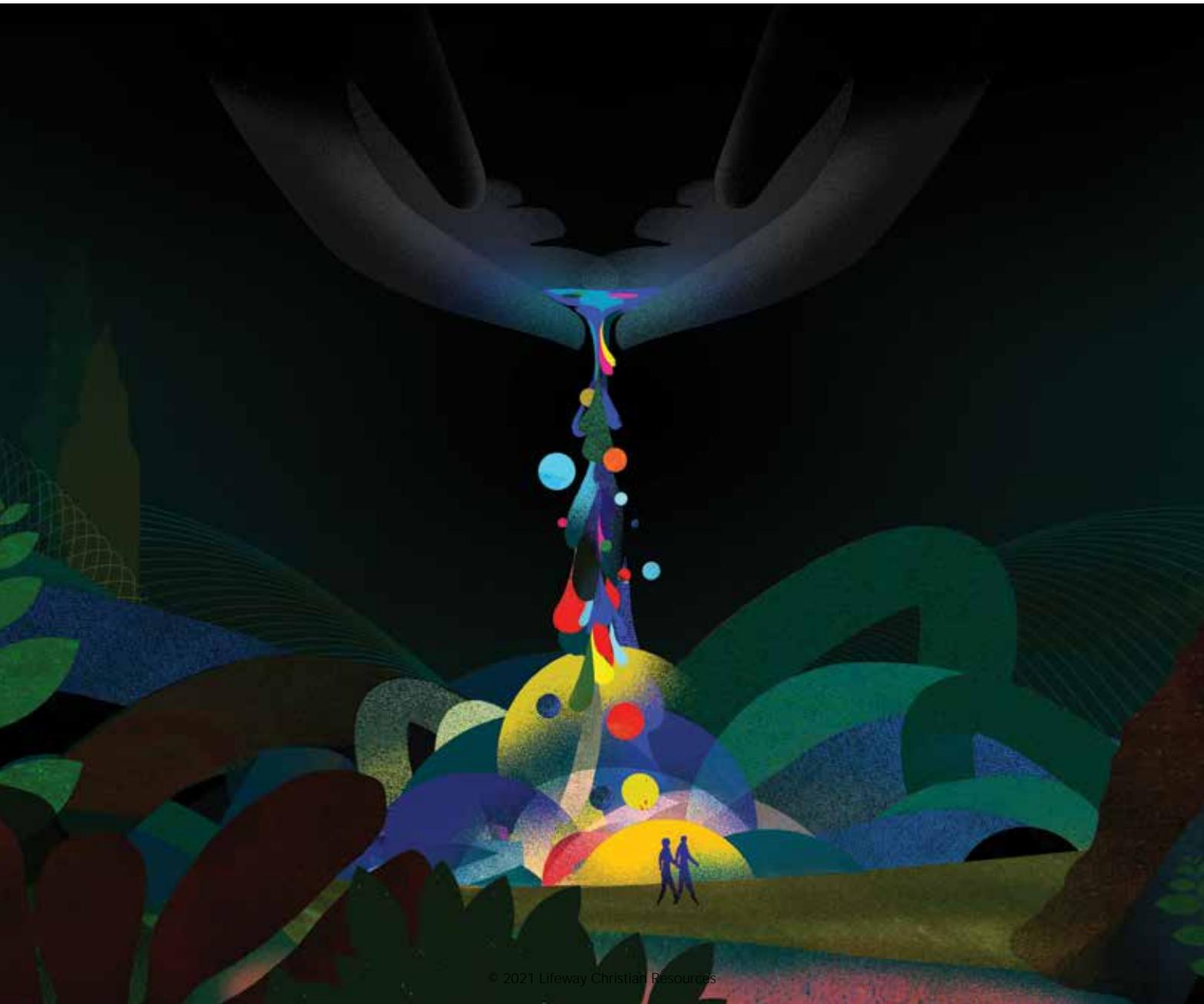




the**GOSPEL**PROJECT.

FROM CREATION TO CHAOS

ADULTS / LEADER GUIDE / FALL 2021 / VOL. 1 / CSB



GOD'S WORD TO YOU

A SUMMARY OF THE BIBLE

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

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

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

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

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

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THE EDITOR

When I was a pastor, the hardest part of writing sermons was always the end—the application. Explaining the meaning of the passage was life-giving and, in a sense, easy. But when it came to explaining what to do in light of it, I struggled. I offered practical guidance on all kinds of different issues, but it always rang hollow to me. Eventually the reality hit me: I was feeding my people the Scriptures, but I was failing to testify to Jesus as I did. I was preaching moralism, telling people to live better lives in their own power. I wanted them to change their behavior rather than be changed by the gospel.

I know I'm not alone in my experience. Many of us grew up hearing the Bible taught this way, and many of us have taught it that way. And this is why I love being part of The Gospel Project. I am grateful for God's kindness to allow me to be part of a resource that is helping people to place the gospel where it belongs—at the center of all we do.

Because if we are followers of Jesus, that's what we're called to be about. We're called to be people who are here for good news with good news to share with the whole world. And that begins not outside in the world but within the church. We need the gospel just as much as those who do not yet know Jesus. We need to be changed by it and to continue to be changed by it.

So whether you're reading this as a brand new Christian, an established believer, or someone still trying to figure out what you believe about Jesus, know that this is my hope for you: that as you study the Bible personally and in community, you will see how it all testifies to Jesus, week after week.

For His glory,

Brian Dembowczyk

Managing Editor of The Gospel Project

The Gospel Project®

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THE HEAVENS DECLARE THE GLORY OF GOD

“Let There Be Light”

by Jen Oshman

+

We followed the guide through the natural doorway carved into the side of the mountain. The tunnel was barely taller than we were, the air noticeably chillier than where we had been standing a moment ago. A drip, drip, drip echoed in the distance, and we breathed in that distinct after-the-rain smell. With each step we descended farther into a labyrinth of limestone.

Uneasy whispers arose and we all zipped up our jackets and pulled on our hoods. We could see our breath. After several minutes of walking with care so as not to scratch our heads or our sides, the tiny tunnel finally fanned out. We then took in the grandeur of hundreds of stalactites and stalagmites reaching out for one other like the fingers in Michelangelo's “The Creation of Adam.” Lights permanently installed on the cave ceiling above shone on the emerald green water below. With eyes wide and mouths agape, we beheld this underground treasure.

And then the lights went out. Our guide had just murmured something about how we should get ready for it to be dark, but we didn't fully comprehend his words in time. We weren't prepared for a darkness that was total and complete. My husband, children, and I all reached out to feel each other. People nervously

laughed and little ones tried not to cry. The dark just feels sinister, uncertain. It makes you shiver and wonder what's out there. When the switch was finally flipped back on, a collective sigh of relief echoed off our stone surroundings. With the flood of light came a flood of comfort and gratitude.

LIGHT OVERCAME DARKNESS

In the beginning, before God fashioned the heavens and the earth, darkness was over the deep. Was it dark like that cave? Or was it much darker? Light was absent. It simply did not exist until God said, “Let there be light.” On the first day of creation, light overcame the darkness, as it always would from then on.

Our Creator God continued, speaking everything into existence: the Himalayas and the Yellow Sea, aloe vera and giant sequoias, the stars Sirius and Betelgeuse and Pollux, the whale shark and the lesser goldfinch, the heifer, the Komodo dragon, and the red-eyed tree frog. Just like my family in the cave, we now take in God's wondrous works with eyes wide and mouths agape. The heavens declare God's glory and the earth resounds with His praise.

On the sixth day, God breathed life into the very first humans, and the Bible

tells us He made them—and He made you and me—in His image. All 7.8 billion people currently on the planet and every person who has lived before us and everyone who will come after us bears God’s image. Just think about that. Every man, woman, and child of every color and country, of every ability and age, of every tribe and tongue, no matter his or her wealth or circumstances or skills or setbacks bears the image of the one true God. To bear His image is to be like Him. Not in every way, of course, as we are not God and we are sinners, but we resemble Him. In some fashion, by nature, we all point each other to Him, and we all receive His gracious care.

God’s care for us is stunning, beyond comprehension. Indeed, at our earth’s birth God brought forth light, but He didn’t stop there. Jesus, the Creator of light itself, said, “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). The Maker of light is Himself light.

“For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). At our re-birth, God brought forth light into our hearts. Darkness was over us. But God—our Creator, our light-maker, our redeemer—came down to rescue you and me.

CALLED OUT OF DARKNESS AND INTO THE LIGHT

How very good of our God not to leave us in the cold and complete darkness. While we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us, trading our sin for His righteousness (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:21). Though we deserve darkness, death, and hell, we are instead given light, life, and eternity with our good God and Savior. How kind and merciful of Him to come. He has called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light so that we might proclaim His excellencies (1 Pet. 2:9).

If you are in the light—in Christ—praise God above and proclaim Him. Shine in the darkness for others. By God’s grace and His power, reveal to others the treasure that is hidden from their

view. Show them the light, for without Jesus we are all lost and have no hope. There is nothing you or I or anyone else can do to conjure up the light on our own. It must be given to us, and once we have it, we must share it wherever darkness remains.

*On the first day
of creation,
light overcame
the darkness,
as it always would
from then on.*

That cold, dark cave that my family visited falls woefully short of the darkness that yet persists in this world and the darkness that awaits in the next for those who don’t know Christ Jesus as Lord. But the cave stands as a physical symbol of a spiritual truth. We were once in the dark, but now we are in the light. We who have been redeemed were once lost, but now we are found. We were once blind, but now we see. God’s matchless beauty, goodness, and majesty has been revealed to us through the light of creation, the Light of the world, and the light that we redeemed image-bearers bring with us wherever we go.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us to let our light shine before men in such a way that they may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). For God’s glory and for the good of all people, may you and I shine like the bright lights in that dark cave, pointing to the eternal, glorious, and immeasurable treasure found in Jesus.

We are made in God’s image. In Christ, we are children of light. Let’s shine.



IN THE BEGINNING

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God created everything good (Gen. 1:1-5).
2. God created everything by design (Gen. 1:14-19).
3. God created everything for a purpose (Heb. 11:1-3).

Background Passages: Genesis 1:1–2:3; Hebrews 11

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God created everything out of nothing, and all of creation reveals Him.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God created the universe by the spoken word, and everything He created reveals His glory. Jesus, the Word of God, is the perfect representation of God's glory. Jesus came to restore all of creation, including humanity, to how God created it to be.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because God created everything to reveal His glory, we seek to fulfill our purpose of making much of Jesus so that others might trust in Him and know and enjoy the Creator too.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: Before “In the beginning,” there was God. Before time and space was, there was the timeless, boundless, infinite Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The triune God—one God in three Persons, perfect in love, unity, and holiness—creates. All that we see, all the science we study, all the history we know and experience—everything owes its existence to the One who created everything out of nothing, and everything serves the purpose of bringing Him glory.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to close their eyes. You may wish to turn lights off, trying to eliminate as much light as possible from the room.

DISCUSS: With your eyes closed, what do you see? (nothing; black; darkness; faint lights; residual images of bright lights; squiggly lines dancing around)

TRANSITION: We have a hard time conceiving of *nothing* in its ultimate sense. In our physical experience, the absence of visible matter is just filled with another form of matter that we can’t see with the naked eye. But at one point in time, creation came into existence, and before creation there was nothing—except God. Before the darkness we perceive, before there was even a color black, there was God the Creator. Therefore, everything that follows His work of creation is part of His story and dependent upon Him.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: If everything is dependent upon God, then how should we live? (we should live with gratitude to the Creator; we should pray to Him for our needs; we should seek to do His will; we should live to please Him and bring Him glory; we should love Him; we should live without pride)

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POINT 1

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING GOOD (GEN. 1:1-5).

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. **2** Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. **3** Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. **4** God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” There was an evening, and there was a morning: one day.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 1:1-5** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary on the next page of this Leader Guide to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in a blank in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

Genesis 1:1 is foundational for the biblical creation account and the whole of Scripture because it introduces us to the main character of the Bible—the **Creator God**.

DISCUSS: How should we read the Bible knowing that God is its main character? (we should look first and foremost for what any given passage is teaching us about God; we should recognize that this is His story, of which we are a part; we should refrain from making ourselves and human beings in general the heroes of Scripture; we should praise God when people in Scripture act in faith and obey His commands)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 2-5** commentary on the next page to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God called His creation **good** as He brought **order** to it through His word.

DISCUSS: Read the **VOICES FROM THE CHURCH** quote in the sidebar, and then ask this question: **What are some ways you have seen the goodness of God’s creation?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: The biblical creation narrative follows a pattern of *forming and filling*. On the first day, God created the realm of the heavens, separating light and darkness. On the fourth day, which we will look at next, the Lord proceeded to fill that realm.

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“Nothing comes from the hand of God that is not intrinsically good. He is the good God who does all things for good.”¹

—Barnabe Asshoto
and Samuel Ngewa

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / How do you begin the story to explain all stories? Genesis 1:1 shows us how—“**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**” These words prepare the reader for everything that will follow, both for the entirety of the creation narrative (Gen. 1:1–2:3) and the whole of Scripture. This is the start of the true story of the God who created His good universe by His Word—the Son of God—and by His Holy Spirit (see Ps. 33:6; John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-3). This is the same triune God who, in His goodness, will “re-create” and restore all of creation through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, God’s Son (see Rev. 4–5; 21–22).

