific way in which God has been merciful to you. Share it with a nonbeliever—you might attract them to the Lord. Or share it with a believer—you can rejoice and glorify God together!

Genesis 4:1-15

TODAY IN THE WORD - A. W. Tozer describes the impact of the Fall on worship in a poetic and poignant way: "Man was made to worship God. God gave to man a harp and said, 'Here above all the creatures that I have made and created I have given you the largest harp. I put more strings on your instrument and I have given you a wider range than I have given to any other creature. You can worship Me in a manner that no other creature can.' And when he sinned, man took that instrument and threw it down in the mud and there it was lain for centuries, rusted, broken, unstrung."

When we consider the purpose for which we are created—to join in the eternal worship of the triune God—Genesis 4 is painful to read. This account can be hard to understand. It seems as if Abel and Cain brought similar offerings to the Lord and that the Lord accepted one offering and rejected the other, for apparently no good reason. In fact, people sometimes look toward this passage to claim that God is capricious. But a closer look at the text reveals the opposite.

First, notice that Genesis 4:3 tells us that Cain brought "some of the fruits of the soil" to the Lord. We have no indication what the quality of this produce was; we certainly have no hint that it was the best of the harvest. Now, notice that verse 4 tells us that Abel brought the "fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock." The fat portions were the best pieces of meat. Additionally, the firstborn always indicated something prized. In other words, Abel gave the best he had, and Cain offered whatever he was willing to spare.

Notice that the Fall didn't destroy worship; instead, it was now possible for worship to become horribly misdirected. But God's favor can never be earned by anything we offer to Him. Instead, true worship helps us cleanse our imaginations and focus our minds on God's majesty and beauty.

Genesis 5:18-24; Hebrews 11:5-6

TODAY IN THE WORD Although you may never see a television "infomercial" touting the benefits of walking, one insurance industry source says walking is the most popular form of exercise. In fact, when measured by the number of participants, no other exercise even comes close to walking. Besides its health benefits, walking is available to people of almost any age, location or health level.

Enoch may not have started the walking-for-exercise craze, but he is probably the most famous "walker" in history. Clearly, the Hebrew verb for "walk" in Genesis 5 is intended to convey more than the act of putting one foot in front of the other.

"Walk" is a popular biblical metaphor for our daily lives, the way we conduct ourselves day in and day out. Enoch and the Lord were such intimate friends that one day the Lord decided Enoch might as well "come on home."

The text indicates that Enoch suddenly disappeared, similar to the way that Elijah was carried to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). The resemblance between the two men's departures is not coincidental. The same word is used in Genesis 5:24 and 2 Kings 2:3 to describe how God took each man to heaven.

Part of our curiosity about Enoch is because we know so little of his life. But what we know is important, because his portrait also hangs in God's "hall of faith." Enoch's faith must have been remarkable. His testimony was impeccable, as today's verse reveals. His life is the context for the classic statement about faith in Hebrews 11:6.

The Bible is full of men and women of remarkable faith who pleased God. So why was Enoch chosen for a direct trip to heaven without passing through death? To learn the answer to that question, we'll need to wait until heaven.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Enoch walked in intimacy with God for 365 years. Most of us have a hard time staying close to the Lord for 365 days!

We would all like someone to say of us what was said of Enoch—that he "pleased God." If those closest to you—your spouse, children, fellow Christians—were to record the impact you had in their lives during 1996, what do you think they would say?

Genesis 6:1-22

TODAY IN THE WORD There's an old Jewish proverb that says, "A friend is one who warns you." According to this definition, the world that existed before the Flood could not have had a better friend than the patriarch Noah. This righteous man (Gen. 6:9) spent 120 years warning his sinful generation of God's impending judgment. Peter called Noah "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), letting us know that Noah combined his many decades of ark-building with the faithful delivery of God's message.

The fact that no one believed Noah and was saved except his own family is not surprising, given the indictment that the whole earth was corrupt in God's sight. The early verses of Genesis 6 describe what some believe to be sexual activity between fallen angels and human women that produced a corrupt race--a gross sin that God judged by imprisoning these angels (2 Peter 2:4) and announcing His intention to destroy the earth (Gen. 6:13).

In this setting of unbelievable sin and violence, Noah's faith shines even brighter. He apparently had no human example of godliness he could imitate, and no one in his generation who shared his love for God except his wife and family.

But look at what Noah's faith accomplished. The writer of Hebrews emphasized that Noah believed God's warning of judgment by water in spite of the visible evidence to the contrary (Heb. 11:7). It had never rained before, and there was no obvious need for a large boat. Every piece of wood Noah cut and fit was a statement of faith.

Noah worked in "holy fear" (v. 7), a reverent awe for God and His holiness that real faith produces. Noah had God's promise that He would establish a covenant with him, and that was all Noah needed.

The Bible says that the ark, which was a means of salvation for Noah and his family, was a symbol of condemnation to the people of Noah's day. His faith exposed their unbelief; he was saved by his belief, and they were condemned by their unbelief.

APPLY THE WORD Noah's story would have ended before it started if he had failed to translate his faith into obedience. But he did everything God told him to do (Gen. 6:22).

Genesis 6:5-22; 8:13-22

I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. - Genesis 9:13

TODAY IN THE WORD In the mid-14th century, bubonic plague--known as "Black Death"--swept through Europe, killing 25 million people, nearly one third of the total population. Carried by a common rat flea, it spread from China to Europe by means of trade routes.

Victims of the plague suffered a high fever, severe pain, and hemorrhaging, and usually died within five days. The disease struck with lightning speed, and inspired such fear that people refused to care for the sick and were sometimes unable to keep up with burying the dead.

As bad as the Black Death was, it was still far less destructive than the worldwide flood described in today's reading.

As humanity multiplied and spread after the Fall, so did sin. People whose "every inclination . . . was only evil all the time" appalled our holy God (Gen. 6:5). Nonetheless, in the story of Noah, we continue to see His mercy.

God's first response to widespread sin was not wrath, as we might think, but grief and pain (v. 6). He didn't want anyone to perish (cf. 2 Peter 3:9). But as He surveyed the earth, His justice required judgment.

Noah, who was blameless and walked with God, was the means to save humanity and to start fresh. God gave him blueprints for the Ark, a passenger list, and instructions about the cargo. Although both a worldwide flood and a boat that size were far beyond his understanding, Noah obeyed. He was motivated by "holy fear," a reverence for the person and words of God, and became an "heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Heb. 11:7).

More than a year after it began to rain, Noah and his family emerged from the Ark to a planet swept clean. God's command to be fruitful and multiply echoed His words at creation (8:17). In gratitude for His saving mercy, Noah and his family worshiped the Lord.

APPLY THE WORD The next time after a thunderstorm moves through your area, why not go out looking for a rainbow?

Genesis 6:5-7:24

TODAY IN THE WORD - Another Noah's Ark? That's what an official in the European Space Agency proposed recently. Dr. Bernard Foing said that efforts should be made to create a repository of genetic samples of all plant, animal, and human life. This library of DNA samples would be placed on the moon in case of a natural disaster, nuclear holocaust, or other catastrophic event. "You could repopulate Earth afterwards, like a Noah's Ark," he said.

The original Noah's Ark was a merciful provision from God. Sin had come to dominate the story of humanity: "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). Since God hates sin, He was happy to dish out punishment, right? Not exactly. "The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (6:5-6). He must judge sin, but He loves us so much that it hurts Him to do so.

Once again, this story sounds the twin notes of judgment and mercy. God would punish sin with a Flood that would wipe out all human and animal life, but He would save a remnant. That remnant was Noah and his family. As a righteous man, Noah contrasted strongly with the people of his generation. He walked with God as a friend, and God shared His plans with him, telling him to build a large boat and put on board a zoo of animal species—a kind of ancient DNA library! Noah obeyed in faith (Ge 6:22; cf. Heb. 11:7). God sent the animals, everyone got on board, and He Himself shut the door. Then it began to rain. What a sobering picture of the extinction of life on earth, an appalling outworking of the punishment of death.

One aspect of our purpose as Christians is to live in light of the Second Coming of Christ. Peter said that people who don't accept the truth of Jesus' return are as badly off as those who were skeptical about Noah's warnings about the imminent Flood (see notes 2 Peter 3:3; 3:4; 3:5; 3:6; 3:7)!

As we can see in today's reading, God takes sin very seriously indeed. Do we? Too often many of us do not include confession as a regular part of our prayer lives. Too often we think only red-letter sins need confessing. Our consciences are simply not tender enough. Today, confess your sins before the Lord. Let His Holy Spirit examine and convict you. Pray with the attitude of David, who said, "I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin" (Ps. 38:18 - [Spurgeon's note](#)).

Genesis 6:1-9; 9:8-17

[God] protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others. - 2 Peter 2:5

TODAY IN THE WORD Anthropologists note that many peoples have some great flood legend. In his book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Don Richardson tells about the Santal people of southern India. Nineteenth-century missionaries were amazed by a legend about a holy couple who escaped destruction when the god Thakur Jiu sent a great flood to destroy wicked humanity. This remarkable account suggests possible residual memory of Noah and the flood.

Genesis 6 is actually the culmination of a long spiral into sin that begins with Abel's murder (Gen. 4). Next we find the arrogant and evil Lamech, who is far worse than Cain. By the time we get to Genesis 6, unspeakable evil is taking place. We don't really know who the Nephilim were, but clearly normal society was breaking down and people's actions were perverse with evil results.

The Flood is both judgment and promise. We often think of Noah as only an ark builder, but Peter calls him a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). With a hammer in one hand, Noah was also urging repentance. But most people refused to listen and, for them, the Flood was judgment. But for Noah and his family, the Flood provided a fresh start. In the midst of corruption and violence, Noah and his family alone obeyed God. Hebrews 11:7 says that Noah became "heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."

After the Flood, Noah and his sons built an altar to the Lord (Gen. 8:20). Genesis 9 records the gracious covenant that God made with Noah and future humanity, promising that never again would the flood waters cover the earth. As a covenant sign, God set His rainbow in the clouds (v. 13). Despite humanity's depravity, God still intended restoration and redemption for His creation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Like the days before the Flood, many still live as if judgment will never come. Jesus used the example of Noah's day to point out that people would be unprepared for the Son of Man's return (Matt. 24:37-39).

But just as God provided a way for Noah and his family to make it through the flood, so also God makes a way to escape His coming wrath through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18-22). And, like Noah, we are also called to be "preachers of righteousness."

Genesis 6:9-22

By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. - Hebrews 11:7

TODAY IN THE WORD In New York City in the early summer of 2011, an eight-year-old boy walked seven blocks home alone from his day camp. His neighborhood of strictly observant Jews is known to be insular and safe. He knew the route well, but this particular day, got disoriented. Tragically, the stranger he stopped to ask for directions had a psychotic history. The boy never made it home.

Our world is a terrifying place. Children disappear, and terrorists board planes. While we might think that the horrors of today are worse than any other time in history, we see that the violence and treachery of Noah's generation had reached epic proportions. Brutal crimes were commonplace, and fear was everyone's constant companion.

Noah, however, was a righteous man who walked with God. God confided in Noah His intentions to judge his generation and literally wipe out everyone, with the exception of Noah and his family, from the earth. To imagine the devastation and destruction to come must have left Noah breathless, both because of the magnitude of the death sentence and the acquittal he and his family had been issued. Perhaps he had to stare down fears of his own. There was certainly no guarantee that Noah would even be allowed to work freely on this boat of colossal proportions.

The writer of Hebrews explains that Noah's faith gave him courage in the midst of fear. Faith compelled him to take God at His word. Faith also moved him into action. Rather than focus on enemies and obstacles, Noah acknowledged that God was powerful and also good. He knew that he owed God obedience.

The fear of the Lord prompts us to take seriously every word He speaks. Sometimes we have to do something as radical as building a boat; some days it's just getting out of bed and trusting Him for the strength we need.

APPLY THE WORD Noah's example teaches us that disarming our fear requires us to listen. God is actively speaking to each of us, especially right in the midst of our fear. Maybe He's speaking words of strength and courage to steady your quaking knees. Perhaps He is speaking words of comfort that His presence is still with you. Maybe He's got specific instructions for you as He did for Noah. His voice quiets fear's whispering. Get still enough to listen.

Genesis 6:9-22

TODAY IN THE WORD - The Aswan High Dam was a massive building project that took eleven years and one billion dollars to accomplish. A dream of Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, this two-mile-long dam aimed to end Nile River flooding and provide electrical power for the entire country. The construction involved political and environmental controversy, but Nasser pushed his vision through.

When finished, the dam created an enormous reservoir three hundred miles long and ten miles wide. The project was completed in 1970, shortly before Nasser's death, and the lake was named in his honor.

Noah also knew about massive building projects!

Human history had gone sour since the Fall. God saw corruption and violence everywhere (Ge 6:5-6). Though judgment was needed, He first took the initiative to make a creation-saving covenant with Noah, one which would preserve both human and natural life (v. 18; cf. Gen. 9:1-17). What made Noah different? He was righteous and blameless. He walked with God (v. 9). To maintain righteousness in the midst of such an evil time, he must have walked closely indeed!

God gave Noah unbelievable instructions-to build a boat like no one had ever seen before, in a landlocked place where it would appear to be of no use. The reason for building it was even more incredible-all living things would soon perish (v. 17). Furthermore, it's possible that it had never rained before. Indications are that a somewhat different ecological system was at work before the Flood (compare Gen. 2:5-6 with 7:11).

If possible today, go to a large, open area. Pace or measure off the dimensions of Noah's Ark as given in Scripture. Most translations have converted "cubits" to feet for your convenience.

Genesis 7:24-8:22

TODAY IN THE WORD - God's deliverance of His people throughout the Old Testament repeatedly involves the provision of water. Lot and Abram's herdsmen divide over water supply; Rebekah gives water to Jacob's camels; Moses strikes water from the rock at Meribah during Israel's desert wanderings. Water in the wilderness signifies grace, the springing up of life in a dry and weary land. But what signifies grace when there is too much water?

Noah and his family didn't need an oasis of water; they were looking for an oasis of land. The olive branch plucked from a living tree after the ravages of the flood promised such an oasis.

While initially the dove "could find no place to set its feet" (v. 9), the second time it returned with the leaf, a sign of the water's recession below the tree-line. The third time it departed for good. After a good half year of floating on water, a leaf signaled the stability of life on land and God's deliverance of Noah and his family from the flood. Just think how joyful they were to see that leaf!

The olive leaf also symbolizes a renewal of life. God destroyed the face of the earth by the flood, and here was a fresh leaf, a sign of new life growing in the chastened world. God in His goodness did not return Noah's family to a barren wasteland, but to a land of new growth. This is a good lesson for us to remember when God disciplines us. What awaits us afterward isn't aridity but renewal of life.

Can you imagine what life would be like without the pattern of seasons? Thank God for ordering the seasons this fall: for seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night. Make a point this September to acknowledge God's ordering of the seasons as good. If you or someone you know is in a time of "flood," a loss of an established pattern and order in life, pray for an olive leaf to be given to them, a promise of coming stability and structure. And thank God for the protection He offers us during these times of tumult and storms.

Genesis 8:1-22

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock. - Genesis 8:1

TODAY IN THE WORD For those who believe the biblical account of Genesis, the Flood is the defining event of the geological record of our planet. It explains evidence that other scientists believe required billions of years of mostly gradual changes. Did the Grand Canyon erode ever so slowly under the chronic duress of an ancient river, or did a cataclysmic event carve out its path in mere moments? Are fossils proof of organic life entrapped and preserved periodically over eons, or did the worldwide flood ensnare traces of every living thing and deposit them in layers during the devastating global transformation brought on by God?

Apart from the scientific issues, the Flood poses an even bigger question for us as we consider how God relates to all that He made: how could God inflict such destruction on creation? This act of wrath is actually best explained in the promise God gave: never to repeat it. The Flood is just as much a story of grace, mercy, and love as it is of judgment.

Noah's family and a floating zoo of every species known to man did not escape God's attention after He flooded the world from above and below (vv. 1, 2). The popularly remembered "forty days and forty nights" of rain had sustained a flood that didn't completely dry until over a year later (v. 14, cf. 7:11). The birds aboard the ark became scouts for Noah as he awaited a safe opportunity to disembark (vv. 6-12), but Noah ultimately relied on God's command to know the appropriate time (vv. 15-16).

Noah's first act was to offer a sacrifice to the Lord, and it pleased God. In response, God vowed to Himself never to curse the ground and destroy life in that way again. But look at the indictment of humanity nested in that promise: "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (v. 21). Many critics of the flood account find it unconscionable to believe God would destroy innocent life. But the time of innocence had become a distant memory on the earth. The punishment God meted out was just—and tempered by His grace toward Noah.

APPLY THE WORD We can grow so accustomed to the grace of God that we start to think we deserve good things from His hand. We begin to believe that happy, healthy, and undisturbed lives are our birthright. But this passage is a reminder of the gravity of our sins against God and our proclivity for wickedness to inhabit the very heart of our intentions. Take this time to confess your sins to God and to praise Him and thank Jesus Christ for taking the penalty of your sins.

Genesis 8:1-9:17

TODAY IN THE WORD - You may have heard how coal miners formerly used canaries. They would bring one down into the mine with them as a kind of early warning system. If the canary keeled over dead, they would know that oxygen was running out and they should head for the surface as soon as possible. Otherwise they might be trapped or suffocated.

In a similar way, in today's reading Noah used two birds to scout for him and his family. The rain had stopped, but was it safe yet to emerge from the Ark? First he sent a raven, but a raven is a strong bird that could fly a long time without alighting. So he sent a dove, which on its second try returned with an olive leaf—nowhere to land, but evidence of plant life. The third time the dove didn't return, and Noah knew it was safe to come out, which God confirmed. From start to finish, they had been in the Ark about a year.

Noah built an altar in grateful thanks and worship to the Lord. Pleased with this attitude, God pledged never to wipe out life in this way again (Ge 8:21-22). Because Noah was a sort of “new Adam,” God also issued a renewed His Creation-style blessing and mandate to all the survivors, including people and animals, though now the relationship between the two would be changed (Ge 9:2-3). God designated the rainbow as a sign of this fresh start, His promise, and His covenant. Rainbows may have been a new environmental phenomenon; and clearly they were invested here with a profound significance. Every time we see one in the sky we should remember God's mercy to us.

The cycle of sin and judgment could have gone on indefinitely. No amount of “New Year's resolutions” or “moral fiber” could have helped us escape our sinfulness, and so we would richly have deserved any number of Floods or similar punishments. Genesis 1-9 could have kept repeating, over and over. But God took the gracious initiative to break the cycle. He had better things in store!

Like Noah sending out birds from the Ark, perhaps you are in a period of waiting in your life. You may be waiting to see what God will do, or where He will lead. You can rest secure in the confidence that He also uses these waiting times in our lives. Look at the situation as an opportunity to grow in patience, which is part of the fruit of the Spirit. “A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly” (Pr 14:29).

Genesis 8:20-9:13

TODAY IN THE WORD The stunning arrest of FBI agent Robert Hanssen on espionage charges (see the June 2 study) came after other agents observed him drop a packet of sensitive information at a prearranged spot in a Virginia park. In the weeks that followed his arrest, we learned that Hanssen had the capability to cause serious damage to national security because of his years of experience in the intelligence community.

Spy stories will always be front-page news, because even in our scandal-ridden culture we still expect people to be faithful to their commitments. We expect faithfulness even more when people's lives are at stake.

Noah was in the most sensitive position imaginable, the only righteous person God could find on the whole earth in that generation. Noah held his own life and the lives of his family in his hands--and because his life was marked by faith, Noah acted faithfully when God commanded him to build the ark.

Noah also committed an act of faith when the waters subsided and the ark was opened. The first thing he did was offer God a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. The Bible says the offering's aroma was “pleasing” to God (Gen. 8:21), and the result was His promise never again to destroy the earth by water (Gen. 9:11).

God's promise, written in the rainbow, was part of His covenant with Noah (vv. 12-13). The language here is similar to creation because, in effect, Noah and his family were beginning the human race again. God also re-emphasized the sacredness of human life, an echo of the statement in Genesis 1:27 that we are made in God's image.

We have stepped away from Hebrews 11 today, but it is still the context we're working from as we consider the good results of Noah's faith (Heb. 11:7). Peter used Noah's salvation through the Flood to illustrate the way God is able to preserve His people from judgment (2 Peter 2:5).

In other words, God honors faith! He doesn't overlook the smallest expression of trusting Him, a thought which ought to encourage all of us today.

APPLY THE WORD Do you want to make some “front page” news in heaven? Then make a daily commitment to live faithfully for the Lord no matter what.

Genesis 9:8-17

TODAY IN THE WORD - The New Age movement has tried to steal the symbol of the rainbow, but it belongs to us!

Rainbows appear in association with many representations of the New Age movement--on merchandise such as troll dolls and crystal pendants, on posters advertising "concerts for world peace," and so on.

The idea seems to be that rainbows inspire thoughts of peace, happiness, or good fortune. They stand for a bright future in which people will have come through the "storm" of modern problems and begun to build a New Age utopia inhabited by enlightened, generous, mystical individuals.

The rainbow does possess a significance that lies deep in the memory of the human race. But it has nothing to do with New Age dreams. The reason for its symbolic force is that it stands for God's covenant with Noah and with all creation, as seen in today's reading.

The worldwide Flood had ended, the waters had receded, and life was about to start anew. God had preserved not only human beings, but also two of every kind of animal (cf. Gen. 6:19-21) with which to repopulate the earth.

The basis for this fresh start is a new covenant, symbolized in the apparently new phenomenon of the rainbow. The parties to this covenant include every creature that had been on the Ark, in addition to Noah and his family. This is the only time in Scripture that animals are explicitly mentioned as participating in a covenant.

Why are they listed? The Flood had been universal, affecting the whole of the created world. So the promise that there would never be such a flood again (Genesis 9:11, 15) is likewise a promise to all of creation, "an everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth" (Genesis 9:16; cf. note [Revelation 5:13](#)).