First written in ancient Hebrew, Genesis 1:1 is comprised of seven Hebrew words. The number seven has significance in many places throughout the Bible, as it communicates completeness. Here, these seven words alert us to a couple of literary features within the passage. These features highlight the sovereign God’s exclusive agency and power as Creator and point to the order, artistry, and goodness of His creation:

- The refrain “God saw that it was good” occurs seven times, which correlates with the seven-day structure of the creation account (vv. 4,10,12,18,21,25,31).
- The title “**God**” in Hebrew (elohim) appears thirty-five times (a multiple of seven) and with God always functioning as the subject of a verb—He is the One who acts, bringing His goodness to bear upon His creation.²

The creation account introduces us to the main character of the Bible: **God**. Verse 1 credits God with bringing all of creation into existence, albeit not yet in a perfected state (i.e., v. 2, “formless and empty”). Most importantly, verse 1 reveals that God was there before **the beginning**; in fact, He existed before there even was a “before.” Nothing preceded God, in other words, and no one or no thing can compete with Him (Isa. 43:9-10; 44:6).

Unlike the gods depicted in the creation stories of ancient Israel’s neighbors, this God is not a being confined within the universe, and He did not need pre-existent materials in order to create. Genesis 1 is foundational, then, to the historic Christian doctrine of **creation ex nihilo** (Latin, “out of nothing”), the teaching that God created everything from nothing and out of nothing (Heb. 11:3; Rev. 4:11). In the Old Testament, the verb “to create” (Hebrew, *bara*) is assigned exclusively to God and His activity, namely, to create or bring about order (see Isa. 40:26).

VERSES 2-5 / The state of creation is described initially as “**formless and empty,**” a Hebrew phrase used elsewhere to refer to a realm of chaos or an empty wasteland (cf. Isa. 34:11; 45:18-19; Jer. 4:23). At this initial stage, the creation has yet to receive its proper order and function. **The Spirit of God** is introduced as the agent who will bring about order, life, and purpose from amidst this **darkness** at God’s word. The Spirit who “hovered” over the watery depths is the same divine Holy Spirit who “overshadowed” Mary to bring about the eternal Son of God’s incarnation within her womb (Luke 1:35) and the same Holy Spirit responsible for the “washing of regeneration and renewal” in our salvation (Titus 3:4-7), both creative acts of God.

After God declared, “**Let there be light,**” He saw that it was **good**, describing the order that He was establishing by separating light and darkness and thus distinguishing between **day** and **night**. The constructs of day and night then allow for the organization of time, **evening** and **morning** constituting **one day**. God’s ordering of creation demonstrates both His goodness and His sovereign power. Throughout the creation account, there is no struggle, violence, or conflict as portrayed in the creation myths of Babylon and Mesopotamia. Indeed, there cannot be because only the good, all-powerful God existed to create and bring order to His creation.

POINT 2

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING BY DESIGN

(GEN. 1:14-19).

14 Then God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night. They will serve as signs for seasons and for days and years. **15** They will be lights in the expanse of the sky to provide light on the earth.” And it was so. **16** God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule over the day and the lesser light to rule over the night—as well as the stars. **17** God placed them in the expanse of the sky to provide light on the earth, **18** to rule the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. **19** Evening came and then morning: the fourth day.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 1:14-19** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 14-19** commentary on the next page to expound upon the following idea in the DDG. Help your group members fill in blanks in their DDG as you explain the *forming and filling* sequence of God’s design in creation (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God’s design in creation demonstrated God’s **goodness** toward humanity and His **sovereignty** as the one true God as He *formed and filled* the creation by His words.

NOTES

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

That God is sovereign means He reigns as the rightful ruler and king over all of His creation. No one or thing can dethrone Him or take His place because He created them all—He is the only God (Isa. 44:6).

Day 7: Sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3)			
FILLING	Day 4: Lights // Sun, Moon, and Stars (Gen. 1:14-19)	Day 5: Fish and Birds (Gen. 1:20-23)	Day 6: Animals and Humans (Gen. 1:24-31)
FORMING	Day 1: Light // Day and Night (Gen. 1:1-5)	Day 2: Seas and Sky (Gen. 1:6-8)	Day 3: Land and Plants (Gen. 1:9-13)

DISCUSS: What are some ways human beings have twisted God’s good design in creation? (we have enslaved ourselves to time through our devotion to work and recreation; human beings have chosen to worship created things instead of the Creator; human beings have perverted God’s design for sex between one man and one woman within marriage; human beings have abused the proper use of His creation through excess and greed)

TRANSITION: God created everything good and He did so by design. He also created everything for a purpose—that we would seek and find Him by faith.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 14-19 / On Day 1 of creation (vv. 3-5), the day and night became markers of time, distinguishing between light and darkness. On Day 4, God made **lights**, not only as markers for keeping track of time but also to **provide light on the earth**. God placed these lights **in the expanse of the sky**, the **greater light** (the sun) to mark the daytime and the **lesser light** (the moon) and **the stars** to mark the night. In the ancient Near East, the sun, moon, and stars were thought of as deities. The biblical creation account, however, declared God's sovereignty over the celestial bodies as the Lord granted them the position **to rule** the day and night, respectively, and showed that these were not personal beings.

The sun, moon, and stars' appointment to **serve as signs for seasons and for days and years** also shows that these celestial bodies were created for humanity's sake. Contrary to the pagan notion that humanity must serve the "deities" that fill our sky, God placed the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens as part of the home He was building for His special image-bearing creatures (see Gen. 1:26-30; Ps. 8:3-8). On Day 6, God would create and appoint humanity as His representatives who were to rule and subdue the creation and other creatures on His behalf.

The arrangement of day and night along with the heavenly lights—in short, time—functions as a gift from God to serve humanity in their ruling over creation. For the ancient Israelites, this passage provided the rationale for the regularity of their agricultural seasons. Pagans, on the other hand, believed false gods oversaw the seasons and must be placated for their favor, leading to uncertainty and unrest. We too rely on the regularity of the seasons, which come faithfully every year because of God's faithfulness to sustain the order He has infused in His creation. God's design in the creation of and management of time (Days 1 and 4) continues to bless and benefit His creatures.

On a larger scale, the sequence of all the days of creation displays for us God's design. God made the world in an orderly fashion for the benefit of His creatures and **saw that it was good** at each step along the sequence (v. 18; cf. vv. 4,10,12,21,25,31).

The goodness of creation is seen and achieved in its forming and filling. The pattern present in the six creation days highlights for the reader that God was intentional in His design (see **Pack Item 3: The Home of Creation**). On Days 1–3, God created the general realms for His creatures to inhabit and rule, laying the foundation of the house, as it were. And on Days 4–6, He created specific creatures to fill and rule these respective realms. The symmetry of the sequence reflects the ideal harmony of creation and moreover the transcendent genius of the Creator.

The refrain "**evening came and then morning**" for Days 1–6 builds to the conclusion of the creation narrative—God's resting on the seventh day (2:2-3), a climax that occurs after God declared creation "very good indeed" on the sixth day (1:31). Notably, the author, the prophet Moses, departed from the evening-morning refrain on Day 7 (2:1-3), indicating that something is unique about this day and that God's relationship to creation had reached a point of wholeness (see Ex. 31:16-17).

Some biblical scholars understand the presentation of God's Sabbath rest to suggest that God then saw fit to dwell in His creation, as if in an earthly temple. **3** In this sense, God designed the world to be not only an idyllic environment for His creatures but also His own personalized temple. God's intention from the beginning has been to dwell with His creatures in joining together heaven and earth, which will one day come to fruition: "God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God" (Rev. 21:3).

POINT 3

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING FOR A PURPOSE

(HEB. 11:1-3).

1 Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen. **2** For by this our ancestors were approved. **3** By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Hebrews 11:1-3** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-2** commentary on the next page to explain the nature of *biblical faith*—assurance that what is beyond our ability to see still exists. Use the **VERSE 3** commentary to show how faith is exemplified in our belief in *creation out of nothing*, which grounds our understanding of the inherent purpose in creation (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #25: *Creation out of Nothing:* The Bible teaches that God created the universe—everything both visible and invisible—out of nothing (sometimes expressed in the Latin phrase, “creation *ex nihilo*”). This means that before God created anything, nothing else existed except God Himself. God alone is **eternal**; every created thing has a beginning. Therefore, the eternal God rules over all of His creation and He alone is worthy of worship. Denial of this doctrine has implications for God’s sovereignty over and providence in creation. Because God created out of nothing, creation has **meaning** and **purpose** and points us to the **Creator**.

OPTIONAL VIDEO: Show the “99 in :99” video about the essential Christian doctrine *Creation out of Nothing* (1:38 in length) at this link: <https://www.gospelproject.com/where-world-come-from-video>.

DISCUSS: How should belief in the biblical account of creation affect the life of a Christian? (we should stand for the truth communicated in God’s Word that creation was intentional and purposeful, not random and meaningless; we should honor the Creator with how we treat and use everything He created; we should marvel at the power of God to create out of nothing and take seriously His Word; we should worship only God the Creator)

OPTIONAL QUESTION: *From Day 5 in the DDG:* **What distinguishes a Christian’s belief in “creation out of nothing” from being a blind faith?** (creation out of nothing makes sense of the world around us since everything we know has a beginning, except God; God has revealed this truth in His Word, in which He has made known to us truth that corresponds to and makes sense of the world around us; the Holy Spirit dwells in believers to give and strengthen faith in what God has said; this is a foundational belief of God’s people across the world and throughout time)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-2 / With this point, we jump to the New Testament, which also speaks with authority about creation because God is the supreme author of the entire Bible.

The human author of Hebrews wrote to encourage his readers to persevere in their faith in Jesus Christ, even in the face of hardships (Heb. 10:32-36). To encourage their faith, and ours, he gave a definition of faith in 11:1. He then proceeded to give example after example of Old Testament saints who exemplified this understanding of saving faith (11:4-40).

Faith, as the Bible teaches, is the human capacity to hold so firmly to something one cannot see that he or she speaks and acts according to its **reality**. To have faith is to have assurance that what is beyond our ability to see still exists.

In an age of scientific enlightenment, faith in the unseen physical world is typical and normal. For example, we don't see atoms, but we trust that they exist because scientists have proven their existence through mathematical calculations and experiments. We learn about atomic theory in school as truth handed down to us. Yet the idea of atoms came from Democritus, a Greek philosopher around 400 BC, long before the scientific method could give substance to the idea of atoms.

Faith as described in Hebrews is akin to the circumstance of Democritus, who could not prove what he theorized, yet biblical faith is still of another sort entirely because it grasps the spiritual, not merely the physical (see 1 Cor. 2:12-15). Atoms have substance; we can't see them but we walk on, sit on, and breathe them in every moment of every day. But when the writer of Hebrews commented on things "**not seen**," he was referring to things without substance that cannot be proven scientifically.

Faith is holding to and acting on the idea of the unseen God as He has revealed Himself, which includes believing the truth that God gives us in His Word, the promise that

salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone, and the hope that reward awaits those who believe and persevere in faith (Heb. 11:6). Those in the Old Testament who believed in God and what He promised in this fashion, without being able to prove the substance of their hope, were **approved** by Him.

VERSE 3 / To understand the nature of biblical faith, one need look no further than the next verse. Here begins the first of nineteen declarations of "by faith" (11:3-5,7-9,11,17,20-24,27-31,33), which provide numerous examples of what it looked like for the Old Testament saints to "live by faith" (Heb. 10:38; see Hab. 2:4).

This first statement of "by faith" in verse 3 is unique for a couple of reasons. First, the person or group expressing faith is broad enough to include the readers. Second, the action is not limited to a specific past event. So, not only did the Old Testament saints believe the biblical account of creation but believers in the present do too.

Specifically, the author wanted to highlight how God created everything. First, God created the universe and everything in it **by the word of God**. God spoke and things appeared. From the revelation of all of Scripture, we know that the "word of God" is the Son of God, truly God and yet distinct from God the Father. The Son was the agent through whom all of creation came into being (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3).

Second, God created the universe out of nothing. He did not use material that already existed, as if something besides Him were eternal. No, what we see—the entire universe—had a beginning, and that by the powerful word of the only eternal God (Gen. 1). Therefore, everything owes its existence to the Creator, and everyone owes Him their worship as the sovereign God. Here we find the ultimate purpose of God's creation—that we, God's image-bearing creatures, would seek and find our Creator and Savior by faith and glorify Him through our relationship with Him (Rom. 1:19-21).

MY RESPONSE

PACK ITEM 5: HEAD, HEART, HANDS: Hand out copies of this card to help your group process how the Scriptures affect our head, heart, and hands.

NOTES



Because God created everything to reveal His glory, we seek to fulfill our purpose of making much of Jesus so that others might trust in Him and know and enjoy the Creator too.

HEAD:

Our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. But this faith cannot be divorced from what God has said about creation, that God created everything out of nothing and that everything He made was good. Our faith in Jesus must incorporate belief in these doctrines because Jesus, the Son of God, was the Word who was with God and who was God in the beginning (John 1:1-3).

How might you need to stand for the truth about God's creation in your home, community, and workplace?

HEART:

The all-powerful, all-good, eternal God brought our universe and our world into existence by His spoken word. How great is our God! Whereas we take stuff to mold and make things that are useful, and many things that are unhelpful if not harmful, God crafted everything that exists from nothing, and because God is good, so too are the things He creates. We dwell in a universe that was created to reflect the goodness of the Creator. God has poured His goodness upon us through His creation so we would know, trust, and love Him as we enjoy responsibly this great gift He has bestowed upon us.

What are some ways your group/church can worship God and reflect and honor God's goodness through your use of His creation?

HANDS:

Through the prophet Moses, God gave the true and Spirit-inspired account of creation to His redeemed people—the Hebrews, or Israelites—so they would have a proper understanding of their God, their world, and the false gods of the peoples around them. Knowing the Creator who created out of nothing infuses every aspect of our lives with meaning and purpose. The Hebrews were to be a light to the nations through their devotion to the one true God. Today, believers proclaim this same God, namely, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word of God, our only Savior and Lord.

Who will you introduce to Jesus Christ, our Creator, Savior, and Lord?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"⁴

—Abraham Kuyper
(1837-1920)

POINT 1: GOD CREATED EVERYTHING GOOD (GEN. 1:1-5).

+ COMMENTARY

“It is no accident that God is the subject of the first sentence of the Bible, for this word dominates the whole chapter and catches the eye at every point of the page: it is used some thirty-five times in as many verses of the story. The passage, indeed the Book, is about him first of all; to read it with any other primary interest (which is all too possible) is to misread it. The opening expression, *In the beginning*, is more than a bare note of time. The variations on this theme in Isaiah 40ff. show that the beginning is pregnant with the end, and the whole process present to God who is First and Last (e.g. Isa. 46:10; 48:12). Proverbs 8:22f. reveals something of the Godward side of this beginning of creation; John 1:1-3 is more explicit; and the New Testament elsewhere at times reaches back behind it (e.g. John 17:5,24) into eternity. Grammatically, this phrase could be translated as introducing a clause completed in verse 3 after a parenthetical verse 2: ‘When God began to create ... (the earth was without form ...), God said, Let there be light ...’ This would not be saying that the undeveloped earth was not of God’s making; only that creation, in its full sense, still had far to go. But the familiar translation, ‘In the beginning God ...’, is equally grammatical, is supported by all the ancient versions, and affirms unequivocally the truth laid down elsewhere (e.g. Heb. 11:3) that until God spoke, nothing existed.”⁵

+ VIDEO

Share the video (5:30 in length) at this link—<https://www.gospelproject.com/in-beginning-gospel-foundations>—to give an illustrative overview of the creation account that will put Genesis 1:1–2:3 in its canonical and theological context, which points us to Jesus.

Discuss: **Why is it important that we read Scripture with an understanding that God is its main character and Jesus, the Son of God, is its main focus?**

+ ILLUSTRATION

When does a house become a home? After it is built? The day of closing? Once an owner moves in? According to some people, you haven’t really moved in until you hang pictures on the wall. Thinking about how a house becomes a home can aid us in reflecting on Genesis 1:1–2:3. When you tell the story about how you “settled” into your home, you don’t go into exhaustive

EXTRA

detail about everything that led up to the house becoming your home—the house’s construction, the previous owners’ history, and the legal paperwork involved with your lease or purchase. Thus, when someone asks about your home, you spare them a detailed property history and share the most relevant personal details, and in this you speak truthfully. The same goes for the Genesis creation account. Without sacrificing historical accuracy, Genesis 1:1–2:3 offers a rhythmical account about a house becoming a home more than a meticulous record to answer the questions we might take to an astronomy, biology, or geology textbook, such as the origins of life or the age of the universe. Through the biblical author, God was communicating in terms that the ancient Israelites could comprehend and also with a view toward people of all generations no matter their level of scientific literacy. This passage first and foremost tells us about the goodness and wisdom of our Creator—God chose to tell the “home story” rather than the “house story.”

POINT 2: GOD CREATED EVERYTHING BY DESIGN (GEN. 1:14-19).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“On these first three days, we find that all the habitats of the planet are created: day and night, sky and sea, dry land. Now consider day 4, which is the parallel of day 1. Here the sun, moon and stars are created ‘to rule’ the day and night, which of course were created in day 1 (v. 16). On day 5, the parallel of day 2, fish and birds are created to populate their habitats as well—the ‘waters’ above and below the earth. On day 6a, the parallel of day 3, land animals are created to populate the dry land. Do you see the logical and literary structure here? First the habitat (or kingdom) is created, and then its inhabitants are created. Could this structure be coincidental? Or was it intentional? And if it was intentional, what does it communicate? ... Genesis 1 has rehearsed for us the major components of the created order, first according to their habitats and then according to their inhabitants, their kingdoms and their rulers. But this structure has also told us that there is one ruler who stands above the rest.”⁶

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Imagine living in a house in which your children need more space to store and play with their toys. You might consider building an addition onto the house or reducing the amount of toys in the home, but instead, you decide to make what was designed to be the master bedroom/office into the kids’ bedroom/playroom. The original design of the house and its intended floor plan no longer matches the functional needs of your family, so you inconvenience yourself and make do with what you have to work with.

This was not the case with God in the Genesis creation account, however. Instead, God freely and wisely created the heavens, the earth, and everything in them with design and purpose. He didn’t have to work with what happened to be there; rather, He spoke into existence what would be there. The literary and thematic correspondence between Days 1–3 (*forming*) and Days 4–6 (*filling*) indicates as much. God made these places with their occupants in mind: day and night for the sun, moon, and stars; the seas and sky for the fish and birds; the land and plants for animals and humans. God envisioned the home before building the house.

POINT 3: GOD CREATED EVERYTHING FOR A PURPOSE

(HEB. 11:1-3).

+ COMMENTARY

“Some realities are unseen because they belong to the spiritual realm and some because they lie in the future, when that realm will break into the earthly sphere. In either case, the person of faith lives out a bold confidence in God’s greater realities. It was by a life lived in this bold confidence, this firm assurance in what was not immediately observable, that the Old Testament saints ‘were commended’ by God (v. 2). In other words, not only did they bear witness to God, he bore witness to them, affirming their lives of faith. This principle of faith grasping the reality of the invisible may be seen in the believer’s confession that God created the world (v. 3). The author states what would have been a foundational point of theology for his community, namely, that God brought the visible, created order into being by his word and out of nothing. The author of Hebrews probably has in mind the creation song of Genesis 1, in which the creative word of God called forth the various aspects of creation. Faith is what looks at that created order and has a firm and resolute confidence in the God to whom it bears witness, who, though unseen, has provided a foundation for such a confidence through his mighty acts.”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

In the 1984 film *The NeverEnding Story*, young Bastian reads a mysterious book in the real world that draws him into the story he reads on its pages. The world of Fantasia, comprised of fictional and mythical creatures, is under threat from “the Nothing,” a thunderous, dark cloud that consumes everything it touches. This destructive element in the story is growing because people in the real world are losing their hopes and forgetting their dreams, which create and populate the world of Fantasia. When the Nothing is finally stopped, all that remains of Fantasia is one grain of sand, yet in the hands of Bastian, all is restored as he wishes it to be.⁸

In contrast to the world of Fantasia in *The NeverEnding Story*, the world God created and the biblical account of its creation are true. Instead of requiring a grain of sand, God spoke everything into existence without preexistent materials. While the Nothing threatened Fantasia because of people’s lack of faith, God created everything out of nothing, and our faith or lack thereof cannot threaten to destroy His creation because the one true God who created everything also sustains everything (Heb. 1:3). But in one sense, the world of *The NeverEnding Story* does correspond with the truth of Scripture: faith does create a connection between this world and the spiritual realm. By faith we recognize the truth from Scripture that God created everything out of nothing, and this same faith placed in Jesus Christ is the means by which we are saved from eternal destruction.

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MADE IN HIS IMAGE

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. We bear God's image in our roles (Gen. 1:26-28).
2. We bear God's image through our relationships (Gen. 2:18-23).
3. We bear God's image as a crown of glory and honor (Ps. 8:3-9).

Background Passages: Genesis 1–2; Psalm 8

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

People were created as God's image-bearers, providing all of humanity with a unique purpose and relationship with the Creator.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Jesus is the perfect image of God, being God Himself (Heb. 1:3). Jesus came to earth in perfect obedience to the Father so that He might bring all glory and honor due Him.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because every human is an image-bearer of God, we fulfill our mission of glorifying God by loving and respecting all persons and pointing them to Jesus, the only One in whom they can find life and purpose.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: In the beginning, God made everything good. Everything was exactly the way He intended: the earth and sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, the creatures that live on land, in the sea, and travel through the air, and even time itself! But His creative work didn't end with any of these. He was saving the best—the pinnacle of creation—for last. In His final creative act “in the beginning,” God created *us*.

INSTRUCT: Ask your group members to take 60 seconds and write down as many answers as they can think of to the following question. Answers can be written in the Notes section of their DDG. Review as many answers as you can together. If you have a whiteboard or a shared screen, write down some of the answers for all to see.

DISCUSS: What does it mean to be a human being? (self-awareness; creativity; compassion; complex reasoning; emotions; being an image-bearer of God)

TRANSITION: When we think about what it means to be a human being, we often will jump to utilitarian answers: we're human because of our capacity to reason, to be creative, or our self-awareness. Digging deeper, when we think about our identities, we often focus on specific aspects of what we do: our vocations, our roles within relationships and family structures, and so forth. While all of these things are a part of what it means to be human, in themselves, they all fall short. To understand what it means to be human—what makes a person a person—is centered on a single concept found in the first chapter of the Bible: A human being is made in the image of God.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “the image of God”? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

POINT 1

WE BEAR GOD'S IMAGE IN OUR ROLES

(GEN. 1:26-28).

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

27 So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female. **28** God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth."

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 1:26-28** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 26-28** commentary to help explain the nature of the image of God in humanity and how this plays out in our *cultural mandate* as God's image-bearers (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #28: *Image of God in Humanity:* The image of God in humanity is understood as mirroring God's attributes in our **nature, actions**, and relational capacities. In **Jesus**, we see the true image of God. He perfectly mirrors God's attributes, fulfills God's will, and enjoys a perfect relationship with the Father. The Bible continues to speak of the image of God in humanity even after our fall into sin, even though our ability to rightly reflect God has been marred.

OPTIONAL VIDEO: Show the "99 in :99" video about the essential Christian doctrine *Image of God in Humanity* (1:48 in length) at this link: <https://www.gospelproject.com/bear-god-image>.

DISCUSS: **What are some specific ways we can faithfully reflect God as His image-bearers in our culture?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: At the heart of our responsibilities as people made in God's image is caring for and cultivating creation for God's glory. As we'll see by exploring Genesis 2, not only do we bear God's image in our role of ruling righteously over the earth but we also bear God's image in our relationships with other human beings.

NOTES

THE CULTURAL MANDATE

Human beings are called to develop the latent potential of the world through the growth of the human race, development of culture, and care for the world God made (Gen. 1:28; 2:15).

COMMENTARY

VERSES 26-27 / One of the first questions Genesis evokes from its readers is this: Why do we see the creation of humanity twice, first in Genesis 1 and then again in Genesis 2? Is this an inconsistency that invalidates the truth of the Bible's creation account, meaning we should treat it merely as a man-made story, similar to other creation narratives from the ancient Near East? No, the two accounts serve a complementary purpose, telling the one true creation story from two angles. Far from being inconsistent or contradictory, the narrative of Genesis 1–2 reveals to us the beauty of God's intention for humanity as people made in His image.

That intention is rooted in the two Hebrew words translated as **“image”** and **“likeness”** in Genesis 1:26-27. These words convey the idea of a figure or replica, an image that represents what it is modeled after. Think about it like a portrait. When an artist paints a portrait, the artist is capturing the subject's image. The portrait is a representation of the subject, communicating something about the subject to an audience. But the portrait is not the subject itself.

Human beings, made in God's image and likeness, are created to be God's representatives in the world. We are not God and we must never put ourselves in the place of God, but we were created to show the rest of creation, including other people, something of what God is like.

VERSE 28 / Fundamental to this calling is our responsibility for the rest of creation. When God commanded the first humans to **“fill the earth,” “subdue,”** and **“rule”** over it, He gave humanity the responsibility of cultivating the earth to its fullest potential. This responsibility is carried out, broadly, through the continued growth of the human race, the development of culture, and our care for the world God made, which is why some scholars refer to this charge as the cultural mandate. To put it another way, human beings are given dominion over all

of creation: the birds, sea creatures, land animals, insects—every living creature, great and small—and every square inch of the earth. All of it. The Bible informs how this dominion extends to every area of life:

- **Wisely consuming and cultivating the world's resources** is a way in which we exercise our dominion in the world, expressing our care for the world God made as He desires (see Lev. 25:1-22).
- **Working with excellence**, being diligent in our labors, and showing respect for our employers, coworkers, and employees is a way of serving and honoring the Lord (see Gen. 2:15; Col. 3:23).
- **Creating art**—music, poetry, visual arts, novels, film, and more—is an exercise of our dominion when we celebrate the creativity, beauty, and goodness of God in overt and subtle ways (Ps. 150).
- **Multiplying biologically**, having children, along with supporting, protecting, and caring for the generations, is an exercise of our dominion as we bring new life into the world and extend culture as God's image-bearers (Gen. 1:28).
- **Multiplying spiritually**, sharing the gospel and making disciples, is the unique way in which Christians fulfill this mandate (Matt. 28:18-20).

Does dominion mean we can do whatever we want with the world? By no means. While we are rulers over creation, we do not do so with complete autonomy. We are not sovereign, with authority emanating from our very being. On our own, we can do nothing. We have no inherent authority over so much as a blade of grass, let alone the rest of the world. God grants us His authority—He delegates it to us as a king delegates authority to a regent or governor, and He expects us to use that authority responsibly. To be made in God's image means having dominion over God's creation, caring for and cultivating it as His representatives for His glory.

POINT 2

WE BEAR GOD'S IMAGE THROUGH OUR RELATIONSHIPS (GEN. 2:18-23).

NOTES

THE TRIUNE GOD

The God of the Bible has revealed Himself as the Trinity in Scripture. While the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, Scripture teaches that the one true God exists as three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—each divine and distinct, one in being, and with perfect equality and unity.