How much does God love creation? "God so loved the world"--the word used here is *cosmos*, meaning all of creation (see January 7)--"that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's love is revealed in Jesus Christ!

Genesis 11:1-9

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. - Acts 2:4

TODAY IN THE WORD The Baltic coast of Russia was not a promising site for a city. The land was marshy. The weather was cold and stormy, and flooding was common. It was in the middle of nowhere. Yet here Peter the Great decided to build an imperial seaport. The energetic czar handled much of the planning himself, sketching buildings and even choosing flowers for the city gardens.

Hundreds of thousands of conscripted itinerant workers toiled to fill the swamp with dirt and wood—and 25,000 of them died. To populate his new town, the czar ordered reluctant nobles to move there from Moscow. What an unlikely beginning for St. Petersburg, a beautiful city that has inspired countless painters, writers, and musicians, and recently celebrated its 300th birthday.

Someone like Peter the Great must have decided it would be a good idea to build the Tower of Babel. These people were ambitious and prideful, relying on themselves and failing to acknowledge or worship God. Their main priority was to "make a name" for themselves. Some scholars believe their tower would have been similar to a Mesopotamian ziggurat, a sort of pyramid with steps up the side. Since these structures often had a shrine or altar at the top, idolatry may have been involved here as well. Archaeologist Alfred Hoerth, however, argues that it was too soon historically for them to construct a ziggurat, and that they were actually building a *migdal*, a fortified tower or citadel.

When God said, "Nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them," He used hyperbole to highlight the fact that humanity needed humbling (v. 6). Only divine intervention could check their rebellious pride. So He stepped in with a very practical solution—He multiplied their languages and brought an end to their ability to cooperate on the building project. In one moment, He changed Babel, "gateway to a god," to *balal*, "confused."

It's worth noting that this event was not a judgment, but actually God's goodness to keep matters from worsening. In heading off this pursuit of evil and thus the need for judgment, God kept His promise to Noah.

APPLY THE WORD Today's suggested application is a bit different from usual. Enroll in a foreign language course! God confused human language at the Tower of Babel, but He also rejoices in its variety. That's why He gave the gift of tongues at Pentecost, and that's why people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" will worship Him in heaven. Spanish would be a good choice, since it's the second most common language in America. Or look around your neighborhood and start learning the language of some recent immigrants.

Genesis 11:27-12:9

So Abram left, as the Lord had told him. - Genesis 12:4

TODAY IN THE WORD In September 2005, 5,000 U.S. and Iraqi troops attempted to evacuate civilians from Tall Afar, Iraq, to protect them from a raid against insurgents. Many people refused to leave through the designated checkpoints out of fear and distrust. One man said, “I would rather die . . . in my home with my family than walk south.”

Leaving home for an unknown destination would be difficult for anyone, regardless of the potential reward or the imminent danger. About 4,000 years ago—and only a few hundred miles away from Tall Afar—a man named Abram faced the choice of whether to go or stay. God called him out of his home in Ur and away from the idolatry of his homeland (Josh. 24:2). God was very clear about what He would do for Abram. But still He was asking Abram to make a major sacrifice and providing very few details.

We know what happened to Abram, the first of the Patriarchs and the subject of our study over the next several days. God's call to Abram (12:1-3) came before his 600-mile move to Haran (cf. Acts 7:2), and it's unclear if God repeated it in Haran. Chapter 11 records Abram's genealogy and the account of his father, Terah, so the call in Ur could have been placed here in the text simply to shift the focus of the narrative to Abram.

Abram and Sarai had no children (11:30) though they were in a genealogical line rich with large, well-established families in the region. Abram left with no idea where God might lead him or how he would become a great nation. If we trace Abram's journey from Ur to Shechem, where God finally gave Abram confirmation that he had arrived in God's desired location, we see that he traveled about 1,000 miles, roughly the distance from Chicago to Boston. Abram's obedience to God endured throughout the journey as he paid tribute to God multiple times (vv. 7, 12). One phrase typifies the new life of faith that Abram adopted: “pitched his tent”. Abram left a life of wealth in a prosperous region for life in a tent in a faraway land.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Abram's decision to obey God cost him his very way of life—which might be the possession we hold onto most dearly. The best of us may give God our time, our effort, and our money, but rarely are we willing to relinquish our comfort.

To show the faith of our fathers, we should be ready to surrender our lives. Ask God to weaken your attachment to your lifestyle and free you to enjoy the blessing of His will.

Genesis 11:27-12:9; Hebrews 11:8-10

He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. - Hebrews 11:10

TODAY IN THE WORD Bible commentator Allen P. Ross does a good job of helping us appreciate the faith that Abraham (or Abram at this point) displayed when he responded to God's call. Dr. Ross writes, "This passage [Gen. 12] points up the faith of Abram. . . . Abram was middle-aged, prosperous, settled, and thoroughly pagan. The word of the Lord came to him--though it is not known exactly how--and he responded by faith and obediently left everything to follow God's plan."

Abraham's faith is amazing not only because he left behind a settled, comfortable life in highly-cultured Ur, and later in Haran, to obey God. Abraham traded the house and good life in Ur for the existence of a nomadic tent-dweller in Canaan.

In fact, the "father of the faithful" never really owned any land again, except for the cave he bought for family burials (Gen. 23:1-20). Abraham did not live to possess the land of Canaan, the land God promised to him. But Abraham still believed God, and by faith he saw the day when his descendants would receive the land as an inheritance.

The writer of Hebrews stressed that Abraham did not even know where he was going when he first started out for Canaan. After telling Abraham to leave Haran, God did not reveal Himself to the patriarch again until Abraham had arrived in Canaan (Gen. 12:7)--and again, Abraham's response is worth noting. He built an altar and worshiped the Lord, and then did the same thing again a little later.

Given the fact that Canaan was filled with pagan tribes at that time, Abraham's actions were a remarkable witness to the true God. It's even possible that "the great tree of Moreh" (v. 6) where Abraham built his first altar was the site of a Canaanite worship shrine. Talk about "marketplace" witnessing!

Imagine Abraham pounding the "For Sale" sign in his front yard in Ur. When the neighbors ask where he's going and what he will do, he replies, "I'm not sure."

"Then why are you giving up all of this?" the neighbors exclaim.

"Because the true God commanded me to go, and I must obey."

APPLY THE WORD Hebrews 11:10 tells us that by faith, Abraham saw a lot more than just the land of Canaan as his future inheritance. The great faith hero's ultimate hope was heaven.

Abraham's hope of heaven determined his actions on earth. That's what our hope is supposed to do for us. John said that the hope of being

Genesis 11:27-12:9

TODAY IN THE WORD - Does someone in your family have an old Bible with records of births, deaths, and marriages? These may be mostly keepsakes today, but in the days before public records of such events were kept, a family Bible may have been a lot more than an heirloom. There were probably many times when these detailed family records were the best, if not the only, source for tracing a family's ancestry.

Every name in the family line was carefully recorded. A person who was able to use family records to prove some sort of legitimate claim or relationship would have been thankful for such careful record keeping.

God is a careful record-keeper too--every name recorded in the genealogies of His Book is important. We could spend several days tracing the biblical line of descent from Seth all the way to Abraham. That line covered a long time period and some key people, which becomes obvious when you read Genesis 5 and encounter names like Enoch and Noah.

We're going to pick up the story of God's righteous line with the patriarch who was called Abram until God changed his name to Abraham (Gen. 17:5). This change is important because it permanently changed the focus of Abraham's life. The name Abram, "exalted father," pointed backward to Abram's heritage, which may have included royalty. But the name Abraham, "father of a multitude," pointed ahead to this man's descendants--including Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16).

You'll find another key genealogy in Genesis 11:10-26. The names here show the descent of Seth's righteous line from Noah's son Shem to Terah, the father of Abram.

Abram's initial call in Ur isn't specifically mentioned in Genesis 11. But it's suggested in the past tense of 12:1, "The Lord had said to Abram" (see also Acts 7:2-4). The family left Ur but then settled in Haran. That, however, was not God's will for Abram, so he set out for the land God would show him.

God is keeping a book of names, called "the book of life belonging to the Lamb" (see note [Revelation 13:8](#)).

Genesis 12:1-9

TODAY IN THE WORD - Several years ago, balloonist [Steve Fossett](#) completed one of the most amazing journeys in the history of flight. On his sixth attempt, he became the first person to fly around the world alone without a motor. Fossett and his balloon, the Spirit of Freedom, traveled for 13 days and more than 19,000 miles. He wore an oxygen mask most of the trip and had to change fuel tanks and do other maintenance tasks under freezing conditions. When he reached the southwestern tip of Australia on July 3, 2002, he made history!

In today's reading, Abram also made an amazing journey. He left behind his home culture and everything he knew. By leaving his father's household, he may have also forfeited his right to an inheritance. He didn't even know his destination—all he had to go on was the character and promise of God. But for Abram, that was enough and the 75-year-old stepped out on faith. Earlier their family had moved from Ur to Haran; then after his father's death Abram set out again and stopped in Canaan, the "promised land" (Ge 12:7).

There he set up an altar and worshiped the Lord. Hebrews 11:8-10 captures his heart: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents . . . For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Abram's faith is certainly on display here, but God's greatness and worthiness to be trusted are even more so. He made a covenant with Abram, a breathtaking series of promises about what He would do for him. He would make his name great—as opposed to what people attempted at Babel, this is fine if God does it. He would turn one clan into a nation. He would bless and curse those who blessed and cursed His chosen people. And He would make this nation into a blessing for all nations (Ge 12:2-3).

An invaluable companion to your study of Genesis would be a Bible atlas—a book of maps from Bible times that goes beyond what you may have in the back of your Bible. As soon as you can, head off to your local Christian bookstore to obtain one. Or if you're not yet convinced how useful such a tool would be, at least borrow one from your local or church library. We recommend you keep one nearby during your devotional times this month.

Genesis 12:1-8

He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed." - Acts 3:25

TODAY IN THE WORD Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is the poignant tale of the convict Jean Valjean who, upon his release from prison, finds himself graciously taken in by a godly bishop. Hardened by years of deprivation and crime, Valjean robs the bishop of some silver candlesticks and flees. Later, Valjean is caught and brought back to the bishop. Valjean, anticipating judgment and punishment, is surprised when the bishop graciously gives him the candlesticks. This marks a new beginning in Valjean's life.

Yesterday we read about the great Flood that came as judgment upon a depraved humanity. If we were to continue in Genesis, we would come to the sad account of the Tower of Babel. As we noted, Genesis 3 to 11 records one long descent into sin. The tower represented the height of human arrogance and rebellion, so it's surprising to read of God's gracious call of Abram in Genesis 12. To be sure, the nations were judged for their arrogance, but beyond judgment was God's grace.

In choosing Abram, God declares his intention to do a brand new thing with humanity. Just as God spoke creation into existence, God begins his great new work of redemption by speaking (vv. 1-3).

No doubt it was very difficult for Abram to leave all he knew in order to go to an unknown place. But this initial command is followed by six statements of what God promises to do for Abram, beginning with making him a great nation and giving him a great name. God also promised to make Abram a blessing to all peoples on the earth. Through this one man, God would extend His grace to the rest of the world.

The call of Abram begins the central story of the Bible, namely, how God will work to redeem lost humanity and to restore His people back to the garden of fellowship with Him.

Over the next few weeks we will trace this story, focusing specifically on how all people of the world have been blessed through this one individual. In the process, we'll see God's great love for the entire world.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Noted missions scholar Bruce Winters once said, "Most Christians think that the Bible doesn't really emphasize missions. They see it as sort of an afterthought that Jesus had at the end of his ministry."

Have you ever really thought about the Bible's teaching on missions? Today we see that Abraham's call is key to God's plan for the nations. In fact, the Bible's teaching on missions begins right here, in Genesis 12. Be prepared for more surprises from the Old Testament concerning God's heart for all the nations.

Genesis 12:1-8

TODAY IN THE WORD - English professor Wayne Martindale and his wife, Nita, were teaching at a university in China. On their way out of the classroom building one day, they held the door open for a Chinese instructor and her friends. The instructor was so impressed with this simple act of kindness that she joined Nita's class. A friendship was born, and they were able to welcome her to their home when she arrived in the United States for graduate study.

Her curiosity grew into genuine seeking. She began to read the Gospels, and after coming to the United States, began to attend an English class based on the Bible. In due time, she trusted Christ as Savior! Says Wayne: "The love of Christ is transforming, and love plays well in every culture."

From Jerusalem to China-look how far the gospel has spread! Are we surprised? We shouldn't be. God's plan of redemption has always included "all peoples on earth" (Ge 12:3). We'll explore the worldwide scope of God's plan over the next six days, mostly by looking at relevant Old Testament passages.

In today's reading, God made a covenant with Abraham. But it wasn't just for Abraham--He intended Abraham's faith and obedience to result in blessing for the entire world!

The Lord called Abram to leave everything he knew and set out in faith (cf. notes Romans 4:1; 4:2; 4:3; Heb. 11:8-12). From that faith, God would make a nation (Israel) and bless all nations. Whoever was on Abraham's side was also on God's side, and would be blessed as a result (v. 3).

When Abraham received this call, he was getting a "fresh start" at age 75 (he would live to be 175, cf. Gen. 25:7). But he had no son, so from a human point of view God's promises appeared impossible. Nonetheless, he was obedient, traveled to Canaan, and built an altar to the Lord when he arrived (vv. 7-8). He believed God's promise and responded with worship.

Too often our perspective on God's work is limited. A simple tool such as a globe, world map, or atlas can help you broaden your vision of God's plan. It's also a great way to start conversations with family or friends. If you don't already have one of these items, consider obtaining one in the near future.

Genesis 12:1-9

TODAY IN THE WORD - Lewis Smedes wrote, "Two anxieties dominate most of our lives. We are anxious in the face of our unchangeable past. . . . We are anxious in the face of our unpredictable futures. God offers two answers to our deepest anxieties. He is a forgiving God who recreates our pasts by forgiving them. He is a promising God who controls our future by making and keeping promises. By forgiving us, He changes our past. By promising, He secures our future."

Abraham knew this and staked his life on God's promise-keeping faithfulness. The Lord told Abraham that he would be blessed, have many descendants, and become a great nation. Through him, all the peoples of the earth would be blessed-a worldwide plan ultimately fulfilled in Christ (Ge 12:2-3; cf. Gal. 3:6-9).

Abraham didn't have this historical perspective. What he did have was a command to leave home and go to a foreign country (Ge 12:1). His family had been living in Ur, in what is today southern Iraq. His father, Terah, moved them more than five hundred miles north and east along the Euphrates River, to Haran. Both cities worshiped a moon god, among many other "deities" in whom Terah also believed (see Josh. 24:2). Only by God's grace could His Word have even reached Abraham in such a setting! And since Haran was located on prosperous caravan trade routes, there was no human reason to leave.

Nonetheless, Abraham obeyed and set out. Only after his arrival in Canaan did God promise him the land, and he responded by building an altar and worshiping (Ge 12:6-7). The "great tree" where this happened was likely a prominent spot for idol worship, meaning that God was making a point and Abraham was taking a stand. This land belonged to the one true God, and it would belong to His people!

One good follow-up to today's devotional is to read the article by Lewis Smedes mentioned earlier. Entitled [CT Classic: Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past](#)

Genesis 12:10-20

You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. - Psalm 77:14

TODAY IN THE WORD Marital unfaithfulness is a major problem in modern American society. Newsweek recently estimated that 30-40 percent of all wives and 50 percent of all husbands have been unfaithful. Shamefully, a growing number of Web sites cater to this, offering everything from personal ads and “discreet” dating services to ready-made excuses and “authenticated” cover stories to help explain one's absence. God invented marriage, but we keep inventing ways to corrupt it. Abram certainly did so in today's reading, and that was just one of his sins in this episode. He also lied, profited from his lie, and dishonored God and His covenant. It's difficult to believe we're still in the same chapter as yesterday!

One problem was famine. Abram made a practical decision to go down to Egypt, where people seldom suffered from famine thanks to the Nile River. Another problem was his beautiful wife Sarai and the likelihood that the Egyptian king would decide to eliminate her husband and take her for himself. So Abraham made another pragmatic decision—he instructed Sarai to lie in order to save his life. From a human point of view, everything worked out exactly according to plan. Not only did he live, he was showered with livestock and gift.

The real problem was Abram's lack of faith. The faith that had sent him on his amazing journey was now too weak to trust in God's power for protection, God's wisdom for a plan, or God's provision for their needs. Since Abram wasn't listening, God spoke directly to Pharaoh instead. He sent diseases to his court, showing divine displeasure and revealing Abram's lie. Since truthfulness was key to Egyptian ethics, Abram was thoroughly humiliated.

Though Abram was faithless, God remained faithful. When He promised to bless the nations (v. 3), He meant that He would reveal Himself to the world through Abram and his descendants. Though the patriarch fell down on the job, God still acted to make Himself known. Before Abram left Egypt, Pharaoh and his court had learned that God was powerful, truth-loving, and righteous. God keeps His promises!

APPLY THE WORD One aspect of Abram's shameful conduct in today's reading was how he dishonored his marriage. We learned earlier that God Himself instituted marriage: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (2:24). Take the opportunity today to renew your own commitment to purity and faithfulness in thought, word, and action. Do not play around with temptation or think “it could never

Genesis 12:10-20

Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? - Genesis 12:18

TODAY IN THE WORD Skydiving is a surprisingly accessible pastime in America. There are more than 400 drop zones open to the public, and interested divers can prepare for a freefall jump with just one day of training. Falling at speeds in excess of 100 mph is relatively easy; finding the nerve to jump is another matter.

Abram had already done the hard part by obeying God's call to leave his homeland—the courage required to do so should never be underestimated. But at this point, going was the only thing God demanded (Gen 12:1-3). God placed no other conditions on him. He didn't have to prove himself righteous, wise, or skillful . . . he just had to go. Abram must have been thankful for that mercy, especially after the events of today's passage.

When famine drove Abram toward Egypt, he couldn't have known if he was leaving God's appointed land—he wasn't given boundaries until chapter 15. Going to Egypt didn't show a lack of faith, but lying about Sarai did. Abram feared that he would be killed (v. 12), so he covered up his marriage. He would later say that Sarai was his half-sister (20:12), although his genealogy in Chapter 11 makes no reference to such a relationship. Regardless of those details, God's promise should have assured Abram that his life was not in danger. Interestingly, God didn't penalize him for his lie or his fear. Abram had obeyed what God required of him, and God stayed true to His word.

Abram was blessed with livestock and servants. Pharaoh was cursed with plagues. This blessing was not the result of Abram's good works but because of his faith. Abram still had plenty of room for spiritual growth. Faith alone was God's expectation, and Abram was without peer in that department.

As Romans 4:13 states, "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith." Abram's sin could not stop God's plan of redemption—his sin, like ours, was the reason redemption was needed in the first place.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY A brief glance cannot sufficiently cover the topic of justification by faith, and it's an important concept to meditate on as we move forward in this study. Every day we'll see examples of imperfect faith from imperfect people—in the Bible and in ourselves. Read through Romans 4 and reflect on what Abraham's faith means to us, especially in light of his imperfection. Remember that your faith produces righteousness and not the other way around.

Genesis 13

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. - Psalm 16:6

TODAY IN THE WORD - The classic hymn “How Firm a Foundation” proclaims: “Fear not! I am with thee; O be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid. I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand. When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply. The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.”

In the midst of choices and conflict—and no doubt with the lesson from Egypt fresh in his mind—Abram stood fast on his firm foundation of faith. In today's reading, he faced another problem, but this time he acted in trust and godliness instead of following his own devices. The problem was that he and his nephew Lot had become too wealthy, with too much livestock, to continue using the same ground. So they had a “summit meeting” at which Abram offered Lot his choice of land.

As the older man, Abram could have dictated the outcome; instead, he surrendered the decision, showing tremendous generosity. Doing so also revealed his faith, since he wasn't worried about the future but trusted God to take care of him. This action also marked him as a peacemaker, going the extra mile to resolve the conflict. Though he could have taken offense at Lot's attitude, he was at peace and content with whatever happened.

Lot's choice, on the other hand, hinted at selfishness and greed. He chose the plain of the Jordan River, the best land—the place where his wealth could most safely increase—for himself. He didn't seem concerned that with his choice to go east, his uncle would take the west and remain in Canaan, with its unpredictable climate and times of famine. He also showed a disregard for righteousness. By pitching his tent near Sodom, a wicked city, he put himself squarely in the way of temptation.

God's response took the measure of the two men's “negotiation.” He honored Abram's faith and renewed His promises of land and nationhood. He answered His chosen patriarch's faith with faithfulness, generosity with generosity, and peacefulness with blessing.

APPLY THE WORD Memorizing Scripture is a great way to encourage your faith. When you store it in your heart, it's there for the tough times to remind you of the purposes for which God created you. Today, you could commit Hebrews 11:1 or Luke 6:38 to memory. The first verse is a definition of faith, reminding us that we should be living in dependence on God and His promises. The second is a formulation of the golden rule and an expression of God's generosity to us.

Genesis 13:1-18

All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. - Genesis 13:15

TODAY IN THE WORD Flea markets play host to bargain hunters searching through a treasure trove of goods. Some people overpay, and other deals are fair, but in some cases, like the customer who paid \$4 for a painting that hid an original printing of the Declaration of Independence, the trade is a one-sided victory. In today's reading, Lot sought the best deal, but Abram was the clear winner.

Abram and Lot's problem was one that most people would like to have—they had too many possessions. Abram shows a proper attitude toward his possessions in two ways. First, he praises God. The phrase “called on the name of the Lord” in verse 4 is usually used in connection with building an altar and making sacrifices of worship. It's very likely that he sacrificed a portion of his livestock to acknowledge the true source of his wealth.

The other gesture Abram made was to surrender the one thing he didn't have in abundance: land. Cohabiting with Lot and his entourage was causing conflict, and instead of aggravating the situation, Abram yielded to Lot. He treated Lot like an equal, and gave him the choice of any land he desired. Pay special attention to Abram's attitude of surrender, because it is rare in the history of the Patriarchs.

Lot took a good, long look at the available land, and he chose what he thought would be the best. As we'll soon read, Lot made a poor choice, selecting a land rich in fertile soil but contaminated by sin (v. 13).

Now it was Abram's turn to survey the land. After Lot left, God told Abram to look at all that he could see in every direction just as Lot did. God told him he could have it all. Verse 7 made it clear that the land had other inhabitants, but God disclosed with greater detail the nature of Abram's inheritance. His descendants were to receive all of the land, and they would be too numerous to count. Considering Abram's descendants at the time added up to a grand total of zero, this was an amazing prediction. But Abram obeyed, and he continued to worship God (v. 18).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY God provides. Abram left his home; God increased his wealth. He relinquished the choice of land; God gave him all the land he could see. He had no children; God made from him multiple nations that thrive even today. So why do we grab all we can reach, seize control of every choice, and long for what we don't have? Give freely to God. Let others take what they want. God will provide.

Genesis 14

Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. - Genesis 14:19

TODAY IN THE WORD What do we know about the mysterious Melchizedek who appears in today's text? Not much. He was king of Salem, also known as Jerusalem, and his name means "king of righteousness." He seemed to have been acquainted with the one true God. Abram gave him a tithe, which could be simply a sign of respect, though it is not recorded that he ever did so for anyone else. The blessing that Melchizedek gave Abram might also be a normal cultural gesture; notably, we don't have a record that anyone else ever blessed the patriarch (v. 19). Did they recognize one another as fellow believers? How? And most intriguingly, how and why had God revealed himself to a Canaanite king?

Abram met Melchizedek on the way back from rescuing Lot. His nephew had gotten caught on the losing side in a small war. Abram could have left well enough alone, deciding that God was punishing Lot for his greed and flirtations with sin. Or he could have acted slowly or resentfully, out of mere family obligation. But every indication is that he rushed wholeheartedly to the rescue! He held no grudges from their separation and Lot's choice of land; rather, he had forgiven Lot for any offense.

This episode also shows how rich and strong Abram had become. In this era, chieftains held sway over small fiefdoms, making local alliances in delicate webs of power-balancing. In such an era, Abram was a major player. He had allies. He had a sizeable, trained militia. He probably had military experience already, for he showed a general's leadership and good tactical strategy in his pursuit of the enemy.

After his victory, Abram showed the purity of his motives by declining any share of spoils or reward. Though he allowed his men to accept some, he refused because he didn't want to obligate himself to a pagan king and because he wanted God alone to receive the credit for his wealth—a lesson learned in Egypt (vv. 22-23).

As for Melchizedek, he's mentioned once more in the Old Testament—in Psalm 110, a messianic psalm. As both king and priest, Melchizedek became a type of Christ.

APPLY THE WORD Melchizedek is mentioned a number of times with reference to Christ in the book of Hebrews. This week, why not dig deeper into this New Testament epistle? Spend extra time in the Word reading, analyzing, and meditating especially on those passages that speak of the priesthood or "order of Melchizedek." The relevant passages are found in chapters 5-7. Compare your interpretive conclusions with commentaries, and after you summarize major themes, prayerfully seek to apply them.

Genesis 14

Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. - Genesis 14:19

TODAY IN THE WORD In cinema, a zoom lens can change the audience's understanding of a situation. By zooming in very closely on a person's face, a viewer can see every twitch or eye movement, creating a personal aspect to the picture. Zooming out creates distance, but with it comes the added perspective of knowing what's going on around the subject.

We've been following Abram closely to this point. Today, we zoom out to see the bigger picture of the world he was in. We might have the impression that Abram was living in seclusion in the land of Canaan, but Chapter 14 reminds us that in key ways Abram was not alone.

First, wars were going on around him; a war between nine kings (v. 9) could not have gone unnoticed by Abram, and it didn't. Before long, he, too, was involved.

His involvement stemmed from another aspect in which Abram wasn't alone. Even though he was separated from Lot, Abram had not at all forgotten him. When he learned of Lot's capture by foreign kings, Abram came to the rescue. Amazingly, Abram had already amassed a battalion of 318 men—truly God had blessed him!

After the battle had ended, we learn yet again that Abram wasn't alone—the existence of Melchizedek proves that Abram wasn't alone in his faith. Scripture highly esteems Melchizedek, using his dual priesthood and kingship to foreshadow the reign of Jesus Christ (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:1-10). That's important to understand if we are to have a proper perspective of the Patriarchs. While we can trace our faith back to him, faith didn't originate with Abram. It also shows that God didn't select Abram out of necessity—unlike Noah, he wasn't the only person at the time who believed in God.

Abram's refusal to accept the spoils of war from the king of Sodom shows his proper understanding of the promise of God. He knew that his inheritance would come from Him, and he didn't want to be in debt to such a wicked king.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Abram wasn't alone, and neither are we. Like he was, we're surrounded by strangers who don't share our faith. Each of us has friends and family members who need our help. And we have fellow believers who can help us. Are you prepared to put your faith in action as Abram did—to lend help to those in need, to show thanks to those who help, and to resist temptation from the wicked? Call on God for help.

Genesis 15

Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. - Genesis 15:1

TODAY IN THE WORD The United Nations declared 2004 as the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and Its Abolition, with August 23 marked as a special day for historical remembrances and celebrations of freedom. One of the U.N.'s purposes was to raise awareness that forms of slavery remain a problem around the world. For example, women and girls are trafficked from Africa and Eastern Europe into Western Europe for the sex trade. Chattel slavery still exists in parts of Africa, and bonded labor remains common in South Asia. Millions of people suffer from these and other illegal and sinful practices every year.

Slavery has a long and tragic history in human societies. In today's reading, it was prophesied that Israel would endure bondage for about 400 years. Thankfully, that prophecy was given in a gracious context: God renewed His covenant with Abram and encouraged his faith. Abram was living a life of purpose, but he still had no son and the fulfillment of God's pro-mise now appeared impossible.

Nonetheless, God reiterated it and even said his children would be as numerous as the stars. Imagine the faith required for an elderly couple to believe this! Following chapter 14, God's promise to be Abram's "shield" took on even more meaning. Though he and his family were outsiders in Canaan, God would protect them. And though he had just refused the booty of war, God Himself would be his reward (v. 1).

To his credit, Abram believed the Lord (v. 6). To boost his faith even more, God performed an elaborate ceremony. Sacrificial animals were cut in two, with the two halves placed on opposite sides. Normally, two parties in a covenant would pass between the halves together, signifying that if they broke their promise they convicted themselves to be "cut in half" (cf. Jer. 34:18-20). On this occasion, however, God passed between the sacrifices alone, signifying that He alone was the sole guarantor of the covenant. He repeated the promise of land and gave additional revelation about Abram's death and the future period of slavery, hinting at the cycles that operate within God's just, eternal plan (vv. 13-16).

APPLY THE WORD In today's reading, God gave Abram a natural object lesson. He took him outside at night, showed him the array of stars, and promised him that his descendants would outnumber them. Have you ever created an object lesson to illustrate a spiritual truth? If not, today might be a good time to try. This can work in either direction; you can pick a favorite spiritual truth and then think of a way to illustrate it, or find an interesting natural fact and reflect on what spiritual truths it might capture.

Genesis 15

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. - Genesis 15:6

TODAY IN THE WORD Comedian Steven Wright once said, “A clear conscience is usually the sign of bad memory.” As we study the life and faith of Abram and the Patriarchs, we'll be reminded regularly that they were far from sinless. But thanks to justification by faith, their sins, and ours, could be forgotten and forgiven.

Actually, God promises so much to Abram in this passage—offspring as innumerable as the stars (v. 5), extensive land (v. 18), and victory over the inhabitants (vv. 19-21)—that it's easy to forget the remainder of the prophecy—four centuries of enslavement and oppression were guaranteed to Abram's descendants (v. 13).

But the most notable thing given to Abram was the one thing that could not be taken away or enslaved: the credit of righteousness from God (v. 6). This is the first time that the word righteousness appears in the Bible, and it's interesting that it precedes any laws or commandments given to Abram. Abram believed, and in God's economy, that was a worthy exchange for righteousness. Notice that righteousness wasn't something Abram did—it was given to him.

God also reaffirms to Abram that his promised descendants would be from his body, not just his house. The affirmation comes after Abram expressed some doubt as to how the promise would be fulfilled. God's word alone was enough to convince him. But when it came to possessing the land, Abram wanted some additional sign that he would be able to acquire it (v. . So God confirmed it with a covenant that detailed the boundaries of the Promised Land and the people God promised to give over to Abram.

Some interpret “river of Egypt” to mean the Nile, but it more likely refers to a wadi or riverbed called the River of Egypt, nearly a hundred miles east of the Nile River delta. Eventually, Israel's southern border did reach the River of Egypt, but it has yet to approach the Euphrates River.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY The land that God promised to give Abram has yet to be fully claimed by his descendants and is still at the heart of much contention both between the peoples of that land and among the scholars who study it. But the righteousness that God credited for Abram's faith is indisputable and freely available to all. Christ's suffering on the cross paid our debt of sin in full, and His righteousness is ours to claim. You can believe in Him and accept His gift of righteousness.

Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:1-5

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. - Ephesians 2:8

TODAY IN THE WORD Following the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant was showered with gifts by admirers and people grateful that the terrible war was over. Grant received so many presents that one newspaper even grumbled about the way the former "stern soldier" gladly received these gifts--which reportedly led Grant to develop a taste for lavish living.

It's hard to turn down a reward when it's set before you, especially if you think you've earned it. Abraham had a great opportunity to enrich himself after defeating an alliance of kings who attacked Sodom and Gomorrah and took his nephew Lot captive (Gen. 14:1-12).

Abraham and his men rescued Lot and all the goods that had been taken, and the king of Sodom offered to let Abraham keep all the property. But Abraham refused the reward as an act of faith (vv. 22-24), because he had committed his future to the Lord.

This is the context for God's further promise that He would be Abraham's security and reward (Gen. 15:1). This assurance dealt with whatever fear Abraham may have had for his future after passing up the reward offered to him.

Abraham understood that the Lord's promise to make him into a "great nation" (Gen. 12:2) required him to have an heir. Enough years had passed since the promise that Abraham began to wonder if he would have to name his servant Eliezer his heir.

It's not entirely clear if Abraham's question (Gen. 15:2) was an evidence of doubt. This is a possibility because even though Abraham was faithful, he wasn't perfect.

But God restated the promise in no uncertain terms. Abraham's heir would be "a son coming from [his] own body," and his descendants would be as many as the stars (vv. 4-5).

Abraham's response to this was to believe the word God spoke, and to receive God's declaration that he was righteous--that is, Abraham believed God in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances.

APPLY THE WORD Many lost people may tell you about the good things they are doing to earn their place in heaven--much as Paul said that Abraham could have bragged about his good works. The problem is that human goodness has no weight with God, a reality that lost people have to understand.

Genesis 15:1-18

TODAY IN THE WORD - When the U.S. Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, the new nation considered it an occasion worth celebrating. Colonial leader John Adams said of the new holiday, "I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty."

It's obvious on this Fourth of July that our country has moved a long way from the ideal John Adams had of worshiping and thanking God on Independence Day. But anytime God grants deliverance to a person, or a nation, it's an occasion to thank and worship the Lord. Abram in Genesis 15 is a case in point.

Today's verses describe an independence day for this patriarch who is so crucial to the story of God's righteous line. God had delivered Abram from the marauding kings who had kidnapped Lot (Gen. 14:1-24). And the Lord made a covenant with Abram, promising him that a new nation would be born from his own child and would live in its own land.

Our primary focus today is on verses 1-6 of Genesis 15, which provide the next bridge connecting the line that leads to God's Redeemer. Abram received God's specific promise that a son would be born to him, so he didn't need to adopt his faithful servant, Eliezer. The promised son was Isaac, who was born years after Abram tried to "help God out" by fathering Ishmael (see tomorrow's study).

We have an advantage as we read this story, because we have the Bible's later revelation about what God was planning in the lives of Abraham and Isaac. The apostle Paul referred to Isaac as the son of God's promise, even though Abraham would have other children, children of promise (see notes Romans 9:7; 9:8; 9:9). Isaac was therefore the "offspring" through whom the promised Redeemer would come.

John Adams' hope that Independence Day would be observed with "solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty" can still happen

Genesis 16:1-6

Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her. - Genesis 16:2

TODAY IN THE WORD Boxer James “Quick” Tillis had big plans when he arrived in Chicago looking for his career to take off. After stepping off of a bus downtown, he placed his suitcases down on the sidewalk and looked up at the Sears Tower. Surveying the majesty of the skyline, Tillis proudly proclaimed to himself, “I am going to conquer Chicago!” When he looked down, his suitcases were gone.

Self-serving plans can wind up hurting us. The main theme that we have examined so far has been Abram's surrender of all he had, so that God could provide him with something better. Today, that focus shifts. Sarai calls Abram's attention to what God had withheld from them—a child—and she works out a plan of her own to meet her desire for a family. The results didn't go as planned.

To understand this story, we can look at the situation from a number of angles. God promised to give Abram descendants through his body, but he had not yet specified Sarai as the intended mother. And from a cultural point of view, the practice of using a servant as a surrogate mother was probably commonly accepted. Was this Abram and Sarai's heartfelt attempt at faithfully following God's will? Not at all.

Neither Abram nor Sarai mention God's promise for descendants in this passage. The only motivation cited in these verses is that Sarai wanted to “build a family” (v. 2). Abram's silent agreement with the plan conspicuously raises our attention. His actions bear an eerie similarity to Adam's participation with Eve in eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6). The text does not suggest that Abram and Sarai were attempting to “help God out” in fulfilling His promise. Sarai's plan was an act of self-service, an attempt to provide for herself what God had not given. Sarai's actions after Hagar conceived prove her spirit of selfishness. She wasn't even satisfied when her goal was accomplished. Instead, she drove Hagar away and didn't, as she had originally said that she intended to do, consider Ishmael to be her own son (21:9-10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY This passage is often used to argue that we should not use our ways to try to accomplish God's will. But from what we see in the text, Sarai was hardly trying to accomplish God's will at all—her own ego and status were what she cared about. The real lesson here is this warning: never use God's will as an excuse to defend our own selfish desires. Instead, let us make Psalm 119:35 our prayer, “Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.”

Genesis 17

I will establish my covenant . . . between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. - Genesis 17:7

TODAY IN THE WORD We can sometimes tell a person's job by his or her clothing. Just by looking, we can see whether someone is a police officer, letter carrier, pizza delivery man, or subway conductor. People usually wear uniforms that visibly advertise their profession and set them apart. In a sense, a uniform is a kind of “sign” to others of their function in society. Similarly, God gave Abram and his family circumcision as a sign of their chosenness and His covenant with them. This is the second sign we've encountered so far in Genesis—the first was the rainbow, given to Noah. A good definition of a sign is “a physical representation of a spiritual reality.” The spiritual reality here was the covenant. You'll recall that its provisions were that God promised to make Abraham into a nation, give his descendants the land of Canaan, and be their God. Abram was to respond by walking before God in righteousness. For him to keep the covenant also meant to worship God alone, resisting the idolatrous, polytheistic culture around him. To commemorate the establishment of male circumcision as a special sign of this covenant, God changed the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah. This signaled a decisive moment in their spiritual history. Now they belonged wholly to God—He had named them as parents name their children. Very humanly, though, Abraham wondered about the fact that he was 99 years old and still had no son with Sarah. Actually, he laughed at the idea and begged God to accept Ishmael as the heir of the promises. God told him that indeed Ishmael, as a son of Abraham, would be blessed, but he wasn't the covenant son. Isaac, meaning “he laughs,” would be born in about a year's time. Encouraged by a specific timeframe, Abraham obeyed God and circumcised all the males in his household “that very day” (v. 23). Circumcision may seem far from our theme of purpose, but in fact it's integrally connected. We are to live with circumcised hearts, meaning we are to be obedient, faithful, dedicated, and worshipful (see Deut. 10:16-21; 1 Cor. 7:19).

APPLY THE WORD Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant, a physical reminder that God had chosen the Jews to be His special people, with special responsibilities. In a similar way, but less formally, does your house show any sign of your faith? Any physical evidence of your beliefs and life-purposes? It might be as simple as a verse on the wall, a cross on the bookshelf, or your child's Sunday school lesson posted on the refrigerator. More important, does this sign truly remind you that you are a child of God

Genesis 17:1-27

He laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old?" - Genesis 17:17

TODAY IN THE WORD One night after a performance, a woman greeted Victor Borge to tell him how much she appreciated his humor, but her words didn't come out exactly as she intended: "I haven't laughed that much since my husband died!" A response of laughter also seems inappropriate when receiving God's promise.

When Sarai told Abram her plan for starting a family through another woman, Abram went along with it. When God told him the divine plan for providing descendants, he laughed. If you're wondering how often God's statements prompted laughter, it was pretty rare. The only other Old Testament figure to laugh at God was Sarah, as we'll study tomorrow.

If anyone but God had predicted that Abraham and Sarah (their newly given names) would bear a child, it would obviously be a joke. When God appeared this time, He intensified the specifics of His promise to Abraham, especially the action that He wanted Abraham to take. He begins by declaring the expectation of blamelessness and allegiance to God (v. 1) and then reveals that the covenant would be everlasting (v. 7). He then spells out the method for signifying the covenant. With the institution of circumcision, God was establishing a physical mark for His chosen people. It was mandatory not just for Abraham and his sons, but for everyone who would be part of his entire household, whether as physical descendants or servants.

But the most dramatic revelation in this passage was how Abraham would receive an heir. A son, whose very name God chose, would be born to Abraham (age 99) through Sarah (age 90). Abraham laughed out loud but internalized his doubt (v. 17), asking only that God's blessing might go to Ishmael instead (v. 18). But God's plan was distinctly for Isaac, who had yet to be conceived. The text gives us no indication of Abraham's level of belief, although tomorrow's passage seems to indicate that, as a couple, Abraham and Sarah weren't completely sold on the idea. They were unaware of how far God would go to keep His word.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY God had chosen a name and created a plan for Isaac before his parents ever thought he could exist. And that plan included the means for our salvation. Here are two points to remember. First, God cares for you so much that He's been planning your salvation since before the Patriarchs of our faith were even born. Secondly, God has plans for you that extend far beyond the here and now. You are significant, and your life can have eternal, global implications.

Genesis 17:15-18:15; Hebrews 11:11-12

Is anything too hard for the Lord? - Genesis 18:14

TODAY IN THE WORD Children born in biblical days were often given names that reflected their parents' circumstances before that child's birth. Isaac (meaning "laughter") certainly fit into that category, because both of his parents laughed at the idea that Isaac would ever be born.

The two laughers were Abraham and Sarah. They considered themselves far too old to become parents after so many years of being childless. But Isaac was born when his parents were age 100 and 90, respectively, and it's a story of doubt and faith that we can learn from today.

The problem with Abraham and Sarah is that they laughed in doubt. It had been twenty-five years since God first promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, and yet nothing seemed to be happening. Fourteen years earlier (Gen. 16:16), Sarah had tried to help the promise along by giving her servant Hagar to Abraham, resulting in the birth of Ishmael.

But God had other plans. Abraham wavered for a moment when God announced that Sarah would have a son and become "the mother of nations" (Gen. 17:16). That struck Abraham as so unlikely that he laughed and asked God to make Ishmael his heir. God did not directly rebuke Abraham, but restated His plan to establish His covenant through Isaac.

Abraham's full confidence in God was restored by the time God Himself and two angels appeared to the patriarch in the form of three men. This time, Sarah laughed inwardly in disbelief as she heard the promise of a son being made one more time (Gen. 18:12).

Despite these displays of humanness, God kept His promise to send Isaac. Abraham was commended for believing that God could bring life from two people who were as good as dead when it came to having children (Heb. 11:12).

APPLY THE WORD Have you ever laughed at the idea that God could do something that seems impossible to you?

Genesis 18:1-14

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. - Genesis 18:18

TODAY IN THE WORD Tabloid newspaper headlines often claim the unverifiable or the unbelievable: “Space Alien Weds Oklahoma Woman”, “Loch Ness Monster Found”, “Abraham Lincoln Alive and Well in New York City.” Walking past the newsstand or standing in line at the grocery store, we chuckle and wonder who comes up with this stuff.

How about this one? “Ninety-Year-Old Woman to Bear a Son.” When Sarah heard the news, she laughed as well. But as incredible as it was, the source was not a tabloid, but God Himself—and God’s promises always come true.

At this point in history, God’s plan of mercy was focused on a specific person, Abraham, out of whom would come a nation, Israel. This plan, however, encompassed the whole world, as seen in His covenant promise to Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3).

God’s promise of a son had first been made years earlier; in today’s reading Abraham and Sarah were well past the age of having children and were still childless. To boost their faith, the Lord Himself and two strangers (who turned out to be angels) paid them a visit. He came in Person to enjoy hospitality in Abraham’s dwelling. As we saw with Adam, Eve, and Noah, God deals with people personally, with implications that ripple far into history.

Abraham and Sarah’s visitors specifically promised that they would have a son within a year. Sarah laughed at the news, an understandable human reaction, but one showing a lack of faith. With supernatural knowledge of her actions and attitude, the Visitor challenged her, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (v. 14). Abraham, on the other hand, “considered him faithful who had made the promise” (Heb. 11:11-12).

APPLY THE WORD In addition to studying with us this month, another way to get a sense of the unified flow of biblical history is to listen to *The Ancient Faith*, a trilogy of albums on the Old Testament, by musician Michael Card. We suggest you take time to listen to these albums carefully, reading the lyrics and meditating along with the music. You can use this music during your quiet time with the Lord or family devotions. Doing so will enrich both this month’s devotions and all your interactions with Scripture.