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper corresponding to him." **19** The LORD God formed out of the ground every wild animal and every bird of the sky, and brought each to the man to see what he would call it. And whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. **20** The man gave names to all the livestock, to the birds of the sky, and to every wild animal; but for the man no helper was found corresponding to him. **21** So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to come over the man, and he slept. God took one of his ribs and closed the flesh at that place. **22** Then the LORD God made the rib he had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. **23** And the man said: This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called "woman," for she was taken from man.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 2:18-23** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 18-20** commentary on the next page to establish the following truth (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Human beings, made in God's image, are **relational** beings in a way that is analogous to (but also different from) how God is a relational being. While our triune God is self-sufficient, we **require** external relationships in order to flourish.

EXPLAIN: Read the **VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY** quote in the sidebar. Then use **PACK ITEMS 6 AND 7: MALE AND FEMALE (POSTER AND HANDOUT)** and the **VERSES 21-23** commentary to flesh out the implications of the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God made human beings male and female to exist as **equal** and suitable **partners** for one another. In the marital relationship, among others, we reflect God's image.

DISCUSS: How does a biblical worldview differ from the culture's on the issue of gender? (God created male and female as good and by design, not as fluid concepts that we can change as we see fit; some cultures elevate one gender or another to the detriment of the other; the world struggles to see the differences in the genders and still recognize their equality, so differences are minimized or erased; some view the distinction of genders as unnecessary and unneeded, leading to sinful, unfruitful lifestyles)



VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"That the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved."¹

—Matthew Henry
(1662-1714)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 18-20 / After God made the world and everything in it, He made a garden in the land called “Eden” (Gen. 2:8). It was “the garden of God,” a fertile land filled with beauty and bounty (Ezek. 28:13). It was, in a word, paradise. More importantly, the garden was intended to be the place where God dwelt with humanity, a defining theme within the story of Scripture (Lev. 26:12; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 37:23; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3). God has always been intimately involved with His creation. He is not aloof, a distant deity with no interest in the world and creatures He made. He is a relational God, existing in eternal, unhindered fellowship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It was into this paradise, this place of provision that contained everything the man would need to live, that God placed him to **“work it and watch over it”** (Gen. 2:8,15). Reading Genesis 2, many of us might expect for its author to continue the refrain of the previous chapter: “And God saw that it was good.” Instead, God said four words that are intended to shock us: **“It is not good”** (2:18). God’s “not good” is meant to suggest not merely the absence of something good but a “substantial deficiency.”² What could be deficient? The man was alone. His need, of which he may not have been previously aware, was made plain as he named every creature but found none among them like him.

Human beings, made in God’s image, are relational beings. Unlike the triune God, however, who is entirely fulfilled in Himself by the eternal relationship that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, humans are not relationally self-sufficient. We require external relationships in order to flourish.

VERSES 21-23 / Therefore, God created a partner for the man, forming the woman (later called Eve) from his side as a **“helper”** corresponding to, or suitable for, him. Through the narrative of the creation of the woman, we see several important truths:

- **God created humans as male and female.** Recently, the concept of gender fluidity—the idea that gender is not fixed and therefore biological sex must be distinguished from gender as an identity—has led many to question this truth, if not abandon it altogether. But the Bible is explicit: God created human beings as male and female (Gen. 1:27), and God’s design does not change.
- **God created males and females as equals.** The concept of correspondence, or suitability, speaks to this. The narrative of Genesis 2 uses this idea to emphasize the equality of the man and woman.³ This is important for our understanding of God making the woman to be a **“helper”** (v. 18). The Hebrew word translated “helper” (*‘ezer*) suggests providing aid, support, and even protection. Rather than seeing the word “helper” as implying someone being subservient, the Bible wants us to recognize the special dignity it conveys because of its connection to God Himself, who also is described as a “helper” (Ex. 18:4; Ps. 20:2; 121:1-2; 124:8).
- **God created males and females as distinct from one another.** Correspondence speaks to the sameness of human beings but also to our distinctness from one another. While sharing the same essential equality, males and females are not the same. By God’s design, our corresponding distinction allows us to flourish as God’s image-bearers, notably through the command to the first married couple to “fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28).
- **God created males and females for intimacy.** By embedding his name (**“man”**; Heb. *’ish*) within hers (**“woman”**; Heb. *’ishah*), “Adam anticipated the deepest intimacy” (2:23).⁴ Here the need for intimacy, fully knowing and being fully known, is fulfilled in the marital relationship. But the Bible is replete with examples of intimacy that are not sexual in nature, such as friends, family, and in the church.

POINT 3

WE BEAR GOD'S IMAGE AS A CROWN OF GLORY AND HONOR (Ps. 8:3-9).

NOTES

3 When I observe your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you set in place, **4** what is a human being that you remember him, a son of man that you look after him? **5** You made him little less than God, and crowned him with glory and honor. **6** You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: **7** all the sheep and oxen, as well as the animals in the wild, **8** the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea that pass through the currents of the seas. **9** LORD, our Lord, how magnificent is your name throughout the earth!

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Psalm 8:3-9** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 3-4** commentary on the next page to highlight the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Human beings in comparison to the greatness of creation seem **small** and insignificant. Yet it is only humans who were made by God to **rule** over all of creation.

DISCUSS: **How have you experienced the greatness of creation making you feel insignificant?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-9** commentary to identify some implications of all humanity having glory and honor as God's image bearers. **Note:** Some Bible translations differ on the translation of verse 5, whether humanity is lower than "God" or "heavenly beings." If the Bible reading raises this issue, use the commentary to explain the two reasonable translations of the Hebrew *elohim*. Finally, use the commentary to emphasize the following Christ connection (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Humans wonder at God's care in part because we are sinners, but God sent His **Son** as "a son of man" so that we might be **saved** through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (Heb. 2:6-9). Jesus, the image of God, is worthy of all glory and honor.

DISCUSS: **What are some ways we can honor and glorify our Lord here on earth?** (treat every human being with honor and respect as being made in God's image; take seriously our role as having dominion over and taking care of God's creation; respect and celebrate the equality and differences between males and females; proclaim Jesus, God's Son, as the Savior who saves sinners)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 3-4 / When God created the world, He did so with the intent of making His glory—His magnificence, power, and majesty—known (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20). As the psalmist, David’s wonder and worship began with God’s self-disclosure in creation, but it didn’t stop there. David marveled at the wonder of creation and the special place within it that God reserved for humanity (Ps. 8:3-4). Humans, in comparison to all that David observed, are so small, so insignificant. Yet it is human beings, mere mortals, who are made to rule over all of creation, called to cultivate and care for what God has made (vv. 6-8). Not only having dominion, humans can communicate directly with God Himself. Only human beings in all of creation have these responsibilities and privileges.

VERSES 5-9 / Humans alone, as God’s image-bearers, are made a **“little less than God,”** yet we are crowned **“with glory and honor”** (v. 5). There are two ways to understand what it means for humans to be made a little less, both of which stem from the translation of the Hebrew word *elohim* in verse 5.

Elohim as God: This is the most common way to refer to God in the Old Testament, beginning in Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning God [*elohim*] created the heavens and the earth”). In this sense, Psalm 8:5 connects directly to God’s determination to make humans in His image (Gen. 1:26). This view is only strengthened by Psalm 8:6-8, which explicitly describes the rest of creation as being under the rule of humanity. Therefore, to bear the image of God carries with it glory and honor. As God’s image-bearers, we are His representatives in this world. This is true of no other created being in heaven or on earth. And only God is above the domain of His image-bearers. He is their ruler and the ruler of all the universe; His sovereignty is uncontestable.

Elohim as Heavenly Beings: In certain contexts, the word *elohim* can also refer to heavenly or supernatural beings (see

Ps. 82:1,6; cf. “sons of God” in Gen. 6:1-4; Job 1:6; 38:7), including angelic beings (Ps. 89:6-7), demons (Deut. 32:17), or even the specter of Samuel that was called up by the medium at En-dor (1 Sam. 28:13). This is actually the view of Psalm 8 taken in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (often referred to in your Bible’s notes as “LXX”), and several English translations follow suit. In support of this translation, Hebrews 2:6-8 quotes this passage as saying “man” was made lower than “the angels.”⁵

Regardless of how someone understands the use of *elohim* here, because humans are nonetheless made in the image of God, unique in all of creation, we must recognize, celebrate, and defend the value of all human beings, regardless of their beliefs, backgrounds, and abilities. A single man or woman is crowned with as much glory and honor as those who are married. Even someone who rejects God’s design for sexuality and engages in immorality is crowned with the same glory and honor as a man and woman happily married for fifty years. A developmentally delayed individual is equally crowned with as much glory and honor as one with a genius level IQ. A child still developing within his or her mother’s womb is crowned with the same glory and honor as the child running through the hallways at your church. To be human—made in God’s image—is to be crowned with glory and honor.

Psalm 8 provides a particular outlook on humanity’s place in redemptive history. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as the One who, for a little while, became less than the angels when He added humanity to Himself (Heb. 2:6-9). The Son of God became a human being, **“a son of man,”** taking on the form of His image-bearers. And through His death and resurrection, He was crowned with all glory and honor, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:5-11).

MY RESPONSE

Because every human is an image-bearer of God, we fulfill our mission of glorifying God by loving and respecting all persons and pointing them to Jesus, the only One in whom they can find life and purpose.

NOTES

HEAD:

When God created human beings as male and female, He made them equal not just in dignity and value but as equal partners in their responsibilities—from cultivating the earth and shaping culture to the call to spread the gospel in fulfillment of the Great Commission. While specific roles will look different from person to person, we are partners in our work as God’s image-bearers.

How might the truth that God created people different yet equal change your perspective on yourself and others?

HEART:

Even though we may acknowledge that all people are made in God’s image, there are some people about whom we are tempted to say, “But not them.” We may view some people as not having the same kind of dignity and value as others because of real or perceived evils committed by them or because of unspoken, unaddressed, or culturally “respectable” sins within our own hearts. The gospel challenges us to love not only those we agree with or prefer but also those we avoid and are prone to devalue as God’s image-bearers, though they are “crowned” with the same honor and glory as we are by nature.

What individual or group of people might you struggle to view as God’s image-bearers? How has this study challenged you in this area?

HANDS:

As God’s image-bearers, we are called to shape the world around us for God’s glory and to help people see that true satisfaction, contentment, and joy are found only in Him. That’s the ultimate point of everything we do. We lead and work with integrity to shape the cultures of our work environments, homes, schools, and churches because we are made in the image of a God who values integrity. We create works of art of all kinds because we are made in the image of a God who values beauty and craftsmanship, even if what we create doesn’t explicitly say Jesus’ name. And in the name of Jesus Christ, we come alongside those in need, people who are weary and burdened, because we are made in the image of a God who is our help in times of need (Ps. 46:1).

What is one action you can take this week to put God’s character on display as His image-bearer?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“For you have made us for yourself and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in you.”⁶

—Augustine (354-430)

POINT 1: WE BEAR GOD’S IMAGE IN OUR ROLES (GEN. 1:26-28).

+ COMMENTARY

“Verse 27 is the first poetry in the Bible, consisting of three lines, each with four stresses and three repetitions of the verb *bara* (‘created’). This is the high point toward which God’s creativity from the opening verse is directed. So consider this: Though you could travel a hundred times the speed of light, past countless yellow-orange stars, to the edge of the galaxy and swoop down to the fiery glow located a few hundred light-years below the plane of the Milky Way, though you could slow to examine the host of hot young stars luminous among the gas and dust, though you could observe, close-up, the protostars poised to burst forth from their dusty cocoons, though you could witness a star’s birth, in all your stellar journeys you would never see anything equal to the birth and wonder of a human being. For a tiny baby girl or boy is the apex of God’s creation! But the greatest wonder of all is that the child is created in the image of God, the *Imago Dei*. The child once was not; now, as a created soul, he or she is eternal. He or she will exist forever. When the stars of the universe fade away, that soul shall still live.”⁷

+ COMMENTARY

“Rather than an indication that they looked like God or shared some of his characteristics (e.g., creativity or relationality or eternal nature), I read Genesis as saying that humans function as the image. Humans are not *like* God’s image, they *are* his image. In the ancient world, an ‘image’ or *tselem* was something concrete. Every deity had a temple, and every temple had an image. The image was a physical representation of the deity, a visible sign of his or her dominion. John Walton argues that the creation account in Genesis is meant to remind us of a temple dedication. Yahweh has built the cosmos as the temple in which he resides and the domain over which he presides. Rather than setting up a statue of himself, he makes men and women. We function as the sign of his rule to the rest of creation.”⁸

+ OPTIONAL VIDEO

If your meeting space allows, play for your group the video “Torah Tuesday—Genesis 1:26” (5:24 in length), where Old Testament scholar Carmen Joy Imes discusses what it means for humans to be made in the image and likeness of God according to Genesis 1:26: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-upTgo3KsM>.

EXTRA

POINT 2: WE BEAR GOD'S IMAGE THROUGH OUR RELATIONSHIPS (GEN. 2:18-23).