Genesis 18:1-15

Is anything too hard for the Lord? - Genesis 18:14

TODAY IN THE WORD After winning the 1912 election, Woodrow Wilson visited an aunt to tell her the news that he would be the next president. “Oh yes? President of what?” she asked. When he told her, “The United States,” his aunt replied, “Oh, don’t be silly.”

Sometimes the truth is unbelievable, especially for someone who has lived long enough to think they’ve seen everything.

When the three visitors arrived at Abraham’s tent, it was the first record of Sarah ever witnessing the Lord’s appearance. What looked like three men was actually a gathering of two angels (19:1) and the Lord (v. 13). Many scholars doubt that Abraham actually recognized the Lord, which is why verse 3 is translated “my lord” instead of “O Lord.” But Abraham gave his guests the royal treatment as soon as he saw them (v. 2), and his demeanor never changed throughout the chapter. The text provides us no indication of a moment of delayed realization on Abraham’s part, which seems to indicate he knew all along it was the Lord.

Sarah, on the other hand, was likely unaccustomed to face-to-face divine meetings. She may not have even received the message from Abraham that God would give her a son. So, for the second time in as many chapters, God’s message made someone laugh. Sarah clearly didn’t realize that her private moment of doubtful laughter would be overheard or that the person to whom she was listening could even read her thoughts. Her fear at this development caused her to lie (v. 15).

If any of us had been in Sarah’s position, we probably couldn’t expect to act any more admirably. She had been uprooted from her home, moved over a thousand miles while living in tents, and taken into Pharaoh’s harem. She went childless until age 90 and then was told that in one year she would be giving birth—how would you have reacted?

The important thing is how God responded. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (v. 19). Of course the answer is “no,” even when it’s hard for us to believe.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY What a wonderful reassurance to know that God’s power far exceeds our faith. Abraham and Sarah both laughed when God told them what He planned to do through them—that’s how outlandish His prediction seemed. The other side of that coin could be a bit challenging, though—God could desire to use you in similarly unthinkable ways. Ask Him today to reconstruct your definition of the word impossible. Then be aware of His leading in ways that you may not have been expecting.

Genesis 18:1-15

TODAY IN THE WORD - In Mudhouse Sabbath, Lauren F. Winner observed, “Christians and Jews hold in common one theological basis for hospitality: Creation. Creation is the ultimate expression of God's hospitality to His creatures. In the words of one rabbi, everything God created is a “manifestation of His kindness. [The] world is one big hospitality inn.’ As church historian Amy Oden has put it, “God offers hospitality to all humanity . . . by establishing a home . . . for all.’ To invite people into our homes is to respond with gratitude to the God who made a home for us.”

Abraham practiced such hospitality in today's reading. Three mysterious strangers appeared at his tent door one day. He welcomed them and bowed low, showing appropriate cultural politeness and respect. He washed their feet (meeting the same practical need as Jesus famously did during Passion Week). He served them an excellent meal and stood nearby, ready to serve as their “waiter” if needed.

As it turns out, two of these strangers were angels on their way to visit Lot before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The other was the Lord Himself, and many theologians believe it was a theophany, a physical manifestation of God the Father (v. 22). This means that it was God Himself who again promised Abraham a son, or rather, reminded him of the promise. As Abraham had done in the previous chapter, an eavesdropping Sarah laughed in disbelief at this news. God saw her hidden thoughts and actions, and emphasized the truthfulness of His promise. Now Isaac's name would always remind both of them of their doubtful laughter!

Another key point here comes as a rhetorical question: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (v. 14; cf. Jer. 32:17-27). Similarly, Jesus said, “With God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). All things! Too often we don't really believe this. Instead of living by faith in who God is and what He has said, we “hedge our bets” to avoid embarrassing Him, so we think. We need instead to step out boldly, wholly trusting God to be all that He really is.

Today's application follows naturally from Abraham's treatment of his three guests. Practice hospitality. Open your home in a friendly and generous way. Invite someone over for dinner soon.

Your guest might be a new family at your church, an international student at a nearby university, or the neighbor over your back fence. Hospitality is a concrete way to show God's love to others. And who knows? You also may entertain angels without knowing it (cf. notes Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:8; 4:9; 10).

Genesis 18:16-33

He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. - 2 Peter 3:9

TODAY IN THE WORD Amsterdam's "red light" district is known for its drug addicts and prostitutes. Many try to avoid this part of the city, but for the Christian outreach, Youth with a Mission, this neighborhood was the perfect place to establish a base. Outreach workers frequently go on "prayer walks," during which they pray against the obvious evil of this district and for the salvation of its residents.

Yesterday we saw that God chose Abraham to bless all the peoples of the earth. Abraham certainly wasn't perfect, and neither were some of his interactions with other nations. For example, when Abraham lied about Sarah in Egypt, great sickness came upon the Pharaoh's household (Gen. 12:10-20). But foreigners, such as Eliezar of Damascus (Gen. 15:2), became part of Abraham's household and shared in God's covenant blessings. Genesis 18 shows that Abraham blessed people around him by praying for them.

When the three divine visitors who announced that Sarah was going to have a son were about to leave, the Lord revealed to Abraham His intentions against Sodom and Gomor-rah (v. 20). No wonder Isaiah 41:8 says that Abraham was the friend of God. Abraham's mercy and justice not only reflect the Lord's work in him, but also show his own heart.

This is the second time that Abraham acted on behalf of Sodom. The first time, he intervened militarily (see Gen. 14:14); this time, he intercedes spiritually. Both times, Abraham is concerned to protect the righteous. At first, the exchange in Genesis 18 sounds more like a business deal than a prayer session! But Abraham's questions show his concern for the entire city, not just Lot and his family. Abraham wants to affirm that Judge of all the earth (v. 25) will do the right thing.

Indeed the Judge of the earth does the right thing, but sadly this meant the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Despite Abraham's prayers, the residents of Sodom were too hardened in their sin. Yet the Lord faithfully rescued Lot and his family, even though it doesn't appear that Lot was a very good witness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Even people who don't read the Bible know that Sodom and Gomorrah are synonymous with wickedness. Given how terrible these places were, Abraham could have felt relief, or even satisfaction, over their judgment. Instead we see that he was grieved because of their impending destruction.

Do we feel grieved when we consider evil around us, knowing that many individuals are facing destruction? Are our hearts moved to intercession for them? Abraham's intercession is a challenging example for us all.

Genesis 19:1-29; 2 Peter 2:7-9

TODAY IN THE WORD According to a recent report, four-wheel-drive sport/utility vehicles were a hot item last summer at car rental agencies. So hot, in fact, that the agencies could not meet the demand. Why the big increase? One rental agency owner said it had nothing to do with the need for off-road driving capability. Instead, the popular vehicles have become a status symbol among the ""water-bottle and boat shoe set."" Driving a sport/utility vehicle sends the message, ""I'm a with-it person.""

Perhaps Abraham's nephew Lot would have bought into that mentality as well. We know he lived in the middle of the most worldly, ""with-it"" culture of his day--the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We also know Lot was headed for trouble the day he chose ""the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east"" (Gen. 13:11)--that is, toward those evil cities. In verse 13 of this same chapter, Moses added a fatal footnote: Sodom and Gomorrah were already headed for judgment.

Nevertheless, Lot plunged ahead. Genesis 13:12 and 14:12 make for an interesting comparison. Lot went from living near Sodom to living in Sodom. By the time we come to the end of his sordid story in today's text, it is clear that the polluted atmosphere of Sodom had smudged Lot's soul and obscured his witness.

Scripture sadly recounts Lot's failure to convince his sons-in-law that God was about to destroy Sodom. Even his wife left her heart in Sodom. She looked back at all she was leaving behind--and became a proverbial warning for anyone who would try to hang on to the world's trinkets (Luke 17:32).

Actually, things grew even worse for Lot when his daughters defiled themselves with him (Gen. 19:30-38). By many measures, it does not appear that Lot finished his earthly race well.

As Dr. Ronald Youngblood has pointed out, Lot built his life with the stubble of this world and was saved only ""by the skin of his teeth.""

How long has it been since you checked the ""building materials"" you have been using in your life? Are you creating a life of wood, hay and stubble, or one of materials that will last (1 Cor. 3:10-15)? Today is a good day to take a look at your activities from the perspective of Lot's disaster.

Genesis 21:1-8

God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. - Genesis 21:6

TODAY IN THE WORD In 2001, Americans spent \$2.7 billion in attempts to overcome infertility, a struggle that millions of families face. There is, perhaps, no more powerless feeling for a couple than being unable to bear children. Even with all the scientific innovations in the field of infertility, some would-be parents have no realistic hope of conceiving a child.

But occasionally, against all logic and scientific explanation, a miracle is born. For such a baby that brings so much overwhelming joy to his parents and all who know them, Isaac, “he laughs,” makes for a perfect name.

This time laughter came not as the result of doubtful surprise, but rather as the overflow of delight. In sharp contrast to Sarah's selfish plan to obtain children for herself through Hagar, God's miraculous provision of a son was an act of unsolicited, unmerited kindness. God gave Sarah the honor she had been seeking by giving her not only a son but also the ability to nurse him (v. 7). Even with Abraham and Sarah's imperfect faith, God poured out His grace in unimaginable ways.

Isaac grew, in the arms of parents with a combined age of 191 years, to be a healthy young boy. The weaning ceremony was a celebration of Isaac's growth beyond infancy, a baby graduation of sorts. God had fulfilled His spectacular promise, and Sarah clearly appreciated the wonder of the situation.

Abraham followed through on his covenant with God, circumcising Isaac as God had commanded (v. 4). It might seem like a small part of this story, but God's gift of a son would have meant very little if Abraham hadn't stayed true to the bigger picture. The innumerable descendants that God promised would come later, but Abraham's responsibility was with his one promised son. He even gave him the name God had chosen for him. He was indeed faithful with the small tasks. Tomorrow, we'll learn just how faithful Abraham would be with a monumental challenge of faith.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Much of what God promised Abraham was anchored in the future—a multitude of descendants, ownership of Canaan. Do you ever feel like your hope is all in the future? We can get anxious for heaven or even an unanswered prayer. Why not take some time to identify the Isaac in your life? Dwell on the joys that God has given you—the tangible displays of His grace. If you begin to grow impatient from waiting on God, thank Him for all that He's already done for you.

Genesis 22:1-18

But my covenant I will establish with Isaac. - Genesis 17:21

TODAY IN THE WORD In his book, *Four Trials*, John Edwards tells of losing his sixteen-year-old son in a car accident. He writes, “Nothing in my life has ever hit me and stripped everything away like my son's death . . . it was and is the most important fact of my life.”

If Abraham could have a choice to preserve one thing from all his possessions and his entire household, and to sacrifice all else to God, he likely would have chosen Isaac. He was the son God had named before he was even born with whom God would establish His covenant (Gen. 17:21). After sending Hagar and Ishmael away (see 21:8-21), Isaac represented Abraham's only son and his only hope for descendants.

But God asked Abraham to sacrifice the one thing he held most dear, and His precise instructions eliminated even the slightest loophole (22:2). All of Abraham's obedience up to this point was minor in comparison to this test. Would he—could he—slaughter his own son?

If today's newspaper carried the headline, “Man ties son to altar, prepares for slaughter. Says God told him to,” we would be outraged by the insanity of the idea. Abraham's unflinching faith is unnerving. Isaac's cooperation is frightening. But Abraham had a grip on the reality of the promise of God. Instead of being consumed by fear of the unknown, he held to what he did know. God said He would give him descendants through Isaac (21:12). That meant, no matter what, Isaac was in no danger. Abraham believed. He even thought God could raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19). What's truly remarkable here is that Scripture does not indicate the slightest hesitation or even a whisper of doubt on Abraham's part. He was prepared to kill his son in obedience to God.

The angel of the Lord stopped Abraham and provided a substitute sacrifice. Then, God swore the oath to beat all oaths: He swore on His own name to fulfill His promise (cf. Heb. 6:13-18).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Abraham's act of supreme sacrifice may seem unthinkable, but it's actually an encouraging example of what faith can enable you to do in God's name. Set aside some time to read Hebrews 11:1-12:2. It includes an astounding list of flawed but faithful men and women who, like Abraham, have risen victorious above impossible circumstances. Whatever challenge life might bring, God is always faithful. Don't lose heart!

Genesis 21:1-21

TODAY IN THE WORD - Why do we laugh in everyday life? Of course, we laugh when someone tells a joke, when we see a cartoon, or when we're watching a comedy. But we also laugh in amazement, excitement, surprise, resignation, anger, or bitterness. We laugh in admiration at someone's cleverness or achievement. We laugh to relieve stress or tension. We laugh for joy. We laugh when others are laughing, even if we're not sure why.

God transformed Sarah's laughter from the laughter of doubt to the laughter of celebration. Just as God had promised, her son Isaac was finally born. Both she and Abraham were so old—90 and 100, respectively—that clearly this was a miracle of God. He waited until He alone could receive the glory for this incredible birth.

As we've mentioned, the name Isaac means “he laughs,” a humbling reminder to both Abraham and Sarah that their faith had wavered. But God wasn't just rubbing their noses in their weakness. “Laughter” also signified a transformation—from weakness to strength, from incredulity to faith, and from sad or stoic waiting to joyful fulfillment. Through laughter, Sarah testified to the fact that they had been wrong and God had been right, that He had indeed done the impossible!

Their previous attempt to “help” God keep His promise, though, came back to haunt them. The birth of Isaac led to conflict with Hagar and Ishmael, now a teenager. Though expelling a son, even the son of a slave woman, was against custom, God overruled and the two of them were sent away (cf. Gal. 4:22-31). This act of obedience was difficult for Abraham, for he genuinely loved the boy. He was forced to trust God to take care of them, and He did—at a moment of crisis, He provided water and made a promise that Ishmael too would become a great nation.

What did this show about God? He is gracious, promising to make Ishmael into a nation as well. He is no respecter of persons, for He appeared and spoke to an Egyptian slave woman. He is also sovereign, and no man-made scheme can interfere with His grand design.

Abraham and Sarah had to laugh—God was right, they were wrong. Sound familiar? How many times have we insisted on our idea, only to discover that God's perfect, eternal streak of always being right is still going on?

Similarly to what you did on January 4, think of a time when you were wrong and God was right, then share that testimony with a friend or family member. By telling one another such stories, we strengthen each other's faith, give God praise . . . and maybe even laugh together!

Genesis 22:1-18

TODAY IN THE WORD - The Dome of the Rock is one of the most impressive buildings still intact from the ancient Middle East. The oldest surviving Islamic monument, it was built in the late seventh century as a shrine for pilgrims. The Prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, is traditionally said to have ascended to heaven from there.

Medieval Christians thought the Dome was the Temple of Solomon. It is indeed located on the Temple Mount, where Solomon's Temple and its successors stood long ago.

This site is sacred to Jews as well. A large slab of rock under the Dome is the place where tradition says Abraham prepared his son Isaac to be sacrificed. Solomon built the Temple on “Mount Moriah” (2 Chron. 3:1), while God had told Abraham to go to the “region of Moriah” (Gen. 22:2) for the offering of Isaac.

In complete faith, Abraham immediately obeyed, though his emotions must have been churning. Offerings to the Lord seemed to be customary at this time (v. 7), but this occasion was clearly different. Right from verse 1, God's command is shown to be a test of faith (cf. Deut. 8:2) the same central issue as in yesterday's story of Cain and Abel.

Abraham passed the test with flying colors. He trusted God with his only son the miracle child of his old age, the child of promise. He believed that God could resurrect Isaac from the dead if necessary (Heb. 11:17-19). This total submission and obedience to God's commands proved the strength of his faith (Gen. 22:12).

The ram that God provided (Gen. 22:8, 13-14) is Scripture's first mention of a substitutionary sacrifice. The ram, as well as Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and his belief in the possibility of resurrection for Isaac, links today's reading with Christ.

Abraham's faith versus Cain's faithlessness presents a vivid contrast. Abraham's total submission to God's will showed his heart and earned God's praise, while Cain's actions showed his heart and earned God's punishment.

Genesis 22:1-18

God himself will provide the lamb. - Genesis 22:8

TODAY IN THE WORD Abraham's faith-filled attitude of total submission to God is paralleled in the words of the classic hymn, "I Surrender All":

All to Jesus I surrender, All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him, In His presence daily live.
All to Jesus I surrender, Humbly at His feet I bow,
Worldly pleasures all forsaken, Take me, Jesus, take me now . . .
All to Jesus I surrender, Lord, I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power, Let Thy blessing fall on me.

Abraham withheld nothing from God, not even his only heir, the son of promise. Isaac was a beloved miracle child, one who embodied the hope of the covenant. But as a test of faith, the Lord asked Abraham to offer him as a sacrifice.

Abraham obeyed promptly, setting out the next morning. He also obeyed unwaveringly—after all, a three-day journey is a long time to think. He didn't know what God was doing, but he believed He could raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:19). In faith, he told Isaac that God Himself would provide a lamb.

He was right. At the crucial moment, God stopped Abraham: "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen. 22:12). Then Abraham saw a ram caught in a thicket, and sacrificed it as a burnt offering. He named the place "The Lord Will Provide"—in context, this communicates not an ordinary, daily provision, but an urgent, merciful, life-saving provision.

APPLY THE WORD If your house were burning down, what three items would you choose to save? You may have been asked this question before; considering it helps clarify what is really important or valuable in our lives.

Genesis 22:1-19

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. - Hebrews 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD The Bible is full of mystery. Of course we've got our theologians and pastors to untangle some of the knots, but certain stories seem to defy what we know and understand about who God is and how He works in this world. Today's narrative of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac has been described as one of the Bible's most challenging passages. In Eugene Peterson's words, "God seems to us to behave outrageously out of character."

For all of our shock, surprise, and even outrage as readers, Abraham himself seemed to have no hesitation when God asked him to sacrifice his son. Although it seemed utterly at odds with everything that God had yet revealed of Himself and His plans, Abraham obeyed, making thorough preparation for an unthinkable act.

The narrative is remarkably tight-lipped. We don't know Abraham's thoughts; we hear only one simple exchange between Isaac and Abraham. But what is clear is the cost of the sacrifice. Four times, in a single sentence, it crescendoes: "your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac" (v. 2). Abraham must give up, indeed must kill, the person whom he loves most.

It's not simply that Abraham loved Isaac. It's that Isaac embodied the very promises of God. God had promised to bless Abraham and to build him a family through Isaac. What would now become of the promise? What if God meant for Isaac to die? What if the promise failed? What if God failed?

Fear is faith's hungry predator. Fear threatens to devour our resolve to trust God and to risk obeying Him. For Abraham, the stakes were infinitely high. He had already forsaken his native land and sacrificed time and again before he began the climb up Mount Moriah. Was it for nothing?

Abraham models for us what it means to fear the Lord: we readily obey and willingly sacrifice. We reject the "what ifs" of fear, and we keep on believing that God is good even when life doesn't make sense.

APPLY THE WORD Fear is an opportunity for each of us to grow a deeper, more persevering faith. The question underneath our fears is simply this: who is God? Is God big enough, good enough, and faithful enough to handle what I fear? Are His intentions towards me ultimately for my good? Will I continue believing the promises of God, or will I believe somehow that He's failed? Our battle with fear requires us to be deeply rooted in the truth of Scripture.

Genesis 22:1-19

Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son. - Genesis 22:12

TODAY IN THE WORD Thomas Watson, a Puritan minister and writer, once said, "Love is the crowning grace in Heaven, but faith is the conquering grace upon earth."

In today's reading, Abraham teaches us a powerful lesson on the nature of true faith. God commanded him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, probably a young man by now. It was a test (cf. Deut. 8:2). What was the real quality of Abraham's faith? Was obedience at the core of his heart and worship? The answer was yes. Abraham obeyed promptly, setting out the very next morning for Moriah. Despite the fact that Isaac was his only son, the son he had waited so long for, the heir of promise and the seed of the covenant, he obeyed. No questions are recorded, but surely Abraham was in anguish. And since the journey took three days, he had plenty of time to doubt, reconsider, and turn back . . . but he didn't.

Abraham passed the test, obeying wholly and unconditionally. At the absolute last moment, God intervened and provided a ram to offer instead—the first recorded example of sacrificial substitution. The angel of the Lord said, "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (v. 12). The New Testament reveals that Abraham's faith was so strong he believed God could resurrect Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19). He had told his servants, "We will come back," meaning that He trusted God to do something (v. 5). Isaac showed faith and obedience as well, for as a young man he might have overpowered his father and escaped. With a sigh of relief and trust, they named the place, "The Lord Will Provide" (v. 14).

Abraham's actions not only revealed the nature of true faith, they also functioned as an act of dedication or consecration, an appropriate time for God to renew the covenant. This episode is furthermore a foreshadowing of Christ, for God the Father also sacrificed His beloved, only Son. He died in our place, as our "ram in the thicket." Yet death was not the end, for He conquered it and lives eternally!

APPLY THE WORD The best kind of faith gives up everything to God, holding nothing back, as Abraham did in today's gripping narrative. When we speak of the Lordship of Christ, this is what we mean—giving up absolutely everything to His loving control. Today, search your heart for things you've been withholding from Him . . . Your family? Your job? Your bank account? Pray to have the faith of Abraham, who bound his son Isaac for the sacrifice and literally laid his all on the altar.

Genesis 22:1-18

TODAY IN THE WORD - Writing about Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Bible commentator Allen Ross says, "It is one thing to claim to trust God when waiting for something; it is quite another thing to trust and obey His word after it is received. This was a test of how much Abraham would obey God's word. Would he cling to the boy now that he had him, or would he still obey and return him to the Lord? In other words how far would Abraham go in obedience? Did he really believe that God would still keep His word and raise the seed of promise?"

Abraham's obedience to God was certainly the focus of this dramatic event. Everything about the heavenly command seemed to fly in the face of Abraham's expectations from the God whose call he had heard and obeyed decades earlier.

For instance, the order to offer Isaac suggested human sacrifice, which Abraham may have known from his pagan days in Ur. But it must have seemed a stunning demand from the true God.

The key to this test, however, was in Isaac and all that he represented to Abraham. God knew Abraham loved his son (v. 2), so we can assume he felt the anguish any father would feel at the thought of losing a dear son.

But Isaac was also the promised child Abraham had waited twenty-five years for. All of the patriarch's hopes for the future rested in this boy, and for good reason. God had told Abraham, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned" (Gen. 21:12).

God's command even emphasized the importance of Isaac's place in His plan. He said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac" (v. 2). Isaac was not Abraham's only physical son, but he was the only son in the line of God's promise.

Abraham risked everything he hoped for when he tied up Isaac, laid him on the altar, and reached for the knife (vv. 9-10). At that moment Abraham passed God's test, and God provided a substitute sacrifice—a picture of the sacrifice the future offspring, Jesus Christ, would make to crush Satan and provide salvation.

Allen Ross is right when he says that it's harder to keep trusting God when we have the answer we've been waiting for.

Genesis 22:1-18; Hebrews 11:17-19

On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided. - Genesis 22:14

TODAY IN THE WORD In his wonderful book, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, Charles Swindoll makes these observations about the startling sacrifice that God commanded Abraham to make in Genesis 22. “We are often hindered from giving up our treasures out of fear for their safety. But wait. Everything is safe which is committed to our God. In fact, nothing is really safe which is not so committed. No child. No job. No romance. No friend. No future. No dream.”

Most of us are still learning the wisdom of trusting God with everything. Nothing is safe if it is withheld from God. Was Abraham somehow holding out on God by failing to commit Isaac to the Lord? There’s no evidence for that. Instead, God wanted Abraham to undergo the ultimate test of faith--whether he loved God more than anyone or anything else.

It’s hard to appreciate all that was at stake for Abraham. Isaac was a beloved and only son for whom his parents had waited twenty-five years. Fatherly love alone would be enough to make most fathers pull back in horror at the idea of giving up their only son.

But Isaac also represented every hope Abraham had for the future. It was God who promised to bless Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and no one else.

The writer of Hebrews says that Abraham obeyed God, believing that He had the power to raise Isaac from the dead (v. 14). That may appear to take the edge off of the test, but far from it.

First of all, Abraham’s confidence in God’s power reveals an incredibly strong faith in a day when there was no evidence of resurrection. Second, he still had to raise the knife over Isaac’s heart and bring it down. That would take great faith no matter what Abraham believed about the outcome.

APPLY THE WORD Let’s finish today’s study with Paul’s teaching on the importance of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12-20).

Genesis 24

There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: . . . the way of a man with a maiden. - Proverbs 30:18–19

TODAY IN THE WORD Basketball player A. C. Green waited many years to get married. During that time, he played in 1,192 consecutive games over 15 seasons—a streak that earned him the nickname of the NBA’s “Iron Man.” More importantly, he also spoke out strongly in favor of sexual abstinence and became a role model for many people.

“My beautiful wife has been well worth the wait,” the 38-year-old groom told the world on his wedding day, April 20, 2002. His new bride, Veronique, responded, “A. C. is the man I have waited for my whole life. To know that he has also been faithful in waiting for me is the best wedding present I could ever imagine.”

How romantic! Perhaps Isaac felt that way the first time he saw Rebekah, at the end of today’s reading. Although it would have been customary to marry his son with a Canaanite woman in order to form a local alliance, Abraham didn’t want that. So he sent Eliezer back to their old home to look for a wife for Isaac, trusting God to provide the right person (v. 7).

Eliezer is an interesting figure. As the chief servant, he stood to inherit Abraham’s estate before the births of Ishmael and Isaac. He might have obeyed his instructions halfheartedly or resentfully, but there’s no sign of that. In fact, like Abraham he shows faith and entrusts the task of choosing a woman not to his own wisdom but to God’s. His unlikely prayer is answered almost immediately, despite the hard labor involved. If Eliezer’s caravan had at least ten camels, and they had been in the desert several days, they would have needed about 25 gallons of water each. If an average jug was three gallons, Rebekah made 83 trips to water them!

From there, the wedding arrangements progressed rapidly. Eliezer gave her gifts and requested hospitality. At her house he introduced himself to the family and told his urgent errand before the meal had even begun. Then he negotiated, paid the bride price, and the next morning headed back to Canaan with the bride-to-be.

APPLY THE WORD Sometime soon for a child in your life, retell today’s story from the point of view of Eliezer. What might some of his feelings have been at different points in the story? How might we describe his faith, as seen in his actions? Imagine him reporting back to Abraham or celebrating the wedding feast of Isaac and Rebekah. Preparing to tell this story will give you fresh insights, and actually telling it should help it come alive for your young listeners!

Genesis 24:1-14

He will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there. - Genesis 24:7

TODAY IN THE WORD World War II General Mark Wayne Clark said that the best advice he ever received was “to marry the girl I did.” When asked who gave him that advice, he responded, “She did!” He then noted with seriousness that choosing a wife was one of the most important decisions of his life—and following the wise advice of his future bride brought him a lifetime of happiness.

When selecting a wife for Isaac, Abraham wanted a woman who would retrace his own faith journey from Ur to Canaan. He made his chief servant swear that he would not choose a woman from Canaan (v. 3), but instead make the 500-mile journey back to the region Abraham had left about 65 years prior (cf. 12:4; 17:24; 25:20). However, he forbade the servant from bringing Isaac, even if the woman he chose refused to return.

Abraham was being loyal to God. His direction was rooted in God's promise. God vowed that Isaac would inherit the land of Canaan, so Abraham wasn't about to let him leave. He had witnessed God's miraculous provision enough times to trust Him for every need, even a wife. He had complete confidence that God's angel would ensure the plan's success (v. 7). Isaac's wife would have to be someone willing to leave her home and family to inherit the land God promised. This extreme selectivity showed that Abraham wanted to build a family of faith.

Even Abraham's servant believed that God would provide, which reinforces the fact that belief in God was never exclusive to Abraham's direct descendants. His prayer for the Lord's help shows that he depended on God for success. After arriving in the city where Nahor, Abraham's brother, lived, he devised a test based on character rather than beauty or charm—and it was no small test. The servant had ten camels that had just traveled 500 miles, and one thirsty camel can guzzle up to thirty gallons of water in just ten minutes! To water them all would be a considerable act of hospitality. It would take a special woman to join the family of God's chosen people.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY What criteria do you use when you evaluate people? It could be a potential spouse or a pastoral candidate, a prospective employee or even a babysitter—it's important to look for people of faith and character. Don't rush into decisions about filling any position. Ask God to grant you success in these choices, even if you have to search hundreds of miles to find the right person. Has He not proven that He will faithfully provide?

Genesis 25:19-34

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated. - Genesis 25:23

TODAY IN THE WORD We all have our favorite foods, and opinions vary about the healthiest diets. What do the experts at the Mayo Clinic say? They recommend eating broccoli two or three times per week, as it helps protect vision and prevent cancer. They also suggest apples because they work against bad cholesterol, soy nuts that protect the heart and bones and reduce the risk of cancer, fish—especially salmon and tuna, and nuts like pistachios and almonds. One wonders what they might say about lentil stew!

Like Sarah, Rebekah for a time was unable to have children, a source of cultural, spiritual, and personal distress. But after twenty years of marriage, God answered their prayer with twins, Esau and Jacob. These two boys were destined for conflict. They had even jostled in the womb, and Jacob grabbed Esau's heel during birth. God chose the younger, Jacob, to be the inheritor of the promises and a patriarch of Israel, but this was clearly according to His sovereign right, not Jacob's intrinsic worthiness (v. 23). In fact, his early character is suggested by his name: the verb *aqab* means “follow at the heel,” but figuratively also “circumvent” or “overreach,” leading to the usual note that Jacob means “he deceives.” A note by the editors of the niv on the text of Jeremiah 9:4 points out that a deceiving Jacob later became an idiomatic expression.

Esau and Jacob grew into men of different characters, habits, and pursuits. Their parents played favorites, with Isaac preferring Esau the outdoorsman while Rebekah chose Jacob the more domestic son. Playing to his strengths, Jacob cleverly lay in wait one day. He knew Esau had been hunting and would be hungry, so he prepared a pot of lentil stew. When Esau arrived, he traded the stew for the birthright.

The birthright was the firstborn's inheritance, a double material portion of the estate. By giving it to Jacob, Esau showed contempt for something valuable and even sacred. He acted impulsively and foolishly, basically treating his stomach as his god (cf. Phil. 3:19; Heb. 12:16-17). That doesn't excuse Jacob's underhanded opportunism. Was the bargain reasonable? No, but the oath was binding.

APPLY THE WORD In response to today's story, cook some lentil soup or stew. Even if you haven't cooked lentils before or don't cook at all, give it a try. Cookbooks, friends, the Internet, or even your local grocery store can provide you with recipes. Our devotional time should focus on spiritual principles in the text, and rightly so. But we can reinforce these truths through physical action. The effort to prepare the stew and its enticing smell and delicious flavor can help you remember to value the blessings from God.

Genesis 25:19-26; 26:1-5

Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife. - Genesis 25:21

TODAY IN THE WORD The Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdos was told of a team of colleagues who had worked long and hard on a thirty-page proof for what was, in their eyes, an extremely complex theorem. Erdos spent ten minutes coming up with a two-line solution.

Perhaps the solution of Sarah's barrenness could have been much simpler as well. For whatever reason, the concept of praying for a son seemed to have eluded Abraham and Sarah. Actually, Abraham doesn't appear to have asked God for much of anything. The requests on record: when he asked the Lord to bless Ishmael (17:18) and when he pleaded that God spare Sodom from destruction for the sake of the righteous (18:22-23). Isaac, on the other hand, simply prayed for a child on Rebekah's behalf, and God answered.

During her pregnancy, Rebekah felt the babies struggling inside her and was understandably concerned (25:22)—the technology to detect twins in the womb was still 4,000 years away. Appropriately, she asked God for an explanation, and again, God answered. The prophecy that the younger son would rule over the older may have conflicted with cultural norms at the time, but it was the continuation of a family tradition in the line of Abraham. He wasn't the oldest son and clearly became the greatest. Isaac, younger than his half-brother Ishmael, was the child of promise. So, too, Jacob would become the patriarch of God's chosen nation of Israel, not his slightly older brother Esau. True to form, the struggle between Jacob and Esau lasted throughout the pregnancy, during delivery, throughout their lives, and through their descendants.

We turn our focus next to God's charge to Isaac, when He called him to not go (26:2). God made it clear that while He would give the land to Isaac and his descendants, Isaac's stay in the land would be temporary at this point. It was essentially a command to stay put . . . for now. The foretold enslavement in Egypt was still part of God's plan, but it was not yet time for that chapter in Israel's history (cf. 15:13).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Has God ever called you not to go? There may be times when God makes you wait for something you believe is His will for you. Don't be discouraged. Continually inquire of God and be willing to do what He asks when He asks. He has given us His own Son—He will not withhold any good thing from you. Just as we must be ready to go when He calls us, we must have the patience to wait as well.

Genesis 25:27-34; 27:15-40

"Are you really my son Esau?" he asked. "I am," he replied. - Genesis 27:24

TODAY IN THE WORD As Marie Antoinette and her family attempted to escape France during the revolution of 1791, her entourage disguised as poor commoners was easily apprehended. The royally vain woman, it is commonly believed, couldn't bear to make the escape without wearing her expensive perfume.

The key players in today's reading couldn't disguise their skewed priorities either. Esau's preferences—trading his chief inheritance for a bowl of stew—are unmistakably depraved. But let's not overlook what it reveals about Jacob's character: he preyed on his brother's foolish greediness.

In his shortsightedness, Esau chose to eat now rather than keep his birthright later. The birthright seems to differ from the blessing in that it was probably the human portion of inheritance—possessions, favor, and honor—whereas the blessing encompassed that which came from God—success, dominion over enemies, and the role of headship in the family (27:27-29).

How ironic that the price of both the birthright and the blessing was food. In his hunger, Isaac allowed the gratification of the meal, the smell of Esau's clothes, and the feel of animal skin to override what he plainly could tell was Jacob's voice. By acting without more closely considering the facts, Isaac showed little more regard for bestowing his blessing than Esau showed for his birthright. But Jacob exposes his priorities as well; he chose personal gain over integrity.

As for Esau, the news of the betrayal of blessing caused him and his father a great deal of grief. Apparently, the blessing was irrevocable, which left Esau with a lesser blessing from his father. The nature of these blessings is elusive. They carry too much force to be just the predictions of a dying man. If they were divine prophecies, how could trickery have played a part? God works through—and sometimes despite—our own conniving. God honored Isaac's blessings as part of His own act of blessing Jacob. He certainly had done little to deserve such grace.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY We all, on occasion, follow the fallen example of these Patriarchs, choosing instant gratification over the blessing of God when we set our sights on anything lower than eternity. Or perhaps you've been guilty of trying to win God's favor at someone else's expense. While these attitudes and actions don't preempt God's grace, they always introduce negative effects like dissension, distrust, and missed opportunities for glorifying God. Thank God for His faithfulness and seek His blessings (see Matt. 5:1-12).

Genesis 26:7-14

The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful. - Genesis 26:7

TODAY IN THE WORD If you've been following along with us all month, you've noticed that today's reading seems familiar. A famine in the land puts a man and his wife on the move. They reside in the land of a foreign king and pretend to be brother and sister. The king is astonished to learn the truth but treats the couple gracefully nonetheless. The man's riches multiply. Indeed, this story happened with Abraham already . . . twice.

As with the second occurrence in Abraham's life (Gen. 20), the king in question was Abimelech of the Philistines, though Isaac likely was dealing with the son of the king who had taken Sarah into his harem. (Abimelech was the title used by Philistine kings, similar to the title Pharaoh used by Egyptian rulers.) It's hard to fathom why Isaac—who had trusted God to provide him a son (25:21) and had been delivered from death by the angel of the Lord (Gen. 22)—would have been afraid, especially after God had appeared to him and reassured him. But this passage reminds us that Isaac and the Patriarchs were very human. It was God who made them great.

And so it followed that God blessed Isaac, not because Isaac proved himself worthy, but simply because God said He would (26:3). This time around, neither the king nor any of the men took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac and Rebekah had stayed in the land for quite some time, and apparently they grew careless in maintaining their cover. When the king found out, rather than retaliate for the deception, he ordered protection for Isaac and Rebekah. That in itself is evidence of God's protective hand.

But God didn't just bless Isaac by protecting him; He also increased his harvest (v. 12), his livestock, and his renown (v. 13). It may seem that the reward doesn't fit with Isaac's behavior, but recognize this: the grace of God is not a New Testament institution. He has always showered those He loves with undeserved blessing.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY All of us in one way or another have been guilty of repeating the same mistakes in life. We keep on failing, but God continues to love us. Today, respond in two ways. First, thank the Lord for the grace and mercy you experience so richly. Secondly, think of others who have let you down on multiple occasions, and extend grace to them as well. No matter what that person deserves, show them love as God has loved you.

Genesis 26:15-33

We saw clearly that the Lord was with you. - Genesis 26:28

TODAY IN THE WORD In today's world, when a man finds success everywhere he goes, he usually gets the credit. If a coach in sports wins championships with multiple teams, he's declared a mastermind. If an actress appears in many top-grossing films, she's labeled box-office gold. A businessman who has success in several businesses is considered an entrepreneurial genius. But in the time of the Patriarchs, people linked continued success with a power beyond that person.

The Philistines could see that something was different about Isaac, and it frightened them. The persecution of God's people began so early in their history; the Philistines attempted to cut off Isaac's water supply and force him and his household out of the area (vv. 15-16). Recall that a famine in the land had driven Isaac into the area in the first place (v. 1), so the search for water in the arid Negev region looked like a dire situation indeed.

The successful discovery of new water sources also appears all the more miraculous given the circumstances—and being repeatedly thwarted by the people native to the land may have struck Isaac and his people with great frustration and fear. When at last he was able to find a well with ample room for his people and herds, Isaac gave credit to God, not his own divining abilities (v. 22).

Once again God reassured Isaac that He would be with him and would bless and multiply his offspring (v. 24), a gesture met with appropriate worship from Isaac (v. 25). After all that God had done for Isaac, it's not surprising that he recognized God as the source of blessing. But what should catch our attention in this passage is that as a result of Isaac's faith and obedience, a foreign king and his people would have a proper understanding of who God is and how He is faithful as well.

Abimelech's persecution turned to an attitude of respect when he realized that the Lord was with Isaac. He and his men understood that it was better to have such a blessed man as an ally than an enemy.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Isaac didn't fight over wells that he could have claimed as his own, and eventually the king's heart softened. When people you know show hostility to you because of your faith, ask God to grant you a spirit of peace. Even when others take advantage of you for their own selfish desires, look for God to give you everything you need—including the possibility for reconciliation. No one can threaten God's promises to you. Take comfort in His gift of faith.

Genesis 26:34-27:13

Isaac . . . loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. - Genesis 25:28

TODAY IN THE WORD Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, " 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." If he had met this family, Tennyson might realize that he underestimated the negative effects of love gone bad.

The love we read about today distorts the selfless nature of true love. Esau loved women that wisdom should have kept him from marrying. God's covenant to Abraham suggested that Abraham's descendants were to keep separated from the people of Canaan, including the Hittites (Gen. 15:19-21). How could God give them victory over these nations if they were intermarried beyond recognition.

But the grief caused by Esau's wives (26:35) was not enough to change Isaac's high opinion of his eldest son. His favoritism moved him to give Esau his blessing, although it's unclear where he got the idea to do it. Esau and Jacob's troubled relationship may have reminded Isaac of himself and Ishmael. Just as Abraham's covenant was to be established with Isaac, Isaac could have been trying to duplicate that honor—or he could have been trying to mimic the blessing God gave him after his father's death (25:11). But it's unclear whether Isaac's blessing had any effect on future events other than widening the chasm between the feuding twins.

Whatever tradition Isaac had in mind, Rebekah's thoughts were running along the same track, just in the opposite direction. She was willing to trick her husband, taking advantage of his old age in order to see her favorite son prosper, even if it meant risking a curse (v. 13). Rebekah may have been motivated by her own interpretations of past messages from God. She may have taken it upon herself to fulfill the prophecy from her pregnancy (25:23).

But God's prophecy to Rebekah didn't require trickery for fulfillment. The future of Israel didn't rest in the blessing from Isaac—that blessing came from the Lord. All Isaac and Rebekah managed to pass on to their children was an attitude of greed and self-service.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Selfishness and pride disfigure the face of virtue, turning faith and love into deception and jealousy. Sinful motives like those in Isaac and Rebekah show up in our lives in ways more subtle than blatant trickery. Sometimes we play favorites with the gospel, reaching out only to those unbelievers we find attractive because of their style, popularity, or personality. Ask God to fill you with His unconditional love for all people and avoid the trap of false love and distorted faith.

Genesis 27:1-40

TODAY IN THE WORD - On October 30, 1938, Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater company deceived the United States. They presented a realistic radio drama based on War of the Worlds, a science fiction novel by H. G. Wells. It was too realistic—the actors' voices and sound effects convinced many listeners that they were hearing a real broadcast about an actual Martian invasion of Earth. People panicked, highways jammed, and some thought it was the end of the world. When Welles heard about this reaction during the broadcast, he went on the air to assure people it was only fiction. Their drama is remembered as one of the greatest media hoaxes in American history.

Jacob knew all about tricks and deception. In today's reading, he lied and deceived. He took advantage of his father's old age. He played the "parental favorites game" to perfection, as his mother helped him trick Isaac. The deception was quite thorough: the food was cooked just so, he wore goatskins to simulate Esau's body hair and his brother's clothes for the smell, and he told multiple lies in answer to his father's suspicious questions. And what about Isaac? God had told Rebekah that Jacob was the chosen one, and surely she communicated that to Isaac. Yet he ignored God's words and would have given the blessing to Esau. All in all, it was a shameful episode for everyone involved.

Isaac's blessing was formal and sacred. He gave Jacob authority and abundance, and despite the deceit his words still carried legal and spiritual force (vv. 28-29). When Esau discovered Jacob had stolen the blessing from him, his bitterness and anger forced his brother to flee for his life.

Despite the covenant, everyone in this story had lost their sense of purpose. How? Perhaps by trying to "help" God fulfill His promise—was that what Rebekah thought she was doing? Perhaps by disregarding God altogether—Jacob's reference to "your God" (implying "not mine") is a telling phrase (v. 20). No one in this chapter remembered God, appealed to Him, asked Him for guidance, or made any effort to obey Him. No wonder they had lost their purpose!

In light of the troubled family situation in today's reading, take a specific step to improve communication with your spouse or children. You may not be guilty of favoritism or deception, but perhaps there's another area in which you can take a step forward. Maybe it's discipline—do your kids know their boundaries? Or openness—do they know they can trust you? Or thankfulness—when's the last time you told your spouse what you most appreciate about him or her? Ask the Spirit to reveal a needed action, and then do it today.

Genesis 27:1-40 Hebrews 11:20

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. - Hebrews 11:39

TODAY IN THE WORD One basic principle of Bible study is that Scripture is often the best commentary on itself. Isaac's inclusion in Hebrews 11 is a good example of how one part of the Bible helps us understand another part. Hebrews 11:20 shows how God used Isaac to accomplish His purposes even in the middle of all the deception and anger that surrounded Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau.

This faith perspective is important because it's hard to see from Genesis 27 how anyone in Isaac's family was acting in faith. Isaac was famous mostly because of his famous family. He lived longer than either Abraham or Jacob, but there's not much space given to him in Genesis. His most clearly recorded act of faith was to pray that he and his wife Rebekah would have children (Gen. 25:21).

When it came time to pass on his blessing, Isaac turned to Esau, probably ignoring God's prophecy that Esau would be subservient to Jacob (Gen. 25:23). Isaac's decision was motivated more by his appetite than anything, because he liked what Esau hunted and cooked.

Esau had already shown his contempt for spiritual things when he sold his birthright to satisfy his own hunger. The Bible says that Esau "despised" his birthright (Gen. 25:34).