+ COMMENTARY

“The first two chapters of Genesis give us two different but quite complementary portrayals of what it means to be male and female. Genesis 1, on the one hand, tells us that for human beings being male and female is closely linked to being created in God’s image [Gen. 1:27] ... The way this verse [v. 27] is structured, with its tight parallelism, shows that there is something about our gender complementarity (male and female) that reflects something true about God ... Human sexuality is part of what it means to be the image of God (says the verse). Not that God is gendered or sexually differentiated, but that *personal relationship* is part of the essential nature of God and therefore also part of the essential nature of humanity, since we were created in his image. Human sexual complementarity and the personal relationships it enables reflect *within the created order* something that is true about God within his uncreated, divine being. Genesis 2, on the other hand, sets our maleness and femaleness in the context of the human task ... God has called his whole creation ‘good’ and ‘very good.’ It comes as a shock, then, when he announces that something is ‘not good’ (Genesis 2:18). What is not good is that the man (the ‘earth creature’) should be alone. But in the immediate context, the problem of this aloneness is not merely that he would therefore be lonely, in an emotional sense. God is addressing not merely a psychological problem but a *creational* one. God has given an immense task to this creature in Genesis 2:15. He has been put in the garden ‘to work it and take care of it.’ When we add this to the task specified in the earlier creation account—to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ and to rule over the rest of the animate creation (Genesis 1:28)—the human task seems limitless. A man cannot tackle such a challenge alone. That is ‘not good.’ He needs help. God sets out, not to find him a companion to stop him feeling lonely, but to find a ‘helper to stand alongside and equal to’ him in this huge task laid on him as the servant, keeper, filler, subduer, and ruler of creation.”⁹

+ COMMENTARY

“The rib is not metaphorical as some have suggested but actual—and for immense theological reasons, as we shall see. As to whether the rib refers to the side (as it does in other Scriptures) or a specific rib is open to debate. But ‘rib’ seems correct here because the Scripture clearly states that God took ‘one of his ribs,’ whereas one of his sides does not make sense. The language pictures a long, curved, glistening rib still moist with Adam’s fluids and warm with his marrow. And no, men do not have one less rib than women. When God closed Adam back up, he was missing a rib, but his children can ‘count ‘em all.’ The significances of this are several and profound. Adam was not created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) but out of the dust of the earth, and neither was Eve made *ex nihilo*. ‘The rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made [literally, ‘built’] into a woman’ (v. 22a). She was made of the same stuff as the man—the same bone, the same flesh, the same DNA. Her correspondence in form, her femaleness, her estrogens were shaped and constituted from the man. Eve was the first person to be created from a living being. Because she came from Adam, she perfectly shared the image of God.”¹⁰

POINT 3: WE BEAR GOD’S IMAGE AS A CROWN OF GLORY AND HONOR (PS. 8:3-9).

+ COMMENTARY

“Tucked into the middle of these [early] psalms is Ps. 8, a creation psalm, reflecting on the role of human beings in the created order. Clearly, the psalmist is thinking about Gen. 1:26-27, where human beings are the crown of creation and were made to rule over the world. David reflects on the role the Lord gave to human beings: ‘You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet’ (8:6). Who are human beings? They were created to rule the world for God, and in their ruling the Lord’s majestic name resounds throughout the earth. Given the placement of this psalm, it seems justified to conclude that this rule of human beings is manifested in the rule of David, the anointed one. The call for human beings to display God’s majesty by ruling the world will become a reality through David and his heirs. The NT sees Ps. 8 fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Heb. 2). The risen Christ is exalted as the messianic king because of his suffering and death, even though everything in the created world is not yet subject to his reign. Human beings will rule over the world only if they belong to Jesus, and they will share his future reign with him.” **11**

+ COMMENTARY

“The New Testament reads Psalm 8 in the light of the coming of Christ. While verses 4-8 speak of the significance of humanity, Paul applies the thought to Jesus, who after all was perfect man as well as God. In 1 Corinthians 15:27, Paul cites 8:6 (perhaps also alluding to Ps. 110:1): he (God) ‘has put everything under his feet,’ with particular reference to death, which he defeats by virtue of his resurrection. The author of Hebrews uses Psalm 8 as part of his argument that Jesus was more important, and thus more deserving of reverence, than the angels (Heb. 2:5-10). Citing the Septuagint version of Psalm 8, he remarks that Jesus was made a little lower than the angels (rather than ‘God’, which is the best reading of the Hebrew) ‘for a little while’ ... But now Jesus is crowned with glory and far surpasses whatever glory the angels reflect.” **12**

+ OPTIONAL VIDEO

As you comment on the greatness of creation in comparison with the smallness of humanity, help your group grasp the enormity of the universe with a video comparing the sizes of planets, stars, and solar systems, such as this video (5:07 in length):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i93Z7zljQ7I>.

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3. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1996), 214 [Logos].
4. R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, in *Preaching the Word*, 61 [Logos].
5. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15 in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 84 [Logos].
6. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Albert C. Outler, rev. Mark Vessey (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 3.
7. R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, in *Preaching the Word*, 36 [Logos].
8. Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God’s Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 164.
9. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), 21-23.
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11. Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 254.
12. Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15-16, in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014) [Logos].

MADE FOR HIS GLORY

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's glory is revealed through the worship of His people (Ps. 96:1-10).
2. God's glory is revealed through the testimony of His creation (Ps. 96:11-13).
3. God's glory is revealed through the proclamation of His Son (2 Cor. 4:1-6).

Background Passages: Psalm 96; 2 Corinthians 3–4

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God's Glory—His matchless beauty, goodness, and majesty—is revealed through the worship of His people, the wonder of His creation, and ultimately through the revelation of His Son.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

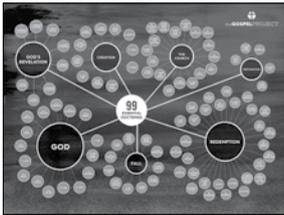
The glory of God, His splendor and majesty, is revealed to humanity in many different ways, but its greatest manifestation is found in Christ Jesus, the Son of God. The Son came to earth so that we might have a relationship with the Father through Him for the glory and honor of God.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because the Son of God came to earth so that we might come to know and experience the glory of God, we live as a sent people, telling others about our glorious Savior, Jesus Christ.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: Before God created the heavens and the earth, God’s glory was manifested and praised without measure and without end. Through His creation, God made a stage and an audience for His glory to fill. Giving God glory is our highest purpose as human beings. We were made for this—to witness God’s glory and testify to it! The entire Bible, and notably the Psalms, helps us to direct our attention and our praises to our Creator God, especially as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

DISCUSS: **How would you describe the sun?** (a giant ball of burning gas; beautiful and radiant; warm and comforting; blinding; necessary for life; almost impossible to ignore)

DISCUSS: **How would you describe the sun when veiled by clouds?** (the sun hasn’t changed at all; seems less bright; seems less warm; easier to forget)

EXPLAIN: Connect our perception of the sun, whether clear or veiled, to our perception and understanding of God’s glory (*the bold words fill in a blank in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #27: God’s Glory: The glory of God is His manifest work, the way He represents His **perfect** character through His activity. It also refers to His excellent reputation and is given as one of the reasons we are to praise His name. Another sense of the word is the inherent beauty of God, the unbearable brightness and beauty of His being as He radiates His own **attributes** and characteristics for all to witness. The Scriptures speak of humanity as having “fallen short” of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23) because we have rejected the purpose for which God created us—to **glorify Him**.

TRANSITION: God’s glory is ever-present around us, but people don’t always recognize it. So let’s look at the ways God’s glory is revealed.

POINT 1

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED THROUGH THE WORSHIP OF HIS PEOPLE (PS. 96:1-10).

NOTES

1 Sing a new song to the LORD; let the whole earth sing to the LORD. **2** Sing to the LORD, bless his name; proclaim his salvation from day to day.

3 Declare his glory among the nations, his wondrous works among all peoples. **4** For the LORD is great and is highly praised; he is feared above all gods. **5** For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. **6** Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. **7** Ascribe to the LORD, you families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. **8** Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; bring an offering and enter his courts. **9** Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; let the whole earth tremble before him. **10** Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns. The world is firmly established; it cannot be shaken."

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Psalm 96:1-10** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-6** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

We are to declare God's glory as the most excellent **King** who is greater than all other gods. Compared to Yahweh, who made the heavens, all other "gods" should be regarded as **worthless**.

DISCUSS: What are some ways our worship of God matters in this world?

(as God's image-bearers, we are to honor and reflect our Creator in our words and our actions, which gives Him glory; we bless God through our worship; we show the world that God is our chief priority and He should be theirs as well; in our worship we proclaim who God is and what He has done so others may worship Him as well; worship of God satisfies us because this is our purpose)

EXPLAIN: Read the **VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY** quote in the sidebar, and use the **VERSES 7-10** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

In our leading all of creation in worship, we should confess **verbally** who God is by celebrating His **attributes**.

TRANSITION: Psalm 96 instructs us in our role to join with the creation in singing about God's glory. As verses 11-13 will show us, our worship also looks forward with anticipation to God's judgment and the transformation of creation, which one day will reveal God's glory in a fuller way.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Let ev'ry kindred, ev'ry tribe
On this terrestrial ball,
To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all;
To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all."¹

-John Rippon (1751-1836)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-3 / Bad theology leaves people with the impression that heaven is a never-ending choir practice; good theology, however, lets them know that heaven and earth were meant to be the stadium and stage for the greatest rock opera of all time. As theologian Herman Bavinck stated, “The fact that the world is the theater of God’s self-revelation can hardly be denied.” **2** If creation is a theater for God’s glory, then the earth is the amphitheater.

God’s people, like an interactive concert audience, are expected to sing praises to the Lord, but so is everyone on the earth. When the worship of God isn’t taking place somewhere in the world, we as image-bearers aren’t doing our job. That’s why missions and evangelism exist, to multiply worshipers of God. **3**

The Book of Psalms provides worshipers with the soundtrack to the true story of the world that is God’s plan of redemption. Psalm 96, in particular, is what biblical scholars call an “enthronement song,” one that declares God’s glory by recognizing Yahweh as the most excellent King who is greater than all other gods.

So we sing to “the LORD.” The term “LORD” represents God’s covenant name, Yahweh, which means “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). We should sing to Yahweh about Yahweh every day and everywhere because of who He is and what He has done (Ps. 96:2-3).

VERSES 4-6 / As an enthronement song, this psalm is something of a victory shout. Yahweh is the de facto champion among the gods—He has no rivals. All of creation belongs to Him and owes Him its worship and allegiance. In other words, this is Yahweh’s world, and those who are on His side should sing about His greatness.

So, unlike the nations, God’s people have a better reason to sing than anyone else (Ps. 96:4; cf. 29:1; 82:1,6; 89:6-7). Yahweh alone is great as the eternal and glorious Creator, the “I AM.” Compared to Yahweh, the false gods of the nations should be

considered as worthless idols. The psalm here isn’t necessarily communicating that these “gods” were non-existent but rather that they could never compete with Israel’s God, Yahweh, the God of gods and Lord of lords (Deut. 10:17; see 1 Cor. 8:4-6; 10:20). The Hebrew word translated “idols” can also mean “worthless” or “insignificant” (see Isa. 2:18; Jer. 14:14; Zech. 11:17). Verse 5 is not a statement about the existence of false gods but a declaration that Yahweh belongs in a class of His own apart from all other spiritual beings (Ex. 20:3; Isa. 43:10-11; 44:6; 46:9-11). In other words, Yahweh alone is worthy of the title “God.”

Unlike the lesser, finite “gods” that the nations worshiped, whom God’s people were also tempted to worship, Yahweh alone made the heavens (Ps. 96:5). There is no other Creator God, a being who is self-existent and all-powerful. True splendor, majesty, strength, and beauty are present in Yahweh alone, who not only dwells in the heavens but also made them.

VERSES 7-10 / Worship reveals what worship recognizes. “Ascribe” is not a word we commonly use today. It doesn’t communicate that we can “give” or “add” anything to God that He doesn’t already possess in His infinite glory and strength. Rather, in our worship, we are making an effort to confess verbally who God is. As people who belong to God, people who know and love Him, we are to lead the parade of celebrating God’s attributes before the rest of creation. Our worship should be infectious and evangelistic as we announce to others God’s good and holy plan to rule and reign over this world—His kingdom come, His will be done (see Matt. 6:10).

Worship focuses on God, but it also enables evangelism. Our ever-present singing to Yahweh should serve as a winsome invitation to sinners from every people, language, tribe, and nation to join the celebration. Our zeal and excitement about who God is and what He has done should help the world to see why God alone is worthy of our worship.

POINT 2

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED THROUGH THE TESTIMONY OF HIS CREATION (PS. 96:11-13).

NOTES

11 Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let the sea and all that fills it resound. **12** Let the fields and everything in them celebrate. Then all the trees of the forest will shout for joy **13** before the LORD, for he is coming—for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his faithfulness.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Psalm 96:11-13** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the commentary to distinguish between *general revelation* and *special revelation* and to explain the following idea (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

Special revelation helps us understand the purpose and proclamation of **general** revelation.

“ALREADY/NOT YET”

The Bible presents the reality of God's kingdom as something that is both present and also future, “already” and “not yet.” Though God is always and already King over His creation, the manifestation of His kingdom became more evident with Jesus' first coming and awaits a fuller glory that will be revealed at Jesus' second coming.

DISCUSS: What does it say about God that He reveals Himself in different ways, such as in nature and in literature like the psalms? (God is creative; God is personal; God is generous to His creatures by communicating to them in multiple ways; God desires genuine relationship with human beings)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 11-13** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God's creation points to the glory of the Creator, though its message is muffled due to the **sin** of humanity. But one day the praises of creation will ring loud and clear when the Lord comes again to **judge** the earth and set everything **right**.

TRANSITION: God created the world to reveal His glory, and we as His people can look forward to seeing His glory more fully when Jesus returns. Jesus is the fullest representation of God's glory, being that He is God's Son. If people want to know what God is like, then they must look to Jesus, whom we proclaim in the gospel.

COMMENTARY

Theologians have historically distinguished between two kinds of revelation: general revelation (sometimes called natural revelation) and special revelation.

General revelation refers to how God makes Himself known to all creatures in creation and history (see Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:18-20).