Jacob wanted the blessing that God wanted him to have, but he and Rebekah used deception to get it instead of acting faithfully. Jacob seems to have been more worried about getting caught than he was about the rightness of the plan.

All four family members had their own agenda, but God overruled this biblical "soap opera" and Jacob became the next in line to inherit the promises God first made to Abraham.

APPLY THE WORD God still overrules and uses human sin and weakness to work out His plan for our good and His glory.

Genesis 27:41-28:22

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. - Genesis 28:15

TODAY IN THE WORD Black lights, lamps that emit long-wave ultraviolet light, can be very useful for detecting counterfeits and forgeries in antiques and art. By using a black light, appraisers can make fractures, glue, and touch-up paint stand out like a neon sign. The righteousness of God and the sinfulness of His chosen people stand in stark contrast to each other in our readings lately, and that trend will continue. Even though His character is far removed from theirs, God's faithful commitment to His covenant with Abraham's descendants remains steadfast. We need the light of God's Word to discern between their sinful actions and the blessings God gives them despite it all. God was with Jacob as he journeyed toward the land of his relatives, but that doesn't mean God was in the decision to send him. Rebekah once again tricked Isaac, hiding her true reasons for wanting Jacob to leave Canaan (27:46). Apparently she didn't want Isaac to know what Esau had planned to do after Isaac's death. From the text, it seems that Rebekah must have died before Jacob returned to bury his father many years later (35:29). Isaac didn't share his father Abraham's fear of seeing his son return to Mesopotamia (cf. 24:5-8). Had Isaac employed the same discernment Abraham did, perhaps he could have spared Jacob from Laban's deception. At least he made the right choice in ensuring that Jacob avoided intermarriage with the Canaanites. At first glance, Jacob's dream seems out of place—the visuals, the ladder or staircase of angels going to and from heaven, bear little relation to the message. It's not until Jacob sets up his conditional test that we realize the importance of the vision (v. 21)—Jacob was not yet fully committed to God. The grandson of Abraham, who had been so devoted to God alone, now required more than God's word to verify God's claims. The vision of angels was enough to convince him of God's presence, but he still wanted to test God's faithfulness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY In some ways, Jacob looked the part of God's chosen one. He was blessed by Isaac, he didn't marry a Canaanite, and we recognize him as the father of God's people, the Israelites. But Jacob's heart was desperately sinful and his faith was barely noticeable. Don't allow your faith to be simply cosmetic. Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart today and expose every sinful thought and attitude. Confess your sin and let God change you from the inside out.

Genesis 28:10-22

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. - Genesis 28:15

TODAY IN THE WORD You've probably heard the "Footprints in the Sand" story. Two sets of footprints are found on the path of life—a picture of God and you walking together. But sometimes only one set of footprints can be seen in the sand. What happened at these times? Did God let you walk alone? Not at all. The end of the story reveals that the times when there was only one set of footprints were the times when God was carrying you.

Though perhaps overused, "Footprints in the Sand" communicates God's sure faithfulness. Jacob also learned this truth as we see in today's reading, especially in today's verse. At the time in his life, he was running away from his brother Esau who wanted to kill him for stealing his blessing. Jacob likely felt tired and depressed.

At this low point, God took the initiative to reveal Himself to Jacob in a dream. The stairway showed that the Lord was not inaccessible or uninvolved, but was connected to earth and human affairs, His "messengers" or angels going back and forth. He repeated the covenant pro-mises to Jacob, and added a personal dimension (Gen. 28:15).

As opposed to the local gods who supposedly ruled a particular part of the world at that time, the one true God was everywhere. He would be with Jacob and watch over him. He also promised that Jacob would return home one day, a promise fulfilled in Genesis 33:18-20.

Although Jacob recognized the Lord, his encounter with the Almighty God understandably left him fearful and awe-struck. After this experience, he set up a memorial stone and named the place Bethel, "house of God." The bold vow he made probably represented the deepening of true faith, though it also reflected his scheming, bargaining mentality.

APPLY THE WORD God has made the same promise to us that He made to Jacob in today's verse. To remind yourself of His never-failing presence and protection, commit to memory one of these Bible verses: Matthew 28:20b; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; or Isaiah 41:10.

Genesis 28:10-22

TODAY IN THE WORD - When author Charles Dickens visited Niagara Falls, he wrote, “I was in a manner stunned, and unable to comprehend the vastness of the scene. It was not until I came on Table Rock, and looked—Great Heaven, on what a fall of bright green water!—that it came upon me in its full might and majesty. Then, when I felt how near to my Creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one—instant and lasting—of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. . . . Niagara was at once stamped upon my heart, an Image of Beauty; to remain there, changeless and indelible, until its pulses cease to beat, forever.”

The awe Dickens felt at Niagara Falls is akin to the awe Jacob felt at Bethel—the sense that the finger of God had touched this place. And for Jacob this touch came at the most unexpected of moments. After the events we studied yesterday, Esau was in a murderous rage. Jacob had to run for his life, leaving behind not only his brother but also a father who was probably still displeased and a mother to whose apron strings he appeared firmly tied. As he bedded down in the wilderness that night, it probably didn't feel like he had the birthright and blessing of Isaac and the Lord.

But that night, Jacob dreamed of a stairway to heaven. We picture a ladder or modern stairway, but probably he saw something like steps up the side of a ziggurat. Angels were going up and down the stairs, signaling God's presence and His interaction with human affairs (cf. John 1:51). God spoke to Jacob in the dream, renewing the covenant and promising to be his God in a personal sense also.

God got Jacob's attention, and that night his heart started to change . . . a little. His vow still sounded a bit like a bargain (vv. 20-22). Nonetheless, he was awestruck by what he had seen and comforted by God's promise in the midst of desperate circumstances. He set up a stone of remembrance, anointed it with oil, and renamed the place Bethel, or “house of God.”

Throughout the Old Testament we have examples of God's people setting up places of remembrance as a testimony of what God has done. Do you have a “stone of remembrance” for God's work in your life? In the crush of everyday pressures we can lose sight of how much God has done, and our faith can be refreshed from recalling specific acts of God's goodness. Your “stone” might be a spiritual journal, a particular artwork or display that you have as a visual reminder, or maybe a favorite hymn or musical CD that helps you remember God's faithfulness to you.

Genesis 28:10-22

TODAY IN THE WORD - Author C. S. Lewis was known as a person of unlimited generosity and kindness to a wide array of people. When an army friend was killed in World War I, Lewis kept a promise by caring for the man's sister and invalid mother in his home until the mother's death in 1951. Lewis also opened his country home, The Kilns, to children from London who were relocated during World War II to protect them from German air raids. The Kilns itself fell into disrepair because of the “astonishing amounts” of money Lewis gave to people in need.

We have all known people like this--men and women whose lives seem to bless and lift everyone they touch. In a spiritual sense, this was also true of Abraham. His son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob, were the direct beneficiaries of Abraham's legacy of faithfulness to God. And through these patriarchs, “all peoples on earth” have been blessed (v. 14).

It's clear from Jacob's well-known dream that he was heir to a wonderful blessing. Even though Jacob was on the run from Esau after cheating his older brother out of his blessing, Jacob was still God's choice to carry forward the promise He made to Abraham. God reiterated this great promise to Jacob as he lay on his stone pillow at Bethel (vv. 13-14).

God's intention was to be with Jacob as He had been with Jacob's father and grandfather. The angels going up and down the stairway in Jacob's dream symbolized God's watchfulness and activity in his life. For all of Jacob's deceitfulness, at least he showed an interest in God that Esau apparently lacked.

Jacob's overnight stop in Bethel was an unforgettable, life-shaping experience for him. He made a vow to honor and serve God--but the rest of the story reveals that Jacob did not immediately reach great spiritual heights after Bethel. He was still Jacob, the con man at heart, until God wrestled him into submission and gave him a new name, Israel (Gen. 32:22-31).

We can act as a source of blessing to the people around us in the week ahead.

Genesis 29:1-30

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? - Jeremiah 17:9

TODAY IN THE WORD They both said “I do,” but only the groom had actual stars in his eyes.

When Russian astronaut Yuri Malenchenko got married in August, 2003, he was on board the International Space Station orbiting the earth, while his fiancée, Yekaterina Dmitriyeva, was at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. They had already set a wedding date; but when his tour of space duty was extended, they decided to go ahead and get married by video link. Texas law allows marriages even if both parties are not physically present. “We just decided that this was the ultimate cosmic soulful connection,” she said.

Today's reading describes another unusual wedding, or rather, weddings. Jacob had arrived at Laban's house and, lacking the ability to pay for a bride, struck a bargain to work seven years in exchange for the hand of his beloved, Rachel. He did what he had always done—relied on his cleverness to get what he wanted—but in Laban he met his devious match. On the wedding night, he slipped Rachel's sister Leah into the bed. The bride was veiled, it was dark, the groom may have had too much wine, and the trick worked.

Why did Laban dupe Jacob? Partially because it was the custom for older sisters to marry first, as he rationalized, but also for convenience (Leah was not attractive and had probably proven difficult to find a groom for) and additional labor (he suggested another seven years rather quickly). To keep Jacob happy, he allowed him to marry Rachel right away, which meant the absurdity of two seven-day wedding feasts back-to-back. The predictable results were mistrust between Jacob and Laban, Jacob and Leah, and Leah and Rachel, as well as an unequal marriage in which one wife was clearly more loved. God sympathized with Leah, despite the probability that she was complicit in her father's scheme, and blessed her with sons (v. 31).

Old ways are hard to change. The human heart is proud. Yet when Jacob saw a mirror of himself in Laban's words and actions, his self-confidence must have been shaken. It was all part of God's plan.

APPLY THE WORD If you have some extra time this week, we suggest you dig deeper into the Word on the topic of marriage and romance. Check out both narrative and expository passages, including difficult or controversial topics—be sure to look at what Paul says about singleness, for example, or why the Old Testament patriarchs were polygamous. What biblical truths and principles are especially relevant to you in your current situation? God's Word has much to say to each of us on this vital topic.

Genesis 29:14-30

I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me? - Genesis 29:25

TODAY IN THE WORD Justice J. Michael Eakin of the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court has a tradition of rhyming his opinions on court cases. In one ruling on a fraudulent prenuptial agreement, Eakin wrote, "A groom must expect matrimonial pandemonium when his spouse finds he's given her a cubic zirconium, instead of a diamond in her engagement band, the one he said was worth twenty-one grand."

Jacob also had a faulty "prenuptial" agreement. Not getting the ring you expected is one thing—discovering you married a different woman than you thought is quite another. He was fine with mistaken identity when he tricked his father for Esau's blessing, but felt differently when he was the one being tricked.

The story begins with Jacob in an unfamiliar position of servitude. If Isaac would have given Jacob some valuables for a dowry—or sent a servant to find him a wife as his father Abraham had done—Jacob would not have owed Laban a debt of service. But Jacob had not yet received any inheritance from Isaac's considerable wealth, and Laban took full advantage of the opportunity.

Jacob served seven years to earn Rachel's hand in marriage . . . or so he thought. Laban brought him his elder daughter Leah, and Jacob was apparently still distracted to pay attention to details like who he was actually taking as his wife. After Jacob's angry reaction and a week's wedding celebration, Laban allowed Jacob to marry Rachel in exchange for his promise to serve another seven years. The second seven-year stretch probably didn't pass nearly as quickly as the first.

Jacob also showed Isaac's tendency for playing favorites. His preference for Rachel over Leah would cause a deep jealousy between the sisters and a very contentious and strange chain of events involving the two maidservants Laban provided each of his daughters. All four women and their efforts to one-up each other would wind up producing Jacob's twelve sons.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Hopefully it takes a certain stretch of the imagination for you to relate to Jacob and Laban's deceit, but consider this: God used these acts of deception and foolishness to construct the foundation of His chosen nation, Israel. If you've ever felt like God couldn't use you to achieve His purposes, look at these people! He can use anyone. That should change how you look at other people, too. Learn to appreciate those around you as potential vessels for His glory.

Genesis 29:31-35

Now I will praise the Lord! - Genesis 29:35

TODAY IN THE WORD In his essay, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” C. S. Lewis wrote that God’s desired end for answering prayer isn’t that our requests themselves will be met but rather that our faith will be increased. He wrote, “Little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle.”

Leah’s weakness and suffering were met with unexpected grace from God. She didn’t need to ask for her first son, Reuben, who was given an appropriate name meaning, “Look, a son.” He just came in response to what God saw as a measure of His mercy on Leah for being the less-loved wife of Jacob. Leah acknowledged God’s kindness, but hoped that this son would increase her esteem in her husband’s eyes.

Her second son, Simeon, which means “hearing,” was so named because God had heard of Leah’s struggles. Once again, Leah connected the provision of a son with her desire for Jacob’s love. The same occurred with Levi, which means “attachment.” Leah thought that surely, the provision of three sons would be enough to solidify her standing and force Jacob to love her . . . but it didn’t.

With Leah’s fourth son, Judah, she didn’t mention Jacob in her response to God. She just praised God for what He did and gave her son the name that meant “praise.” Although further events would change Leah’s attitude, at this point in her life Leah’s satisfaction with what God gave her coincided with the temporary conclusion of God’s provision. God’s desire for Leah was not simply for her to produce sons—He desired her praise. If only Leah could have sustained her content spirit of praise, she may have responded with stronger faith and more godly character when she was again tested by difficult circumstances. But we’ll later see that Leah’s hope was still tied to the fulfillment of her earthly desires for the affection of her husband rather than for the love of God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Have you ever made a prayer list with two columns, one for “prayer requests,” and the other for “praises”? It is most definitely appropriate to praise God for answering our prayers, but our praise shouldn’t hinge on a response from God. Answered prayer is a reminder to praise God, but it shouldn’t be the reason we praise God. Spend some time today praising God for who He is. Our Savior, King, Comforter, Redeemer—the list of reasons to praise Him is endless. Let our praise for Him never cease.

Genesis 30:1-24

So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" - Genesis 30:1

TODAY IN THE WORD Frank Sinatra was known for his extreme passion, which sometimes got out of control. One of his most infamous tirades ended with him ripping the telephone off of his office wall and setting the room on fire. Allegedly, the offense that sparked his anger was that the color of his telephone clashed with his outfit.

It may be just as hard for us to identify with Rachel's overreaction to the birth of Leah's children, but her desperation shows the high value that had been placed on a woman's capacity for bearing children, especially boys. Part of God's promise to Abraham was a multitude of descendants, and the women who married into his line apparently took that promise to heart.

If Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, he had a poor way of showing it. His anger against his wife reflected rather than diffused his wife's emotion. As his grandfather had done, Jacob took his wife's servant as his wife to produce his fifth and sixth sons, Dan (which means "justice") and Naphtali (meaning "wrestling").

Not to be outdone, Leah gave her maid to Jacob as a wife, and she bore him sons Gad ("luck" or "fortune") and Asher ("happy"), bringing the total number of sons to eight. The tactic of increasing Jacob's wives brought him a growing family, but it had unsurprising negative effects as well. For example, Leah didn't just stop bearing children—she had to resort to petty bargaining just to spend a night with her husband (v. 16).

Nevertheless, God granted grace to this family, blessing Leah with two more sons (Issachar meaning "reward" and Zebulun meaning "dwelling") and a daughter, Dinah. Finally, after all the jealous plotting and scheming, God gave Rachel a son of her own, Joseph, meaning "may God add." God would indeed add later, eventually bringing Rachel a second son, the twelfth for Jacob.

Perhaps most notable element among all the discord in this family is the silence of Jacob. His utter lack of leadership allowed unbridled envy to run amok in this dysfunctional family.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Today's reading is a good spot to remember that God planned to bring His Son to the world through this line of people. If the plan had depended on the righteousness of Abraham's descendants, it would have failed. But the success of God's redemptive plan relied on His faithfulness—and that never fails. Today, thank God for His faithfulness, especially the gift of Jesus Christ. While we inherited our faith from the line of Abraham, we place our faith in Jesus.

Genesis 30:25-31:12

God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me. - Genesis 31:9

TODAY IN THE WORD In the Aesop fable of the goose that laid the golden eggs, a man and wife who owned a golden-egg-laying goose decided to cut open the bird to see if they could get all the golden eggs at once. In their greed, they ended up killing the goose and losing the source of their growing wealth. Aesop's moral: Much wants more and loses all.

Laban treated Jacob like his own little golden goose, attempting to reap the benefits that came from God's blessing of Jacob—he didn't even try to hide his motives (30:27). He then made every effort to keep Jacob's agreed-upon wages from multiplying by removing all the livestock that he thought would produce offspring that met the criteria they discussed (30:35-36). All the dark or spotted sheep were placed in the care of Laban's sons. Essentially, Jacob was left to tend all-white flocks and was allowed to keep only the ones with any color—seemingly an impossible situation.

But Laban's scam couldn't prevent God from providing. While chapter 30 tells us of Jacob's methods for breeding the flocks, chapter 31 explains an added dimension to the story. Apparently, a supernatural dream allowed Jacob to see the males that would produce spotted or dark offspring. Somehow, God gave Jacob the ability to produce a wealth of livestock that could not be confused with Laban's, not only because of their color but also due to their superior strength.

The principle that emerges from these details is clear—God blessed Jacob despite Laban's dishonest dealings, and this time, Laban wasn't able to abuse his position over Jacob. Laban didn't benefit at all. In fact, he and the rest of his family began to resent Jacob and his growing wealth. After acquiring enough wealth to survive on his own, and having entered a situation where he was no longer welcome, Jacob's time to return to Canaan had come.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY What God wants to give you, no man can take away. Try not to be discouraged when people in a position above you abuse their power or use you for their own personal gain. God is able to bless you no matter what others may do to you. Stay true to God and keep your eyes and ears open for His wisdom. You'll be surprised what He can do to improve your situation. Also, don't forget the eternal inheritance you have through Jesus Christ that cannot be destroyed or stolen.

Genesis 31

TODAY IN THE WORD - You may have heard of the Mason-Dixon Line as the dividing line between the South and the North. What you may not know is that it was originally set up to settle a land dispute when America was still a British colony. Charles Mason, an astronomer, and Jeremiah Dixon, a surveyor, were charged with the task in 1763 of marking the exact boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland and between Maryland and Delaware. It took them five years.

The stones they placed at one-mile intervals were large blocks of limestone, shipped from Great Britain and weighing between 300 and 600 pounds each. Today these stones are being searched out, catalogued, and restored.

Jacob and Laban set up stone boundary markers for a similar purpose. The game they had played in trying to take advantage of one another had gone sour, and Jacob had again run away, this time with family and goods.

This most recent spat revolved around another bargain about livestock, and thanks to God (not Jacob's superstitious actions) Jacob had gotten the better of it. His wealth had increased. But Laban's sons responded with coldness and jealousy, accusing Jacob of stealing or at least draining their inheritance. So he checked his wives' loyalty, waited until sheep-shearing time, and ran for it. There's evidence that Jacob had changed a little—this time, he acknowledged that God was responsible for his success (despite Laban's cheating), and cited an encouraging dream and promise from the Lord (vv. 5-13).

God protected Jacob by warning Laban during the pursuit (v. 24). He obeyed, putting a good face on it and pretending that all he wanted was a fond family farewell. Jacob, though, knew the real score. Once again we see his changed heart: “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you” (v. 42). In the end, they negotiated a tense agreement not to harm one another, with a stone marker and God as witnesses between them.

Jacob spent a great deal of his life trusting in his own strength and cunning, and in fact he was pretty good at it. But God was trying to teach him to walk in faith and rely on His strength and wisdom. How about you? Have you been trusting in your own strength? If you're smart, talented, or successful, this can be a powerful temptation. But Scripture says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

Genesis 31:13-55

Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land. - Genesis 31:13

TODAY IN THE WORD Jacob may not have behaved in a godly way, but he did what the Lord asked of him. He was essentially retracing Abram's journey—although his grandfather wasn't being chased at the time because he hadn't left in secrecy.

Jacob, on the other hand, chose to obey God through the back door. He managed to flee with his entire household without Laban's knowledge until the third day of his journey. The Hebrew phrase translated “deceive” in verse 20 (and again in v. 26) literally reads that Jacob stole Laban's heart from him. Translators traditionally interpret it as an expression for deception, but it seems to convey a nature of cruel betrayal as well. By not telling Laban that he was fleeing, Jacob robbed him of any chance to say goodbye to any of his descendants (whom he would never see again after this chapter). Jacob had no reason to fear that Laban would prevent his departure, as the Lord proved with His message of protection when He appeared to Laban in a dream.

Rachel, though, robbed Laban of his idols, and many scholars debate why she would have stolen them. The fact is that Scripture doesn't give a clear indication that Jacob's wives, or even Jacob himself, had been solely devoted to God. They had seen Him protect them and bless them, but they had yet to make a clear commitment to worship Him exclusively.

The reunion between Laban and Jacob started bitterly. The search for the stolen idols is a strange story because Jacob made a very risky vow that unknowingly placed Rachel at risk—but justice was never served. Rachel's crafty lie may have saved her life and preserved the idols for herself, and beyond that, the case of the missing idols was never solved. Jacob and Laban then made a covenant that sealed their separation for good. More important, it guaranteed that Jacob would continue on his return to the land of his father, the land of the inheritance. It also would bring him face to face with the brother he had so strongly offended.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY By leaving in secret, Jacob did the right thing in the wrong way. We should never feel ashamed or afraid of doing God's will. When you find yourself in a hostile situation, ask God for the conviction to do the right thing, the courage to do it openly, and the humility to do it in a way that glorifies God rather than yourself. If the Lord wants you to take a certain action, He will certainly make it possible for you to succeed.

Genesis 32

TODAY IN THE WORD - The apostle Paul chose not to boast about his spiritual experiences, no matter how wonderful. Instead, he “boasted” in his weaknesses. God had given him a “thorn in the flesh”—widely thought to be some type of physical affliction— and though he had prayed for relief three times, none had been given. Instead of becoming frustrated by the unanswered prayer, Paul recognized that God was at work keeping him from becoming proud: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” “Therefore,” Paul responded, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

Paul learned this lesson by wrestling with God in prayer—Jacob learned it by actual wrestling! On his journey, he worried what Esau might do to settle old scores, and since patterns are hard to break, he relied on himself to solve the problem. He sent a “test message” to his brother, strategically divided his people and goods into two groups, and sent gifts ahead to appease Esau’s anger (these might be an implied apology as well). The pattern may be familiar, but Jacob actually was not the same man as before. He prayed fervently for God to save him, acknowledging his unworthiness, giving God the glory for his protection and success, and claiming His promises (vv. 9-12).

That night, he wrestled alone with God, though he didn’t realize it was God until the end. In this encounter, he learned he couldn’t prevail by his own strength. His inability to triumph physically was a meta-phor for his inability to solve problems his own way. God left Jacob with a limp, one he would bear for the rest of his life as a reminder of his weakness. But He also left him with a blessing, not because Jacob bargained but because he pleaded for it (v. 26). In addition, the Lord gave the patriarch a new name, Israel, meaning “he struggles with God” (v. 28). In what sense had Jacob “overcome”? He had recognized God and responded in faith. That’s why he named the place Peniel, meaning “face of God.”

If you have ever wrestled with God in prayer, you know from your experience how it changes you. You may not have a physical limp as a result, but God does use those times to transform our hearts and minds.

Just as Jacob and Paul spent intense times with God, we can bring our earnest requests and desires to the Lord. These times of prayer aren’t just about getting what we want—Paul still had his “thorn”—but it is about pouring out our hearts to God and seeing how He shapes our lives and perspective.

Genesis 32:1-32

"I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." - Genesis 32:30

TODAY IN THE WORD Before leading his troops across a river, Oliver Cromwell proclaimed, "Put your trust in God. . . . But mind you, keep your powder dry."

When Jacob learned that Esau was coming, he prayed, but then he took every precaution to help God protect him. But at the end of that day, Jacob found himself grappling not with his brother, but with the angel of God (v. 24, cf. Hos. 12:4).

Even though Jacob had for the second time witnessed the presence of angels in his camp (28:12), he still feared the wrath of Esau. In his message to his brother, he ignored the leadership role that Isaac had assigned to him in his blessing (27:29) and instead called Esau his master. He planned an extravagant gift for his estranged brother and resigned himself to the possibility that half of his company might be destroyed. Then he prayed.

Taken on its own, Jacob's prayer resounds with the heartfelt expression and genuine humility of a devout man of faith, and it shows a thorough understanding of the promises of God. Funny how a life-threatening situation can revitalize one's prayer life. But after the prayer was over, Jacob still took every precaution to save his own skin rather than relying on the faithfulness of God to save him. He prepared Esau's gift and sent out everyone else, even his wives and children, ahead of him to face the potential threat of Esau and his 400 men.

The reason for the nighttime wrestling match is unclear, although it may have been to teach Jacob and his descendants a lesson about his relationship with God. His new name, Israel, meant "God fights" or "he fights with God." The wound the angel inflicted on Jacob after the fight was over showed that God was superior in strength, but had not used His power to defeat Jacob. In effect, it communicated grace, as did the blessing. He did not need to tell Jacob His name. He had shown Himself to Jacob. As the limp would prove, this was no dream. Israel had come face to face with the God who would fight for him!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's one thing to ask God to protect you and sustain you. It's quite another to live like you believe it. Jacob had been privy to special revelations of God Himself, and he still lacked confidence in His protection—so how much more difficult is it for us? On our own power, we can't hope to improve on the faith of Jacob. But with the Holy Spirit, we have infinitely more help than we can imagine. Submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and He will give you strength.

Genesis 33:1-20

Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him. - Genesis 33:4

TODAY IN THE WORD Most people remember Esau for two main things: the foolish trade of his birthright and his angry reaction at being swindled out of his blessing. Basically, Esau's weak spot was a lack of self-control, a quality that thankfully can develop over time. Jacob, on the other hand, had a more chronic heart issue—he was deceitful, and indeed lies and distrust seemed to surround him all of his life.

Twenty years after running away from his angry twin (cf. 31:38), Jacob didn't expect much to change in the heart of Esau. But Esau's anger had actually dissipated—his heart had softened, although we never learn exactly why. But Jacob's heart hadn't changed. He was still frightened of Esau. He arranged his family in order of importance, putting his most beloved family members farthest away from Esau's approaching clan. Notice who was at the back of the line: Joseph and Rachel. Even as he was about to meet his brother—who had wanted to kill him as a result of their parents' favoritism—Jacob singled out his own favorite.

At least Jacob had the nerve to move ahead of his family and greet Esau first, bowing to him as if he were royalty. But Esau didn't want to be treated like a king, nor did he want to be feared. His only desire was to have his brother back and to see his children. But Jacob still couldn't trust his brother. Esau was essentially inviting Jacob to accompany him to his home in Seir, just south of the Dead Sea. At the time, they were probably less than a hundred miles away from Esau's home. Jacob made excuses why he wouldn't travel with Esau and even rejected his offer of a guard. He assured Esau that he would meet him there, but Scripture gives us no record of Jacob ever making the trip. Instead of heading south, Jacob eventually settled west.

This incident, which might seem like a joyful reunion of brothers, was actually a sad, awkward parting between twins separated by selfish, twisted love. However, despite Jacob's inability to truly reconcile with Esau, God did provide a crucial element in their relationship—peace.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Have you ever found yourself at a family gathering or social setting where your only desire was that there would be no fighting? Sometimes in those situations, we sacrifice honesty and genuine personal connection for the sake of keeping the peace. Wouldn't it be better to rely on God to soften the hearts of those around you, as he did with Esau, and use the opportunity to openly, sensitively communicate your faith? Ask God to help you glorify Him by showing His love.

Genesis 35:1-7

I will build an altar to God . . . who has been with me wherever I have gone. - Genesis 35:3

TODAY IN THE WORD High school science teacher and baseball coach Jim Morris made a conditional promise to his team, the Reagan County High School Owls. He vowed that if they won the league title, he would try out as a pitcher for a major league team. The team held up their end of the deal, and even at the age of 35, Morris tried out and in 1999 earned a position on the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. He said, "God has a funny way of bringing some things around and knocking you in the head with the ultimate destination. Something I should have achieved quite easily took me a long time to get around to."

Jacob's promise to God at Bethel was a long time in being fulfilled, but finally he came around to doing something that should have been quite easy—making the one true God his only God.

When God called Jacob to return to Bethel, what memories must have flooded his head! Jacob had sworn that if God protected and provided for him on his journey to Mesopotamia and back, then he would worship God alone. Since making that vow, God had more than fulfilled his request. He had given him eleven sons and great wealth—far exceeding the food and clothes that Jacob had requested (28:20). And He had also given him miraculous protection. Although we didn't have time to study it in this month's reading, Levi and Simeon massacred every male in the city of Shechem to avenge their sister Dinah (see Gen. 34). But the fear of the Lord prevented the surrounding cities from retaliating against Jacob or his family despite the fury it must have caused (35:5).

Jacob's cleansing of his household's idols just may be the crowning achievement of his life, for it was motivated not by distrust or selfishness, but rather by faithful allegiance to the Lord. He rightly prepared himself and his people to worship God—what higher calling is known to man?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Jacob gave his heart to God, and that allowed him to cleanse his family. Make today a turning point in your life by taking an inventory of anything that detracts or distracts from your worship of the Lord. This isn't an exercise in legalism—you don't need to make a list of what is okay and what isn't. Just allow the Holy Spirit to examine your heart and point out to you any attachments you may be grasping instead of pursuing the Lord with all your heart.

Genesis 35:1-15

Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him. - Genesis 35:14

TODAY IN THE WORD A young Franklin Graham was returning by private plane to school in Texas when the electrical system failed. He and the pilot were stranded above rural Mississippi without lights, radio, or any means of guidance. Suddenly the night sky lit up with a search-light leading them safely to an airport landing strip. They discovered later what had happened—a Christian who managed a county airport had been giving a friend an after-hours tour and “just happened” to turn on the lights to show what he would do to help a plane in trouble. God had miraculously arranged everything!

Similarly, an older and wiser Jacob admitted in today's reading that God had taken care of him throughout his life (v. 3). He came full circle back to Bethel. Then he had dreamed of a stairway to heaven and first heard God promise to be his God. Now God renewed the covenant and confirmed his new name of Israel. Jacob purified himself and his family, burying and renouncing idols and building an altar to worship God alone. The content of the covenant had not changed in all these years. The Lord promised to make Jacob's descendants into a great nation and to give them the land of Canaan. These promises had been given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as a young man. In addition, God had promised to bring Jacob “back to this land,” and now He had done it!

Jacob responded in much the same way as he had years ago. He set up a stone pillar to commemorate the occasion, consecrated it by anointing it with oil, and poured out a drink offering in worship to the Lord. A drink offering—this is the first one specifically mentioned in Scripture—signified complete, wholehearted commitment (v. 14; cf. Phil. 2:17). What a turnaround! After a life characterized by deceit, struggle, and selfishness, Jacob surrendered everything to God. His life story is evidence that God's choosing of us doesn't depend on our own worthiness, as well as the fact that He keeps His promises and has a sovereign plan both for individual lives and for all of history.

APPLY THE WORD As you may have noticed, we've skipped some passages in Genesis in the interests of time and devotional efficiency. But we encourage you to read through this entire book in one sitting sometime soon. Fifty chapters may seem daunting, but it probably won't take you more than a few hours to read through the whole book and get the big picture. If you do it soon, you'll be well-prepared to get more out of the

Genesis 35:9-20

A community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. - Genesis 35:11

TODAY IN THE WORD When Mozart was two years old, he visited a farm with his family and heard the squeal of a pig. The toddling prodigy instantly proclaimed, “G-sharp!” After consulting a piano, his family verified that he had correctly noted the pig's pitch. At such a young age, Mozart left no doubt that greatness awaited him.

Israel was still in its infant stages, far from being a full-fledged nation and only recently receiving its name—but through God's blessing, Jacob knew that great things would come from his descendants. Yesterday we studied Jacob's decision to finally commit himself and his family to God alone. Today we read God's response, which was no small “thank you” for Jacob's allegiance.

Some of the blessing would have already been very familiar to Jacob, including his new name, Israel. He also would have recognized the exhortation to “be fruitful and increase in number,” since it was the same assignment God gave to Noah after the flood (9:1). And the fact that the land of Canaan would belong to Jacob's descendants was a renewal of the promises given to Abraham and Isaac. But this blessing contained a new fact—Jacob's line would include kings (35:11). This fact would take on additional importance after Israel conquered the land. When the people eventually sought a king for their nation, their command was not an inherent violation of God's plan (even if the spirit of their request was; see 1 Sam. 8:7).

Couched at the end of this reading is a miraculous blessing mixed with tragedy. We're given no warning that Rachel had conceived for a second time, but her life ended giving Jacob his twelfth son, Benjamin. When the text says that Rachel's tomb is marked “to this day,” it's almost prophetic. Although a series of renovations have added a dome, walls, and other barriers, Rachel's Tomb continues to this day to be a beloved attraction for tourists and would-be mothers and fathers praying that God would give them sons and daughters as He did for Rachel.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Especially here in the “New World” of North America, where eighteenth-century structures are considered old, we often lack a sense of the ancient—and we also fail to understand the enduring consequences of our actions. But the mark that Jacob and Rachel left on this world included kings, even the King of kings, and vast cultural implications. How will your life and the lives you touch affect the world, especially since you're armed with the truth that brings eternal life?

Genesis 37

He sent a man before them "Joseph, sold as a slave. - Psalm 105:17

TODAY IN THE WORD In 1998, a pair of Levi's jeans manufactured in the 1880s was found in Nevada and auctioned on eBay. Said to be the oldest pair still in existence, the jeans fetched a handsome price of \$46,532, paid by the Levi Strauss company itself. "This is an important piece of our company's history," said the chairman. "It's great that they will now be preserved in our archives."

If there are archives in heaven, surely Joseph's coat of many colors will be among the clothing artifacts on display. The NIV translates the phrase as "richly ornamented robe," and the NAS as "varicolored tunic," but the meaning in the original Hebrew language is uncertain. What's certain is that the garment signaled Joseph's status as Jacob's favorite son, the firstborn to his beloved wife Rachel. He didn't help matters by reporting on his brothers to his father or by telling everyone about his dreams, in which he was exalted above them all. Presumably these dreams were from God, since they came true; but notice that Joseph didn't mention God, and even Jacob was a bit shocked at their content. Still, he "kept the matter in mind," remembering his own dream at Bethel (v. 11).

Joseph's brothers, naturally, hated him. They saw him as a spy, felt belittled by his dreams, and resented the favoritism. Given an opportunity, they plotted to kill him, but thanks to Reuben they "merely" sold him into slavery. Ironically, they used his robe as a prop for their story that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. Their deception was successful, and Jacob mourned deeply for his lost son.

The stage is set for the final patriarchal narrative in the book of Genesis. We've journeyed through the accounts of Creation, the Flood, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and now we'll travel with Joseph to Egypt, the starting point for Israel's nationhood. From a human perspective, so far it looks like a story of jealousy and revenge, but as today's verse makes clear, God had a plan. He sent Joseph on ahead to prepare the way. Joseph may or may not have sensed it, but he was right in the center of God's purposes for his life.

APPLY THE WORD To truly get a bird's-eye view of biblical history, take a little extra time today to read Psalm 105. This psalm is a wonderful example of remembering history and using that memory to praise the Lord. If you wish, try reading it aloud to yourself or your family—though if you do so at the dinner table, we recommend you wait until after the meal! It would also be appropriate to create your own "Psalm 105" where you think through your own history and praise the Lord for the ways He has worked in your life.

Genesis 37:1-36

His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. - Genesis 37:11

TODAY IN THE WORD In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (8:32). The statement caught Jews off guard because, as descendants of Abraham, they claimed not to be slaves to anyone. Jesus informed them that they were indeed slaves to sin.

Throughout our study of the Patriarchs, we've seen them act as slaves to one sin in particular—the sin of deception. Interestingly, in today's reading we see that telling the truth indirectly led to their enslavement in Egypt for over 400 years.

At seventeen years of age, Joseph had yet to master his family's art of deception. He gave his father what was surely a candidly honest report of his brothers' work—it's hard to tell if this was one incident or just a developing trend, for it seems as though Joseph was never assigned to work with his brothers. It may have just been his role to report on their progress (vv. 13-14). His honesty gave him favor with Jacob, but certainly not with his brothers (vv. 2-4). Joseph's brothers hated him even more after his next bit of honesty, telling them his dream that saw their sheaves of grain bowing to his. But then his free expression of the truth of his second dream crossed the line even with his doting father (v. 10). While Joseph's decision to relate his dream to his father and brothers may have been unwise or even arrogant, it stands in stark contrast to the pattern of secrecy and deception that dominated Jacob's life.

Jacob's other sons didn't have a problem with bending the truth. They took their first opportunity to plan his death and blame it on wild animals. Reuben attempted to save Joseph's life, and his method included tricking his brothers (v. 22). The only way that Joseph actually emerged from the cistern or well was because of his brothers' greed (v. 26). The cycle of favoritism and jealousy was made complete by the sale of Joseph to the descendants of Ishmael, whose departure from Abraham came as a result of Sarah's jealousy and preferential treatment of Isaac.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Jacob's mourning was in many ways his own doing. He passed on to his sons his habit of telling lies, and it caused him considerable pain. This circus of lies told in today's passage stands as a stern warning to us to tell the truth. Joseph survived his brothers' attack—and so did his integrity. The rewards of deception are the inability to trust, the indignity of being deceived, and the infliction of deep, enduring suffering. The truth will set you free—cling to it.

Genesis 39

TODAY IN THE WORD - Raul Corvalan, a taxi driver in Buenos Aires, earns less than \$200 per month, but he has something money can't buy: honesty. One day a woman left more than \$3,500 worth of antique jewelry in the back of his cab. He called the taxi company, got the woman's address, and returned the jewelry box in person. The Argentinian government was so impressed they awarded him and his family a paid vacation at a nearby beach resort. Corvalan said, "I did not expect anything in return because what I did should be expected from everyone."

Like Raul Corvalan, Joseph was a model of integrity. In Egypt, he was purchased as a slave by Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. God was with him and gave him success, and soon he was trusted so highly he was put in charge of all the household affairs. As a steward, he pursued excellence and integrity in his duties, and his work was blessed (as was Potiphar's house) by the Lord.

Joseph also showed integrity in the area of sexual purity. He resisted sexual advances from Potiphar's wife, not once but multiple times. He tried to reason with her, saying it would be a betrayal of his master, and more importantly, a sin against God (Genesis 39:9). He tried to avoid the appearance of evil, refusing even to be with her. And finally, when she tried to force him to come to bed with her, he broke loose and ran away. Spurned and angry, she gave up on sex and opted for revenge, using Joseph's cloak as evidence for her lie to her husband. This was the second time his cloak had told an untruth about him! Even if the other servants knew the truth, no one would have dared to contradict her. Potiphar may have been suspicious of the lie, though. Some laws allowed for the death penalty in rape cases, but instead of having his slave executed Potiphar merely sent Joseph to prison.

In prison, the pattern repeated. Joseph's faith and righteousness remained strong. God was with him, he did well, and soon he was trusted again with leadership and responsibility (Genesis 39:21-23).

As we did back on the 10th, today we recommend several verses to add to your "Scripture memory bank." These are all on the theme of fighting against sexual temptation: 1 Corinthians 6:18-20; Ephesians 5:3; and 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 4:4; 4:5 (notes). You can choose which one to memorize, but it would be wonderful to choose all three and recite them to yourself often. Be like Joseph: "Flee from sexual immorality . . . not even a hint . . . honor God with your body."

Genesis 40-41

He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him. - Daniel 2:22

TODAY IN THE WORD Convicted of murder in 1984, Darryl Hunt spent 18 years in a North Carolina prison. But recently DNA evidence led the police to another man, who confessed to the killing and testified that he acted alone. A judge voided the charges against Hunt, the governor issued a pardon, and the wronged man became eligible for financial compensation. "Finally, my innocence is recognized," he said. "For so many years I have been trying to prove my innocence only to be told I was lying, and to finally have it official means a lot."

Joseph must have had a similar feeling when the prison doors swung open for him. Unjustly accused and imprisoned, he was handed a golden opportunity to interpret dreams for Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer. As with Daniel, quoted in today's verse, God gave him the interpretations so that He would receive glory in a pagan land (40:8). Both interpretations came true—one man was executed, the other pardoned. Surely the pardoned man would say a word in the king's ear and help Joseph regain his freedom? Surely that was God's plan? Once he regained his job, however, the cupbearer forgot all about Joseph, who languished in jail for two more years. From a human point of view, God's intervention and Joseph's faith had struck out.

But from God's point of view, He was saving Joseph for the main event—Pharaoh had a dream, and the pieces of the puzzle started to come together. The wise men of Egypt could not interpret it, and in the midst of this crisis the cupbearer finally remembered Joseph. Brought before the king, with everything to lose, Joseph boldly gave God the credit (41:16), correctly interpreted the dream as a warning of famine, and even made a policy recommendation about gathering and rationing food. Impressed, and discerning the "spirit of God" in this young man, Pharaoh appointed him a high court official, perhaps like a Prime Minister or Minister of Agriculture (v. 37-40).

Joseph was only thirty years old—it had been thirteen difficult years since his teenage dreams. In the blink of an eye, God's power had taken him from the bottom to the top!

APPLY THE WORD Joseph's advice to Pharaoh exemplifies many principles of good stewardship. Part of good stewardship is preparing for your retirement years. Are you doing so now? Though of course your ultimate faith is in God, not what you save, to meet your needs in retirement, there are many good biblical reasons to investigate your options. You might want to seek advice from Planned Giving personnel at Moody, or read a book by

Genesis 42-43

Preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. - Proverbs 3:21-22

TODAY IN THE WORD The Great Library of Alexandria was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Established about 295 b.c., it collected the leading books of antiquity, including Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Buddhist texts, and the first translations of Scripture—an estimated 700,000 scrolls in all. Now Egypt is building on this great tradition with a new Bibliotheca Alexandrina near the site of the original. It has the same purposes, too—“a focal point for research, the advancement of knowledge, and the open exchange of ideas.”

The historical and cultural learning and achievements of Egypt are indeed impressive. But in the story of Joseph, God used a former slave from Canaan to make plans to save the country. Through faith and discernment, Joseph—once a slave and prisoner—jumped from a cell to a key position in Pharaoh's court. Through faith and discernment, Joseph saved many people from starvation during the years of famine, including his own family.

The severity of the famine forced Jacob to send his sons to Egypt, where they had heard there was grain. When they had their audience with the official in charge of food distribution, they failed to recognize Joseph—after all, he had grown into a man during the intervening years, was dressed in Egyptian clothing, and spoke Egyptian. Plus, the last time they saw him he was a slave in a Midianite caravan, so an Egyptian palace was the last place they expected to find him! Joseph recognized them, though, and decided to test them. By accusing them of spying on the first visit, and showing favoritism to Benjamin during the second, he aimed to find out how his family was doing and whether his brothers' hearts had changed at all.

Joseph discovered that his father still grieved his loss and that his brothers still felt guilt over their long-ago actions (42:21). Their guilt led them to make solemn pledges to Jacob about Benjamin's safety when they returned with him the second time. As for Jacob, he seemed resigned to his fate and made no mention of trusting the Lord. Little did they know that forgiveness and reunion were just around the corner!

APPLY THE WORD Be generous today. Give someone an unexpected gift. Our example is Joseph, who put the silver back into his brothers' grain sacks. If this had been part of testing them (as putting the cup into Benjamin's sack will be), he would have accused them of stealing it, but he never mentioned it. Apparently he just wanted to be sure his family had enough money for the hard days ahead. In the same way, give your gift with no thought of reward or human praise.