Special revelation refers to how God has made Himself known specifically to His people through His Word, namely, in Scripture and in the person of Christ (Heb. 1:1-2).

The Book of Psalms itself, being inspired by God and preserved by Him over the centuries, is special revelation. The Psalter (another word to refer to the Book of Psalms), both in terms of its structure and content, points God's people to the Messiah and to the transformed world to come.

For instance, the first book, or section, of the Psalter (Psalms 1–41) is concerned with the true King and God's law. Further, the final book of the Psalms (107–150) carries an abiding theme of calling all of creation to worship Yahweh, concluding with five "hallelujah" praise songs (146–150). In short, the Book of Psalms begins with an emphasis on Israel's King who will reign over the nations and ends with the praise of Israel's God, Yahweh, as He reigns over the nations. As some biblical scholars have stated, the central message of the Book of Psalms can be summarized like this: When the Messiah-King reigns, Yahweh reigns.

The Book of Psalms, sometimes called the "hymnbook of God's people," is a profound collection of poetry, songs, laments, praises, and prayers, but it is also prophetic because of its outlook toward future events. Psalms 2; 16; 22; 34; 45; and 110 address events such as the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Messiah as well as the final judgment and the cosmic transformation of the heavens and earth. Creation will reach its apex when Jesus returns to judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:30-31), an event anticipated in Psalm 96. Special revelation helps

us understand the purpose and proclamation of general revelation.

VERSES 11-13 / Psalm 96 finds itself in a section of the Psalter celebrating Yahweh's reign, and verses 11-13 lend their voice to a choir of psalms exulting in the coming rule of Yahweh. We should follow the psalmist's lead by joining our voices with all of creation to rejoice over the Lord's forthcoming reign through His appointed King.

Similar to how salvation history as revealed through special revelation has an "already/not yet" dynamic, so too does general revelation. The kingdom of God already arrived, in part, with the revelation of Jesus in His first coming (Matt. 12:28; Mark 1:15), but God's kingdom has not yet been established in its fullness (Matt. 6:10). Something similar holds true for the revelation of God in nature. The heavens already declare the glory of God in a sufficient yet shrouded way (Ps. 19:1ff), but the day is coming when the skies, earth, and seas will be filled to the brim with the celebration of Yahweh. In other words, Psalm 96:11-13 describes general revelation in this world as well as the world to come, namely, the end of the story.

Creation has been testifying to the Creator's greatness and majesty since the beginning, but ever since humanity brought sin into the world, we have failed to perceive rightly and acknowledge faithfully the revelation of God in nature (see Rom. 1:18-21). While nothing is wrong with God's revelation of Himself in nature, there is something wrong with us—and moreover, there is something wrong with the world on account of the curse of sin (see Rom. 8:19-21). Because the earth has been subjected to futility and strife for a temporary, albeit prolonged, period, creation does not yet reveal God's glory as fully as it could. While right now the trees may only whisper to us about God's goodness, the psalmist described a day when they will shout for joy (Ps. 96:12).

POINT 3

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED THROUGH THE PROCLAMATION OF HIS SON (2 COR. 4:1-6).

NOTES

1 Therefore, since we have this ministry because we were shown mercy, we do not give up. **2** Instead, we have renounced secret and shameful things, not acting deceitfully or distorting the word of God, but commending ourselves before God to everyone's conscience by an open display of the truth. **3** But if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. **4** In their case, the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. **5** For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake. **6** For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **2 Corinthians 4:1-6** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-2** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

The gospel radiates more clearly when believers **speak** and **live** the truth.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we can detract from God's glory in the gospel? (we can open ourselves up to the charge of hypocrisy through unrepentant sin; we can make the gospel something that focuses on us and what we do rather than what God has done through Jesus; we can misrepresent the gospel, saying it is a means to prosperity or an easy life; we can downplay God's commands and consequences regarding sin)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 3-6** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The proclamation of the gospel, coupled with God's **miracle** of calling **light** out of the darkness of our hearts, helps us to see our salvation is all about God's glory in Jesus Christ, God's Son.

THE NEW COVENANT

The old, Mosaic covenant that governed the relationship between God and ancient Israel, enshrined in the law of God, which no one can keep perfectly, has been superseded by the new covenant inaugurated with Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law and graciously paid the penalty for our sins. The new covenant secures salvation for all who believe in Jesus on the basis of His righteousness.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-2 / The apostle Paul wrote here of the new covenant ministry that he, Timothy, and, by extension, all believers have received from the Lord Jesus (see Gal. 1:11-12). The gospel ministry of the apostles, now proclaimed by the church, reveals the glory of Jesus Christ and brings life and righteousness to those who hear and believe its message (2 Cor. 2:14–3:18).

Paul remained resolute in this ministry in spite of numerous reasons to give up and walk away (11:23-28). Why such devotion? Because of God’s mercy poured out on him, which immediately changed Paul from a persecutor of the church to a proclaimer of Christ as Savior and Lord (Acts 9:1-31). Every believer shares in this mercy and subsequent ministry. We may have a less dramatic conversion story and a different calling, but salvation from our sin and the joy of service is all of God’s mercy, through and through. So we too should refuse to give up and instead persevere in the mission to proclaim the gospel of Jesus.

God’s glory is found in the truth because God is truth. Therefore, perseverance in the believer’s ministry requires a rejection of deceit and a commitment to the truth. Ever present before Christians is the temptation to modify God’s message for the sake of personal benefit, popularity, and pride. This could entail changing what God has said regarding salvation; it also could involve altering God’s commands for our obedience. But this would follow the “cunning” path of Satan, who first contradicted God’s word in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-5; 2 Cor. 11:3).

Rather than follow Satan’s path of deceit, we must follow God’s path of truth. With our words and our actions, we should proclaim faithfully the glory of God in His Word and in His Son, who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In this way, we will not detract from God’s glory but magnify it in the eyes of everyone we encounter in the hope that they too will recognize the truth of the gospel of Jesus and give glory to God.

VERSES 3-6 / Not everyone who hears the gospel will believe in Jesus. In fact, the default state of everyone we encounter prevents them from doing so.

Just as Satan tempts believers to adjust and abandon the truth of the gospel, he—the temporary and limited “god” of this world—blinds sinners so they cannot see the truth. This does not erase the moral culpability of sinners for failing to worship God. Paul himself wrote that every person is without excuse before God because the Creator made this world as a clear display of His power and nature, but in our sin, we reject Him (Rom. 1:18-20). So through the influence of Satan and our own sinful nature, we stand condemned before God and imprisoned under sin and death—trapped in darkness. Only a miracle can rescue the perishing; thankfully, the Creator God works miracles by His mere word.

The light that saves sinners from the pervasive darkness of sin and death is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believers proclaim Jesus’ death on a cross and resurrection from the grave so unbelievers can find forgiveness for their sin and the gift of eternal life (Acts 26:18). But this proclamation must also be accompanied by the new-creation miracle of God. In the beginning, the Lord spoke and called light out of darkness (Gen. 1:3), so too must He call light out of the darkness of our sinful hearts so we can see the glory of Jesus in the gospel and believe in Him for salvation. The God of creation through Christ is the God of our new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

The ministry of the gospel speaks truthfully the Word of God, which testifies to Jesus, and is supported by faithful and faith-filled actions so others can see the truth about Jesus clearly (2 Cor. 4:2). But we do not put ourselves on a pedestal. We were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), a position of distinction in the created order, but Jesus, the glorious Son of God, is the image of God, and our purpose in life is to make much of Him to the glory of God.

MY RESPONSE

PACK ITEM 8: FOR HIS GLORY: Hand out copies of this bookmark to help remind your group to give glory to Jesus through what they say and do.

Because the Son of God came to earth so that we might come to know and experience the glory of God, we live as a sent people, telling others about our glorious Savior, Jesus Christ.

HEAD:

God's glory is present everywhere in creation for people to see and recognize His eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:19-20). Furthermore, human beings were created in God's image with the purpose of fellowship with and worship of the Creator. But the introduction of sin has shrouded these messages in the hearts of humanity. Now people live contrary to their purpose and ignorant of it. Believers have had the truth revealed to them by God and now have the ministry of reasoning with others so they too may see and know God's glory in Jesus Christ for salvation.

How will the knowledge of God's glory in Christ shape your outlook on life in this world?

HEART:

All of creation reflects the beauty and majesty of the Creator. His glory is evident everywhere we look, though often we don't see it because our minds are set on other, lesser, created things. Even now, the earth, the skies, and the seas resound with praises to God's glory (Ps. 19:1-6). If God's creation and creatures not made in His image sing His praises, how much more should we, God's image-bearers, lift our voices to the heavens and shout for joy for our Creator and present and coming Savior!

What earthly delights and desires do you need to repent of so you can worship the Lord?

HANDS:

As human beings, God's image-bearers, we were made for God's glory. We were made for fellowship with our Creator as we reflect His glory on this earth through our work and our love for one another. But sin has broken our relationships, and now all of humanity lives estranged from our God. Through faith in Christ, however, that relationship is restored. God sent His Son so that we might be saved through Him. Jesus, who is Christ the Lord, reigns in heaven and (one day, noticeably) on earth as our resurrected Savior. Everyone needs to hear this gospel, and it is our privilege as believers to proclaim this Jesus that they may be saved by His righteousness and grace.

How will you proclaim Jesus as Lord through your words and actions this week?

NOTES



VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"God ... did not leave us in absolute ignorance. For the knowledge of God's existence has been implanted by Him in all by nature. This creation, too, and its maintenance, and its government, proclaim the majesty of the Divine nature."⁴

-John of Damascus (c. 675-749)

POINT 2: GOD’S GLORY IS REVEALED THROUGH THE TESTIMONY OF HIS CREATION (Ps. 96:11-13).

+ COMMENTARY

“While the revelation of God in creation and providence is incapable of leading us to salvation, given the presence of sin, it is still necessary in order to understand special revelation. The two elements interact, so much so that neither is complete without the other. As we need Scripture rightly to appreciate general revelation, so creation informs our grasp of special revelation; without it we could not understand the Bible at all ... Special revelation is given by God in order that we may appreciate the place he has assigned for the created order. In the long run, the sphere currently delimited by general revelation is the locus of God’s ultimate purposes. This unity of general and special revelation reflects the unity of God’s plans (Eph. 1:10), where he is to head up all things under the rule of Christ. These two spheres, while distinct, are inseparably conjoined. Having been grasped by redemption in Christ, believers can take a totally different view of creation than was possible beforehand. The world is ours because it belongs to God. The arts are there to develop and be enjoyed. Music, fine art, poetry, politics, science, literature—these are areas to be conquered and reclaimed.”⁵

POINT 3: GOD’S GLORY IS REVEALED THROUGH THE PROCLAMATION OF HIS SON (2 COR. 4:1-6).

+ ILLUSTRATION

Apart from Christ, we are trapped in spiritual darkness so deep that we cannot see our way out. When taking a tour of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, groups gather in a large, vaulted chamber where dozens of people can sit at picnic tables to eat. Part of the tour includes turning off the lights in this chamber so visitors can get a sense of the pervasive darkness that accompanies the underground. You can’t see your tour guide, your group, the floor, or even your hand right in front of your face. Without light, one would be hopelessly lost in that cave. Without the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ made to shine in our hearts by God, we would be forever lost to sin, death, and darkness. (See the Unit 1 introduction for a similar idea and further development.)

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UNIT 2

LET US MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES

“Only Wickedness All the Time”

by Ronnie Martin

+

Here’s what we know as our journey unfolds through the Book of Genesis: God had initially created an unblemished world. And not just a world but a universe that reflected the loving and communal bond that has existed for all eternity between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And not just a universe but a union, which bore the image of Himself in the form of a man and woman who reflected the joyful attributes that would uniquely characterize Christ the Creator.

But when the serpent entered, and succeeded in deceiving Adam and Eve, rebellion against God reshaped the heart of humankind, and the decay process of all creation began. Unlike the lie the serpent told Adam and Eve, God proved true to His word. The day He told Adam and Eve that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would kill them—on that day, they would die—He was being loving, not lying (Gen. 2:17).

What follows are some of the saddest chapters in Scripture as we see the generations of Adam and Eve, now polluted by sin and spiritually dead, physically die off one by one, just as God promised they would if Adam disobeyed His gracious command.

At the root of Adam’s sin was pride, which is a desire to elevate ourselves above all others as a way to achieve significance. Although God had already planned to send a Savior—His Son—to atone for the sins of the world (Acts 2:22-23), this prideful heart would be passed down to all of Adam and Eve’s descendants for as long as the world existed.

LIFE IN A (BROKEN) NEW WORLD ORDER

As generations continued to live and die under this new world order, the world increased in wickedness to the point that God decided He would no longer tolerate this excessive evil. He would send a flood to destroy humankind, but not everyone. He would spare a family of eight led by a man named Noah, who found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8). It was this unmerited favor, or grace, that led God to rescue Noah, who was described as a righteous and blameless man among the people on the earth. Rather than walk in the paths of his contemporaries, Noah “walked with God” (6:9).

Through no merit of his own, Noah was spared from God’s just and holy wrath against the wickedness of the world. And when the flood had subsided, God

graciously gave Noah the same charge He had given Adam in the garden of Eden—to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (9:1). God established a covenant with Noah, promising never again to use a flood to destroy all of His sinful image-bearers and His sin-cursed creatures (9:15).

But as much as God blessed Noah, the man was still a sinner by nature who was saved from God’s wrath only by God’s grace. Though the world had been wiped clean, the hearts of Noah and his family were anything but, as evidenced after the flood when Noah became drunk with wine and his shameful nakedness witnessed by his son (9:20-23).

Despite their imperfections, Noah’s family obeyed God’s mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Unfortunately, by the time we get to Genesis 11, not only do we have a population explosion but we have an explosion of pride in the hearts of people who have become united together as one voice. We might read this today and wonder what was so bad about a people united under a common language, but what they desired to accomplish in their union with one another illustrates the problem.

God wanted His image-bearers to “fill the earth,” to reflect His glory across the globe. But like their forefather Adam before them, they desired to make a name for themselves through self-exaltation, garnering the glory that’s reserved for God alone. They would do this by building a tower that reached into the heavens (11:4). Like all humankind since, the people of Babel sought significance and immortality through the allure of created things rather than through their Creator. In yet another act of grace through judgment, God dispersed the people by confusing their language, which divided them and sent them out to multiply and fill the earth as God had originally commanded.

TRANSFORMING OUR CRAVING FOR SIGNIFICANCE

Sadly, the rest of history reflects this tragic tendency we carry in our DNA

to “make a name for ourselves.” The “name” is not the problem, however; it’s the “making it for ourselves.” We all crave significance, and we would do well to remember that the longing for significance is not an earthly or wicked desire. It comes from being made in the image of God, who created us, declared His creation good, and commissioned us to fill the earth with His glory and goodness. As image-bearers of God, we have been exalted above all other creatures. We are more valuable than many sparrows, as Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 10:31.

The problem is not whether we are significant, it’s that we seek our significance in things that are insufficient to provide significance for us. But there’s nothing new going on here! All of our new-school ways of making a name for ourselves—building platforms, achieving greatness, garnering fans, attaining financial success, or receiving clicks and likes—are as old school as the Tower of Babylon.

The sin of Babylon was just a repeat of what happened in the garden of Eden. And it happens again every time we elevate our own name above the name of Jesus, “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9).

Although the sin of pride will continue to be at the root of our most besetting sins, Babylon paves the way to a far more redemptive narrative. God came down to observe the people’s tower, and in His judgment, He disciplined the Babelites to limit the peril of their own pride. Jesus—God incarnate—humbly came down as one of us to lovingly deliver us from our pride. Far more significant than making a name for ourselves, Jesus redeems our identity by restoring our desire to give glory and honor back to Him, where we find fullness of joy and eternal pleasures (Ps. 16:11).



RELATIONSHIPS BROKEN

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Sin is transgressing God's commands (Gen. 3:1-6).
2. Sin brings shame and harm (Gen. 3:7-13).
3. Sin comes with a great cost (Gen. 3:14-21).

Background Passage: Genesis 3

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Adam and Eve's transgression of God's command resulted in dire consequences, both short-term and long-term, for them and all of humanity.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Even in the midst of Adam and Eve's transgression, God's grace was evident. God promised to provide a descendant, Jesus, who would crush the head of the serpent, thereby defeating sin and death and restoring people with God and one another.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been so greatly forgiven in Christ, with hearts full of gratitude, we carry the gospel message forth to the nations, sharing how others also can be forgiven of sin.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: God’s creation was good (Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25), and with the addition of the first man and woman, it was very good (v. 31). This couple resided in the garden of Eden, a glorious paradise for our first ancestors to tend and grow as they walked in communion with their glorious Creator. But then evil slithered into the garden of Eden and set off a chain of events that has affected humanity’s experience with creation and the Creator to this day.

DISCUSS: What are some differences between the world as we see it today and the paradise of the garden of Eden we see depicted in Scripture?

THE GARDEN OF EDEN	THE WORLD TODAY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a close, loving fellowship with the Creator • unquestioned peace and affection between a husband and wife • freedom and abundance of provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • separation and discord between people and God • infighting, divorce, and breakdown in marital relationships • poverty and starvation

TRANSITION: Our world is a mess. Countries can’t get along. Families hold lifetime grudges. We live with regrets that plague our consciences day after day. Even the earth around us and beneath us seems to suffer from a sickness played out in brutal weather and natural disasters. What happened? How did the world God called “good” get so bad? Genesis 3 tells us. In the garden of Eden, a place too beautiful for such ugly events, a choice was made that caused peace and perfection to shatter like glass into a million pieces. We still suffer the consequences of that choice today in our world, in our relationships, and in our own hearts.

POINT 1

SIN IS TRANSGRESSING GOD'S COMMANDS (GEN. 3:1-6).

1 Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden?'" **2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. **3** But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.'" **4** "No! You will certainly not die," the serpent said to the woman. **5** "In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." **6** The woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 3:1-6** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the commentary on **VERSES 1-3** to focus on the interaction between the woman and the serpent in the garden. Identify the evil presence embodied in the serpent as Satan. Show how the serpent began to tempt the woman and put doubt about God's character and command in her mind with a simple but subversive question.

DISCUSS: How do temptation and sin relate to doubts about God and His Word? (temptation and sin always find their basis in doubt because all disobedience stems from a lack of faith; temptation can cause us to doubt, and doubts can lead to temptation; doubts present opportunities to choose between rejecting God's Word in sin and turning to God in faithful obedience)

EXPLAIN: Use the commentary on **VERSES 4-6** to highlight how Satan, temptation, and sin work to deceive us: God's word and commands are twisted so that we reject outright what God has said and subsequently choose to *transgress* His commands, which is sin. Note that this event in Scripture—Adam and Eve's eating the forbidden fruit—is referred to as *the Fall* of humanity (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #37: Sin as Transgression: The word *transgression* means "to cross over" or "to pass by" and is often used in reference to transgressing God's explicit commands. When God gives a **specific** command, as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and when that command is **disobeyed**, transgression has taken place (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14). In this sense, sin is **law-breaking**.

OPTIONAL VIDEO: Show the "99 in :99" video about the essential Christian doctrine *Sin as Transgression* (1:37 in length) at this link: <https://www.gospelproject.com/sin-transgression-video>.

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"As distrust of God's command leads to a disregard of it, so the longing for a false independence excites a desire for the seeming good that has been prohibited; and this desire is fostered by the senses, until it brings forth sin."¹

—Carl Friedrich Keil (1807-1888) and Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-3 / Into God's good garden slithered a serpent, **"the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made"** (Gen. 3:1). The serpent was God's creation, but an evil spirit took control. The Bible attributes this evil to Satan in Revelation 12:9. Using the serpent's natural craftiness, God's great enemy asked the woman a question that has echoed down through the ages: **"Did God really say..."** (Gen. 3:1).

At first, Satan did not deny God's word; he just questioned it. The serpent introduced an idea yet unheard of in the world—the assumption that God's word is subject to our judgment. **2** The woman was confronted with a great reversal of the natural order. She had been created, along with her husband, to live comfortably and safely under God's word. But when offered the role of judge, she took the job, resulting in taking and eating, the outward sign of the inward sin already festering in her heart.

The conversation between the woman and the serpent was a master class in temptation. God made the garden for the man and woman to enjoy. The woman did not deny that. In fact, in her response to the serpent, she spoke truth: **"We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden"** (Gen. 3:2). But then she went beyond God's word and added a phrase to it: **"But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die'"** (3:3, emphasis added). God only said not to eat it, not to avoid touching it (see 2:16-17). The woman added a strictness to God's word, making His command overly burdensome and all too tempting to rebel against.

VERSES 4-6 / After the woman altered God's word, the serpent added more wood to the internal fire of doubt: **"No! You will certainly not die"** (3:4). The danger of temptation and sin is that it twists God's word, changing His commands into something more palatable to our ears. Sin entices, promising a joy it does not contain

and cannot deliver. Sin works through deception, drawing us away from the right path without disclosing the full ramifications of its dead end. "Sin's deception" leads us to follow its destructive path (Heb. 3:13).

Satan presented God's word as an exaggeration: "You won't die! It's just that God knows if you eat of the fruit, you'll be like Him, knowing good and evil, and He doesn't want that. He's holding out on His image bearers" (see Gen. 3:4-5). Oh, the evil deceitfulness of sin! Always promising good from evil, giving hope to the path of destruction, presenting a path to self-reliance when dependence upon God is the best life by far. Sin says, "Take matters into your own hands and be your own person." But we find soon enough that we don't have the ability to stand on our own. Life apart from God is far too anxious, far too difficult, far too sad. It is the height of foolishness to reject the love and care of God in favor of going our own way. No wonder our hearts soften when we hear the voice of the Savior call out, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Sin has let us down, and it's our fault. But God can restore us to our proper place inside His covenant love. Sin will surely kill us, so we need Another who can surely give us life.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The hope we desperately need comes after the terrible act of sin. Looking at the fruit like the judge of a cooking show, the woman saw it was good for food, beautifully enticing, and potentially full of experience her life was missing. So she took it and ate. And the man, who stood silently beside, abdicating his responsibility to care for his wife and his world, received the fruit from her hands and he too ate (Gen. 3:6).

The deception was complete. Sin entered the world. With that one transgression, **the Fall** occurred, casting the shadow of sin upon all humanity and changing our world forever.

POINT 2

SIN BRINGS SHAME AND HARM (GEN. 3:7-13).

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. **8** Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. **9** So the LORD God called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” **10** And he said, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” **11** Then he asked, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” **12** The man replied, “The woman you gave to be with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate.” **13** So the LORD God asked the woman, “What have you done?” And the woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 3:7-13** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 7-8** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

The lie of sin is that life will get better once we do or take what we want. But the first man and woman quickly discovered that sin brings **shame** and harm, alienating us from **one another** (fig leaves) and from **God** (running and hiding).

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 9-13** commentary to illustrate the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

Sin and shame lead to a compounding problem as those who sin against God and others try to **cover up** and **excuse** their sin by blaming it on others, even **God** Himself.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we try to cover up and run from our sin and shame? (we tell lies to cover our previous sinful actions and lies; we blame others, the devil, and even God; we refuse to be honest with our families and our churches about the temptations and sins that plague us; we try to do good things so others won't suspect our sinful attitudes and actions)

TRANSITION: Three chapters into the Bible and we're already confronted with the great problem for humanity and the world—sin and the separation from God that it brings. But God is not yet done with humanity or His creation.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 7-8 / The man and woman ate the forbidden fruit believing their eyes would open to a new and greater world around them. They thought they would be like God (Gen. 3:5), but instead, they saw how unlike Him they really were. This new awareness was too much for them to handle, and what was once innocent became scandalous: **“They knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves”** (3:7). The Hebrew word for “naked” describes someone stripped of protective clothing. **3** Never once had they thought they needed protection. But now their vulnerability was all they could see. So they plucked fig leaves to cover themselves, an outward act displaying an inward sense of shame.

The fig leaves provide a good illustration of the effect sin has upon us. When we realize what we have done, we feel a need to cover ourselves. We desperately fear being seen in our sinfulness, stripped of our outer facade that we clean and manage so well. We go to great lengths to patch ourselves up, to downplay our desperation, to hide the things that would destroy our sense of pride if displayed in the light. Such irony that the pride that causes us to sin is the very pride wounded after the sinful act is committed.

As God came walking in the garden in the evening breeze, the man and woman fled from Him as if He were a hurricane. This illustrates the greater tragedy of sin. Not only is sin transgressing God’s commands, but it also causes us to run from God in our shame, doing further harm to our already wounded hearts. In running from our Creator because of our sin, we are running from the only One who can provide the forgiveness we so desperately need.

VERSES 9-13 / The tragedy of sin is acted out day after day by sinners all around the world. Right now, people are running and hiding. But neither covering nor hiding is a match for God’s revealing and finding.

As Adam and Eve hid among the trees of the garden, God came calling, **“Where are you?”** (3:8-9). It’s easy to miss the import of this question. God was not wondering where they were. God is all-knowing, so He knew what Adam and Eve had done, and He knew where they were hiding because of it. God was calling them out of the shadows, drawing them out of hiding, and wooing them to repentance with His kindness (Rom. 2:4). But the open and warm relationship they once had was shattered. Now each step for Adam and Eve toward or away from God was a painful one.

Like a father catching his children red-handed, God had some questions for His image bearers (Gen. 3:11). And as with children, being caught in their shame instilled fear in Adam and Eve. This fear continues to plague us all in our fallen condition: fear of being found out, fear of our shame, fear of the harm we’ve caused. Fear makes us do things we would never think of doing, keeping us locked in a pattern of sin

A chapter ago, Adam sang over his lovely wife (2:23). But then Adam abdicated his responsibility as head of the marriage and co-ruler of all creation. After the Fall, he blamed the woman for what transpired. Even more, he blamed God, saying, **“The woman you gave to be with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate”** (3:12, emphasis added). It was God’s fault! If only He had not made Eve, all would be fine.

Eve did no better and pointed her finger at the serpent. She was deceived, and she ate. Confessions wrapped in excuses. Such is the pattern of sin and shame.

Here is the holy God among broken people who are willing to add sin upon sin as they blame others for their transgressions. How could life ever be pieced back together? How can such evil ever be undone? Before we can contemplate our hope, we must consider sin’s implications and consequences.

POINT 3

SIN COMES WITH A GREAT COST (GEN. 3:14-21).

14 So the LORD God said to the serpent: Because you have done this, you are cursed more than any livestock and more than any wild animal. You will move on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life. **15** I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. **16** He said to the woman: I will intensify your labor pains; you will bear children with painful effort. Your desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you. **17** And he said to the man, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘Do not eat from it’: The ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it by means of painful labor all the days of your life. **18** It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. **19** You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground, since you were taken from it. For you are dust, and you will return to dust.” **20** The man named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all the living. **21** The LORD God made clothing from skins for the man and his wife, and he clothed them.