Genesis 44-45

TODAY IN THE WORD - Darryl Williams was a black high school football player with a bright future before he was shot by white youths in a racially motivated act of violence. The bullet turned him into a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. Williams, though, went on to finish high school and university and now holds a normal job. His assailants were arrested, convicted, and served their time in jail. Darryl has never met them. They have never apologized, but he chose to forgive them anyway. "Hate is a useless emotion that takes up too much energy," he said. "If I were to retaliate in anger, what would make me different from them? Both my religion and my common sense tell me it's the thing to do."

Joseph, too, chose to forgive his brothers' sin of selling him into slavery and telling their father he was dead. As a high official in Egypt, he could have had them executed or imprisoned. But he knew God had directed his every step, and this knowledge helped him overcome his natural feelings.

In today's reading we enjoy the climax of a suspenseful plot. Joseph planted a silver cup in his brother Benjamin's grain sack, then made a false accusation to see what his other brothers would do. Had they changed? Yes. Judah told the whole story to try and gain Joseph's sympathy, and he offered to make good on his vow to take Benjamin's place. These were not the same men who had jumped on the chance to sell Joseph into slavery more than twenty years before.

In response, Joseph finally revealed his identity in one of the most gripping, emotional scenes in biblical narrative. His brothers were terrified—by the unexpectedness, the switch in languages, the sudden presence of their long-lost brother, their powerlessness, and their deep feelings of guilt. Joseph, however, did not seek revenge; instead he provided for his family's needs, inviting them to come and live in the best part of Egypt. More significantly, he comforted and forgave his brothers, assuring them that "God sent me ahead of you" and that it had been His saving plan governing Joseph's life all along (Genesis 45:7-8).

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is a type or foreshadowing of Christ, who died on the cross to forgive even far more grievous sins and betrayals.

If you are struggling to forgive someone who has hurt you, meditate on this story of Joseph and his brothers. God does not excuse the sinful action of the brothers, but He still redeemed the situation to ensure the survival of His people. And He gave Joseph the ability to see His perspective and to forgive his brothers. Pray that the Holy Spirit will grant you His grace to forgive.

Genesis 45:1-15

TODAY IN THE WORD - Researching forgiveness, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan found that almost 75 percent of those surveyed believe God has forgiven them for past mistakes and wrongdoing. Older people were more likely than younger ones to feel this way. The study's lead author wrote, "There's a remarkably high level of confidence across the country that God forgives us."

On the other hand, only 52 percent of people reported forgiving others, and just 43 percent said they'd actively sought forgiveness from others. It appears that we easily imagine receiving divine forgiveness but are more reluctant to take difficult, concrete steps toward reconciliation with other people.

Joseph had the courage to extend forgiveness to his brothers. Out of hatred and jealousy, they had almost murdered him, sold him into slavery instead, and deceived their father into thinking him dead. Because of them, he'd suffered exile and imprisonment.

The tables had turned, and in today's reading, Joseph possessed the power to do as he wished to his brothers. He could have thrown them into prison or sent them home to starve. We can assume he was tempted toward revenge, but he overcame that temptation and received them with love. (He wasn't naïve, however—he'd first tested their character.)

Despite their evil actions, Joseph forgave his brothers "from the heart," as shown by his extreme emotion and invitation for the family to come live in the best land in Egypt. His forgiving love boggled his brothers' minds. Their natural response would be revenge, so they assumed it would be his, which explains their terror (Genesis 45:1-3). Godly forgiveness is beyond worldly comprehension. In fact, for years, Joseph's brothers remained suspicious that he was still out to get them (see Gen. 50:15-21).

Here's a question similar to one asked several days ago: Do you need to forgive a family member? Or be forgiven by one? Sometimes, the closer a person is, the harder it is to let go of bitterness or overcome pride.

Genesis 45:1-28

It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. - Genesis 45:5

TODAY IN THE WORD One day in 1999, a New York nurse named Penny Brown just happened to get the day off at the last minute so that she could attend her son's Little League baseball game. During the game, batboy Kevin Stephan's heart stopped after being accidentally hit in the chest with a bat. Penny performed CPR and saved his life. Seven years later at a restaurant in New York, it was Penny's life that needed saving. She began to choke, and employees at the restaurant called for a volunteer firefighter who just happened to work there. He performed the Heimlich maneuver and saved her life. That hero just happened to be . . . seventeen-year-old Kevin Stephan.

Of course, that kind of thing doesn't just happen. God in His sovereignty orchestrates the acts of men to accomplish His purposes, and that was obviously the case in the life of Joseph.

By the time we see Joseph here, his own brothers couldn't recognize him. Their imaginations were too limited to consider that Joseph could possibly be in charge, even though they knew that the last they had seen of him he was headed to Egypt. Joseph knew that God had planned his stay in Egypt because it ultimately gave his family the means to survive a seven-year famine. They could live in peace and luxury because of Joseph's position, and the nation that would rise from these twelve brothers was given safe harbor . . . for now. But that wasn't the only providential benefit. Without Joseph's disappearance into Egypt, the reconciliation in their family would have been impossible, and that's what they needed more than any food.

No two brothers in the history of the Patriarchs had ever coexisted for the long term. Abraham and Nahor, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob—they had all gone their separate ways. But these twelve brothers and their ever-growing families were destined by God to stay together as one nation. Joseph couldn't have known that by the time his family left Egypt they would be a nation of some two million people, but he did know that it was God, not his brothers, who was in control.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Complaining is easy. Seeing the plans God has in store to use your trial as a means for His purposes may be impossible—but you can know that He can use anything to accomplish His ends. While you may not have control over your circumstances, you can control your attitude and your availability to be used by God. Whatever might be troubling you today, bring it before the throne. No earthly problem can thwart the plans God has for you.

Genesis 45:1-28

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish . . . the saving of many lives. - Genesis 50:20

TODAY IN THE WORD The first chapter of Job presents a powerful lesson in faith. In rapid succession, Job heard the news that his livestock had been stolen or destroyed, that the servants tending them had also been killed, and that his oldest son's house had collapsed and ended the lives of all ten of his children.

Job was on the ropes, reeling from these devastating blows. How did he respond? With worship: "Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised' " (Job 1:20-21).

Like Job, Joseph looked at the hardships of his life from the perspective of God's sovereignty. He had endured brothers jealous of their father's favoritism and angry about his dreams--brothers who had attacked him and sold him as a slave after planning to murder him. He had been a slave in Egypt, and despite excellent work, he was unjustly accused and imprisoned, then nearly forgotten by a man he had helped.

The God's-eye view looked different, however. The Lord had put His man in place to meet a critical upcoming need. Joseph had wisdom imparted from God through dreams. That wisdom impressed Pharaoh and earned Joseph high office. He also had administrative wisdom to make plans. But the most important thing Joseph had was faith. He responded to situations with integrity and gave God all the credit for working for his good (Gen. 45:5-8; cf. Rom. 8:28).

APPLY THE WORD Joseph understood that God's merciful hand had been working in his life, even when outward circumstances made it difficult to see. In spite of the circumstances, he responded to God's mercy with faith.

Genesis 46:1-4; Genesis 15:13-16

I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. - Genesis 46:4

TODAY IN THE WORD How long is too long to wait for a promise to be fulfilled? A couple of days? A month? A year? After 430 years, you'd probably start to get a little impatient.

That's precisely how long, to the day (see Ex. 12:41), that the nation of Israel would have to wait for the fulfillment of the promise in today's verse. Jacob may have been afraid to go to Egypt both for fear of what might happen to his sons, especially Benjamin (42:4)—or he may have feared that leaving would be unfaithful to God's promise to give him the land of Canaan (35:12). When God assured him that there was nothing to fear, believing that assurance was a great leap of faith. By heading to Egypt, Jacob was entrusting the future of all his sons to the protection of God in an unfamiliar land.

Jacob's faith was well-placed. God had foretold this excursion into Egypt in the early stages of Abram's nomadic life in

Canaan. The full weight of that prediction was probably not on the minds of Jacob and his sons, for God had predicted enslavement and mistreatment—not exactly an assuring thought. But the fact that God foresaw this four-generation detour is an amazing encouragement. Egypt was a sort of cocoon for Israel, and when they emerged from it, they were a mighty nation.

But for Jacob, God promised more than just many descendants and national prosperity—He gave him a personal promise, similar to the one he had given Abram, of a peaceful death in the company of his beloved son Joseph. That might not seem very significant, but for Jacob, it meant a lot. After the excruciating grief he endured when he believed Joseph to be dead, Jacob couldn't have wished for more than to see his son again. The knowledge that the Lord had cared for his sons and arranged for their futures allowed Jacob to die in peace and be buried in Canaan (50:13)—but the record of his faith has endured to this day.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY What are you waiting for? Christ's return? A loved one's salvation? Peaceful relationships? Don't lose heart. God's timing doesn't usually match our scheduling preferences, but the lives of the Patriarchs testify to the faithfulness of God. Be sure to set aside time every day to focus on God's faithfulness. What you see and experience throughout the day may remind you that the wait goes on—but put your faith in the powerful promise of Him whom you cannot see.

Genesis 46:28-47:12; 50:15-21

Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this? - Esther 4:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story of Esther is the story of God's providence over even the most terrifying circumstances. Esther was an exiled Jew living in the Persian Empire. When Queen Vashti displeased King Xerxes, Esther was the one, chosen from among many beautiful young women, who won the heart of the king and became the new queen. Later, when a plot emerged to kill all the Jews, Esther was used by God to save her people. Today's verse records the wisdom of Esther's uncle Mordecai who saw God's redemptive hand at work.

Joseph is another example of God's sovereignty. After his brothers sold him into slavery, Joseph ended up in an Egyptian prison, through no fault of his own. Later, through a series of providential events, Joseph became the second most powerful person in Pharaoh's Egypt. Behind Joseph's exalted position, however, we see the hand of God, who used Joseph to save the rest of his family. But we must not overlook the fact that Joseph's administration and policies were a blessing to the Egyptians and the other nations who looked to Egypt for help during the seven-year famine (Gen. 41:56-57).

In today's passage, we find Joseph's family in Egypt because of the severity of the famine in Canaan. Goshen was located in northern Egypt and had excellent pasture land, which Jacob and his sons needed. Clearly the concern here is for Jacob and his family, but notice that Jacob blesses the Pharaoh twice (47:7, 10). In this we see a partial fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham, that through him all the families of the world would be blessed.

As the story of Joseph unfolds, we see that God's purposes for bringing Jacob and Joseph's brothers to Egypt also included reuniting the family. Following the death of their father, however, the brothers were fearful that Joseph might take revenge for their earlier mistreatment of him. Instead, we find one of the most remarkable accounts for forgiveness in the Bible. Joseph clearly understood that God used him to bless his family as well as others in Egypt (50:20).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY Although the actions of Joseph's brothers were obviously evil, God redeemed the situation and used it to bless many people, both Egyptian and Israelite.

We too may find ourselves in difficult circumstances. But like Joseph, we need to trust God and know that He is in charge. Just as God used Joseph to bless a wide circle of people around him, we never know how God might use our situation. Genesis 50:20 is one of the key verses in the Bible; consider memorizing it this week.

Genesis 48:1-22; Hebrews 11:12

Each generation of the upright will be blessed. - Psalm 112:2

TODAY IN THE WORD Cyrus McCormick, the inventor of the reaper and manufacturer of farming equipment, was a friend of Dwight L. Moody and a generous supporter of Moody's work. McCormick's son, Cyrus Jr., also a very capable business leader, later stepped into his father's place and led the company, International Harvester, for more than thirty years. He was also committed to Christian work, and became one of the original trustees of Moody Bible Institute.

God is always looking for faithful people to bless generation after generation. One of the greatest benefits of a life of faith, which Hebrews 11 demonstrates so well, is the opportunity it gives us to pass on a godly legacy.

Abraham's family is Exhibit A of this principle at work. His grandson Jacob inherited and preserved the blessing--though far from perfectly, given Jacob's years of deceit and the faithless actions of his older sons in their treatment of Joseph among other things.

Despite everything, Jacob was still the "blessing carrier" for his generation, and he followed a family pattern in the way he blessed Manasseh and Ephraim, the two sons born to Joseph in Egypt (v. 5).

Like Isaac, Jacob had bad eyesight, suggesting that he couldn't tell Joseph's boys apart. Jacob seemed to be confused when he crossed his hands to confer the blessing, despite the fact that Joseph lined the sons up so that Jacob's right hand would rest on Manasseh (v. 14).

But Jacob knew what he was doing when he reached across and blessed Ephraim instead. This was the fourth generation in a row in which the younger son received God's blessing: Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Reuben, and now Ephraim over Manasseh. By basically adopting Joseph's sons, Jacob gave his faithful son's family a double inheritance.

APPLY THE WORD Looking back on the time when you first came to know the Lord, you can probably remember several people who played a role in bringing you to faith.

Genesis 48

The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day . . . may he bless these boys. - Genesis 48:15

TODAY IN THE WORD Bernard Weisberg was a pioneering Chicago lawyer and judge who fought for individual rights, especially civil rights. But perhaps his most important legacy was to his children—a love for reading and writing. He read aloud to them often, everything from fairy tales to Mark Twain. Now one son, Joseph, recently published his first novel. Another, Jacob, is a talented editor and journalist. "My father was a kind of Johnny Appleseed with books," he said. "Not only was he always extolling their virtues; he gave and lent, scattering them where he went." As Bernard himself wrote, "Reading with our children will be first and last an act of love, a uniquely rewarding kind of intimacy, and a rich storehouse of shared experience." Fathers' legacies make such a difference! What legacy did Jacob leave to his sons? First, he passed on God's covenant promises. Specifically, he adopted as his own Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and blessed them. Although he was the oldest, Reuben had lost his birthright (see Gen. 35:22; 1 Chron. 5:1-2). Joseph was Rachel's firstborn, and we see this adoption as Jacob giving him the birthright, a double portion of the inheritance.

Second, Jacob also passed on a legacy of thankfulness and trust. He praised God's goodness in allowing him to see Joseph and his family (v. 11). He called the Lord, "the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day" (v. 15). In this intimate picture, we sense how far Jacob's heart has changed from that of the young trickster who cooked the famous lentils. He believed God would fulfill His promises, for He made Joseph swear to bury him back in Canaan. He exhorted his family to walk in faith and to trust in God's sovereign plan.

Nothing that happened in the lives of Jacob and Joseph was random. Somewhat to their own surprise, they had lived lives filled with purpose—not by their own efforts or abilities, but because God ordered their steps. That's our God, too, always working "for the good of those who love Him" (Rom. 8:28).

APPLY THE WORD Family reunions are a common occurrence in the United States, but even if your biological family doesn't get together, you can still celebrate the spirit of Genesis 45-48 with your spiritual family. If your church has a homecoming service or some other church-wide fellowship time, be sure to take part. If not, talk to your pastor and other church leaders to see if you can help organize such a gathering. This is a great way

Genesis 48, 49

Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come. - Genesis 49:1

TODAY IN THE WORD When Jacob blessed Joseph's sons and then all of his own sons, he assembled the fathers of the nation of Israel, and he blessed them and prophesied about their future. The author of Hebrews describes this blessing as Jacob's act of faith (Heb. 11:21). It was this faith that was passed down through the tribes of Israel, on through their descendants including Jesus, and through Him to everyone who believes on His name.

In chapter 48, Jacob adopted Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob passed on the primary blessing to the younger of the two (48:19). Unlike the blessing Jacob tricked from the lips of his father, this blessing was intentionally given to a son other than the firstborn. It's interesting that no firstborn son in the history of the Patriarchs was ever the recipient of the preferred blessing—perhaps that's God's way of showing that His plan is distinct from the adopted plans of men.

One blessing that stands out from the rest is Jacob's blessing of Judah because of the clear messianic implications, especially the claim that the “scepter will not depart from Judah” (49:10). Even at this early stage, God gave His people insight into His plan for bringing the King of kings to the throne.

Perhaps the most descriptive blessing, though, is found in 48:15-16, not for what it predicts, but for the past events it recounts. Jacob called God his shepherd throughout his life and an angel that delivered him. This is the first time in Scripture that God is described as a shepherd, and it's so apt in the lives of all the Patriarchs. They weren't perfect. They didn't always make the wisest decisions. They spent their entire lives wandering as nomads through the land God had for them. But they, like sheep, found their salvation in their allegiance to the Shepherd. They followed Him, and they recognized Him as their protector. More than anything, from looking at the lives of the Patriarchs we learn about our God who is faithful, good, and gracious. Now, thousands of years later, we still serve and obey that same God!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY No matter what your nationality is, the descendants of Abraham have blessed you, not because of any marvelous thing they did or skill they had, but because of their faith and God's faithfulness. Praise God for His elaborate plan of simple faith. Since He first called Abram, God has been giving out the gift of faith to people like us who follow Him like sheep. As hopeless as we are on our own, how encouraging to know that our Shepherd is the Lord Almighty!

Genesis 50:15-26

TODAY IN THE WORD - In the late nineteenth century, an anonymous African was taken from his grave, stuffed by French taxidermists, dressed in feathers and skins, and until recently exhibited in a museum in Banyoles, Spain. For decades he was known as El Negro, looked at by generations of schoolchildren on field trips.

Now he's home. After many years of protests and negotiations, the unknown man's remains were returned to Botswana and given a state funeral. This powerful symbolism was front-page news and hundreds came to view their stolen ancestor.

Just before his mummification and burial in a foreign land, Joseph likewise requested that his body eventually be returned home to Canaan. Since he talked about God coming to their aid, things may have already been going sour for the Israelites (Genesis 50:24-25). Hundreds of years later, his descendants remembered and honored his request (see Ex. 13:19).

After Jacob died, Joseph's brothers showed that while their hearts had changed somewhat, they still didn't understand forgiveness. They assumed that with their father dead, Joseph would seize the opportunity for revenge. When he heard their feeble attempt at trickery, aimed at escaping his imagined vengeance, he wept. Had they lived all this time without feeling forgiven? Did they not have enough faith to grasp the beauty of God's plan? All he could do was repeat what he had said before. Despite their wrong motives and actions, God had worked everything that happened for good. Through Joseph, many lives were saved during the difficult years of famine, his own family's not least of all. They needed to see what Joseph saw, the bigger picture—lives saved, God's name glorified among the nations, and His covenant promises still at work.

Our prayer is that you have also seen the big picture this month in our study of Genesis—the grand sweep of history's origins, the breathtaking faithfulness of God, and the purpose-filled lives lived by those who have run the race before us (see note Hebrews 12:1). From this study of beginnings, we have discovered that our life purposes can be found in God alone!

What lessons or principles have you learned this month from our study of Genesis? Take some time today to re-read, reflect, and review. Especially in relation to this year's overall theme of life purposes, what do Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, and Joseph have to say to you here and now?

As we begin this new year, ask the Lord to reveal His purposes for you, and seek to incorporate these truths into your life.

Hebrews 11:22; Genesis 50:15-26

Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit. - 2 Corinthians 7:1

TODAY IN THE WORD Last August, the class of 1970 at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, finally held its commencement exercises. The 30-year delay was the result of a deadly tornado that struck the city on May 11, 1970, days before the university's graduation exercises. The ceremonies were called off as Lubbock dealt with the tragedy. A group of those 1970 graduates, now fifty-somethings with children old enough to graduate from college, participated in commencement exercises.

Some things are too important to be forgotten with the passage of time. We've been meeting "heroes from Hebrews" whose faith in God and His promises did not fade throughout more years than most of us expect to live. In fact, "These people were still living by faith when they died" (Heb. 11:13).

Joseph was one of these faith champions. His confidence in God never wavered from the time he was a seventeen-year-old sold into slavery in Egypt until he died at the age of 110. The writer of Hebrews could have drawn on many dramatic stories from Joseph's life to prove his faith.

But Hebrews 11:22 also speaks of Joseph's prophecy concerning Israel's future (Gen. 50:24-25). Woven into this account is a dramatic statement of faith in God's ability to keep His word.

Genesis 50:20 has been called the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament. It takes a faith perspective to realize that even the hateful actions of other people are part of God's greater plan for our good. Joseph's faith was put into action (James 2:18-26) when he embraced his brothers and their families instead of taking revenge on them.

But Joseph's greatest act of faith may have been his last act on earth. He looked ahead and believed that God would someday bring the Israelites out of Egypt and back into the promised land. Joseph's command to take his coffin with them was a statement of his confidence in God's fulfillment (Gen. 50:24-25).

APPLY THE WORD Joseph's life is the embodiment of today's verse. He believed God's promises and made faith commitments that kept him true to God even in the face of temptation (Gen. 39:1-12).

Genesis 50:12-21

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. - Genesis 50:20

TODAY IN THE WORD - When the Arthur Andersen accounting firm crashed in 2002 in the aftermath of the Enron scandal, Steve Stoner was one of thousands who lost their jobs. He saw his life savings, which had been invested in Andersen, evaporate. Yet he was able to say, "Losing my job was a gift from God." Why? Because his career had been taking a heavy toll on his marriage, family, and spiritual life. He had been on the road to burnout.

In his own words: "The collapse of Andersen was a welcomed opportunity to reclaim portions of my life over which I'd lost control. . . . The Holy Spirit seemed to remind me that my wealth had little to do with markets or pension funds. It was in feeling loved and cared for by a heavenly Father who was in control of my life."

Like Steve Stoner, Joseph trusted in God's sovereign goodness, no matter what happened. He and Job make an encouraging pair-if they trusted God after all they went through, who are we to complain?

In today's reading, Joseph's brothers expected him to finally take revenge. They had intended to kill him, and eventually sold him into foreign slavery. Now that their father Jacob was dead, they were sure payback time had come and tried to protect themselves with a lie (vv. 15-17). It's so deep in human nature to think and feel this way that they could hardly grasp Joseph's response.

Joseph saw life through a totally different lens. In his experiences, he beheld God working to save lives (v. 20). He knew what his brothers had meant to do, but God's purposes outweighed their jealous intentions. God's plan, not theirs, governed Joseph's faith and actions. And at the heart of it all was his ongoing trust in the promises God had given to Abraham.

Joseph trusted completely in the sovereign goodness of God. Do we?