NOTES

PROTOEVANGELIUM

A compound Greek word literally meaning “first gospel,” this term refers to the first gospel announcement in the garden of Eden following Adam and Eve’s initial disobedience, when God promised to the serpent that an offspring of the woman would strike the serpent’s head but that also the serpent would strike the offspring’s heel (Gen. 3:15).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 3:14-21** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 14-19** commentary to expound on the following point (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

God warned His image-bearers that sin would come with a cost—**death**. Human beings also experience other **pains** and **struggles** in life and relationships.

DISCUSS: What are some ways people experience the cost of sin in their lives? (everyone dies; marital relationships suffer through harsh words, bitterness, backbiting, power struggles, and infidelity; work has become toil, full of distractions and inefficiencies)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 20-21** commentary to explain the following point: Understanding the cost of sin is an important aspect of the spiritual life. God is gracious in revealing to us the weight of our sin in the harm and separation it brings. But He is also gracious to reveal to us the way out of our sin through the offspring to come, Jesus, who will crush the serpent’s head, defeat sin and death, and restore us to a right relationship with God (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

In the midst of pronouncing judgment, God also promised hope for humanity (Gen. 3:15). God saves through the **gospel** of **Jesus Christ**.

COMMENTARY

The narrative now breaks into three parts characterized by Hebrew poetry. Here God dispenses His judgment to the three principal characters in the Fall. First, God addressed the serpent, also known as Satan. Second, God addressed the woman. Third, and finally, God addressed the man.

VERSES 14-15 / Unlike the man and the woman, the serpent received no opportunity to explain itself. It received only its sentence in two parts. First was the humiliation of going about on its belly and eating the dust. The serpent would forever be in the position of submission before all creation.

In the second part, God foretold the serpent's ultimate judgment—destruction underfoot by an offspring of the woman. Our original parents sinned, and their sin was their own, but God has made sure the tempter will not go unpunished for his role in the Fall of humanity.

VERSES 16-19 / Still, there remains a word of judgment for the woman and the man. God turned His attention to the woman first. Made to be man's helper, she was a perfect complement to him in every way, and he to her. But now sin had come between them. Not only did Eve harm her relationship with God, she also harmed her relationship with her husband. The freedom she once felt in their marriage was now gone .

Eve's sin not only resulted in emotional and relational harm but also physical harm. Labor pains during childbirth are now her lot, as well as the lot of all her daughters after her. She would still have the dignity and joy of bearing children and bringing them into the world, but it would hurt.

The man also received a punishment. He too would find his work and world cursed. The land that once flowered and budded and gave forth produce so easily is now set against him. One bite of forbidden fruit caused all other bites to be gained through toil. He would still eat. He would still have

dominion over the land. He would still co-rule with the woman as God's greatest creation and image-bearers. But he would struggle. What once came easy would now come by the sweat of his brow. The nature he once tamed so effortlessly now would encroach upon him with its thorns and thistles. And after his final meal, in death, he would return to the dust from which he was made.

VERSES 20-21 / But restoration was coming. Perhaps Adam recognized that when, in verse 20, he named his wife Eve. Thus far called only "the woman," she now has a name fit for her—she is the mother of all the living. After the pronouncement of death, there is still life to be had, life to be lived!

Adam heard the promise of restoration and resolution in verse 15. Who would expect a promise of hope for humankind in the midst of a judgment oracle? Yet here it is. In the judgment of the serpent, God provided a glimmer of hope for all humanity in the comfort of the gospel.

Theologians have called Genesis 3:15 the protoevangelium, the first gospel. It would be Eve's offspring who would eventually set things right. And indeed, it was. Jesus Christ was born of a woman, a virgin, so many years later (Luke 1:30-35; Matt. 1:20-25). And after becoming a curse for us in His sacrificial death on the cross (Gal. 3:10-13), He stepped out of a garden tomb, showing that He had crushed the head of the serpent who bruised His heel in death. God kept His promise. He always does.

Nevertheless, the consequences of sin remain for now. The couple was expelled from the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:22-24). But that's just the beginning of the story. A return to Eden is possible, but only at a great cost—not to Adam and Eve but to the promised offspring, to God Himself in Jesus Christ.

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been so greatly forgiven in Christ, with hearts full of gratitude, we carry the gospel message forth to the nations, sharing how others also can be forgiven of sin.

NOTES

HEAD:

The Genesis narrative is not a myth. It is the gracious revelation of God that explains who we are and how we got here. We are God's marvelous creation—His image-bearers—who have rebelled against Him. Adam and Eve sinned first, but all of us are implicated in sin. As Paul said, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The first step in our response to God's offer of salvation in the gospel is a full recognition of our deep sinfulness. We have fallen short of God's holy standard, and the wages of our sin is death.

How does understanding the origin of sin and its consequences help us see our need for a savior?

HEART:

Separation from God and His blessed favor is the most tragic of circumstances. In fact, this is ultimately what makes hell so torturous. And separation from God is exactly what sin causes—this is the essence of death. Our sin is no small matter. We cannot trifle with it. We must repent of it. Thankfully, God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ex. 34:6-7). In Jesus Christ, God has provided a remedy for our sin. The massive heart of Christ stands ready to forgive. All we must do is come to Him with the empty hands of faith.

How do you need to receive or respond to the gospel, the remedy for our sin, today?

HANDS:

In the story of the Fall, perhaps you resonated with Adam and Eve running and hiding from God. When confronted with our sin, that is so often our natural reaction. It is humiliating to be seen as we really are. But the gospel promises us that we will find a solution to all our sin when we confess our sins before God. First John 1:7 tells us, "If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." In those moments when you want to run and hide from God, step into the light of Christ instead.

What sin do you need to confess before God and perhaps another person today?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Wherefore, the seed, Jesus Christ, in his bruising the head of the serpent, must take away sin, abolish death, and conquer the power of the grave. But how must this be done? Why, he must remove the curse, which makes sin intolerable, and death destructive. But how must he take away the curse? Why, by taking upon Him 'flesh,' as we ... and by being 'made a curse for us.'"⁴

—John Bunyan
(1628-1688)

POINT 1: SIN IS TRANSGRESSING GOD'S COMMANDS

(GEN. 3:1-6).

+ COMMENTARY

“The serpent opened the dialogue with a surprised, incredulous tone ... He did not directly deny God’s word, but he introduced the assumption that God’s word is subject to our judgment. Such a thought had never been verbalized before. It was enticing. The serpent also carefully avoided the use of God’s covenant name, ‘the Lord’ (Yahweh). In chapter 1 Elohim (signifying God as Creator) was used in every instance to refer to God, but in chapters 2–4 the title Yahweh-Elohim is everywhere employed (combining his Creator and Covenant-Redeemer names)—everywhere except here in the deadly dialogue of 3:1-5. Satan was careful not to mention God’s personal covenant name but stuck to Elohim, the more remote designation. Ominously, Eve followed his lead as she too only used Elohim in their dialogue. Satan’s incredulous tone and conscious disuse of God’s personal name set up his studied distortion of God’s word. Whereas in 2:16 the Lord God had generously commanded, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,’ Satan now asks, ‘Did God [Elohim] actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden”?’ (emphasis added). That was a complete distortion and travesty of God’s word. God’s generosity was perverted by Satan’s question to suggest divine stinginess! Satan’s approach was so subtle that Eve did not suspect that God’s word was being attacked. It was just an ‘innocent question.’ But a seed of doubt about God’s word had been planted in Eve’s heart that would bear immediate fruit.”⁵

+ ILLUSTRATION

In his famous book *The Confessions*, Augustine spoke of an event when he was sixteen years old. He and some friends stole pears from a neighbor’s tree. He didn’t want the pears to eat. In fact, after taking them, he threw them away. What made him take them? It was the thrill of the theft that made it worth doing. In reflection, Augustine realized he did such a thing because his heart was depraved and fallen to the core. He sinned because he wanted to sin. He enjoyed it. If he ate the pears, he thought, they would have been sweeter because of the sin that obtained them.⁶ Isn’t that so true of us and our sin? We delight in it. We find sweetness in it, though we know the aftertaste will leave a bitterness in our mouths. How do we move past this desire for sin? The Puritan pastor Thomas Chalmers talked about the “expulsive power” of the gospel.⁷ What we need to battle our sinful desires is a greater desire to drown out all the rest. We need a more beautiful vision—the gospel of Jesus Christ—to purify our hearts. When Jesus reigns supreme, even the most tempting of sins appears dim beside Him.

POINT 2: SIN BRINGS SHAME AND HARM (GEN. 3:7-13).

+ COMMENTARY

“When, therefore, it is asked what death it was with which God threatened our first parents if they should transgress the commandment they had received from Him, and should fail to preserve their obedience,—whether it was the death of soul, or of body, or of the whole man, or that which is called second death,—we must answer, It is all. For the first consists of two; the second is the complete death, which consists of all. For, as the whole earth consists of many lands, and the Church universal of many churches, so death universal consists of all deaths. The first consists of two, one of the body, and another of the soul. So that the first death is a death of the whole man, since the soul without God and without the body suffers punishment for a time; but the second is when the soul, without God but with the body, suffers punishment everlasting. When, therefore, God said to that first man whom he had placed in Paradise, referring to the forbidden fruit, ‘In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,’ that threatening included not only the first part of the first death, by which the soul is deprived of God; nor only the subsequent part of the first death, by which the body is deprived of the soul; nor only the whole first death itself, by which the soul is punished in separation from God and from the body;—but it includes whatever of death there is, even to that final death which is called second, and to which none is subsequent.”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

Perhaps you have seen the commercials about home foundation repairs. Stair-step fractures in the brick, cracks in the walls, stuck doors and windows—these may be signs of foundation problems. If the house’s foundation is compromised, the entire house is sick. Of course, this isn’t usually the homeowner’s fault. He or she likely inherited such a problem when purchasing the house. That doesn’t absolve the homeowner, however, from dealing with the fallout. And ignoring the issue won’t make it better. Unfortunately, no matter the circumstances, it’s a costly problem. When Adam and Eve sinned so long ago in the garden of Eden, they cracked the foundation of the household they were building. Every generation thereafter was left to deal with the results. From birth, we are sick; indeed, we are dead in our sin. As David proclaimed in Psalm 51:5, “Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.” Theologians call this “original sin.” We are born with it. It’s part of who we are as a result of Adam’s transgression (Rom. 5:12-14). We are still made in the image of God. There is still a glory in humanity. But the foundation is compromised. It doesn’t take long for us to begin to see the effects. The cracks in our own lives show up soon enough, and just like a home with foundation issues, our cracks are signs of something wrong deep inside. Is there a solution to this problem? There is! We must go to God through Jesus Christ, repenting of our sin and asking for His forgiveness. We cannot, as our original parents did, blame others. We must take responsibility for our own sin and go to the Great Physician for healing.

POINT 3: SIN COMES WITH A GREAT COST (GEN. 3:14-21).

+ COMMENTARY

“We know how the bruising of the Lord Jesus Christ took place. It happened at the cross as Satan finally succeeded, so it seemed, at striking back at God and silencing his meddling in human affairs forever. It was bruising with a vengeance. It included the hatred of the religious leaders, the mocking of the crowds, the beatings, eventually the crucifixion with its great agony. And yet, it was only a bruising, not a defeat, for on the third day after the crucifixion Jesus rose from the tomb triumphantly. On the other hand, although Satan achieved what he believed to be a true victory, it proved to be a Pyrrhic victory, for his power over us was broken. I do not know precisely what Satan was thinking of as he finally achieved his goal of having Christ crucified, but I am sure he had at least forgotten this prophecy or else had dismissed it as applying to other times and circumstances. He failed to see how even his moment of triumph was to be turned to defeat in accord with this prophecy. John Gerstner declares, ‘Satan was majestically triumphant in this ... battle. He had nailed Jesus to the cross. The prime object of all his striving through all the ages was achieved. But he failed. For the prophecy which had said that he would indeed bruise the seed of the woman had also said that his head would be crushed by Christ’s heel. Thus, while Satan was celebrating his triumph in battle over the Son of God, the full weight of the Atonement accomplished by the Crucifixion (which the devil had effected) came down on him, and he realized that all this time, so far from successfully battling against the Almighty, he had actually been carrying out the purposes of the all-wise God.’”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

Imagine for a moment that you have received a very expensive electronic gift. It does all the cool things you never knew you needed but now can’t live without. You have some friends over, and one of them wants to take a look at it. You hand it to him, asking him to be very careful because it is precious to you. He nods politely and then takes it outside to show his wife. On the way, he passes by the pool and, ignoring your plea for care, he waves it around and it slips from his hand, plopping into the water. It’s destroyed. You now have two options. You can lash out at your friend in rage, demanding he repay what he has broken, or you can forgive him, accepting the responsibility yourself. But to replace the item, someone must pay. In forgiving, you agree to pay it. In a similar manner, God took responsibility to pay for our sin. Our sin wasn’t merely a problem to solve, it was a debt to pay. In Christ, God sent His only Son to pay the cost we incurred. Forgiveness is always a costly matter. Someone always suffers. How amazing it is that the suffering one was God Himself!

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SIN SPREADS

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Transgression spread throughout the generations (Gen. 4:1-8).
2. Wickedness spread throughout the generations (Gen. 4:17-24).
3. Death spread throughout the generations (Gen. 5:3-5).

Background Passage: Genesis 4–5

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

After the first transgression, sin and its consequences spread rapidly throughout all people.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

After Adam and Eve's sin in Eden, sin's impact on humanity and creation spread far and deep, but it could not surpass the grace and mercy of God. God's promise to provide a Rescuer in Genesis 3:15 still remained. Jesus would be that Rescuer, the One who would come to put an end to sin and death.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because sin is an affront to God and brings great harm to us and others, we are to fight against sin in our lives and stand against sin in our culture, all while declaring and resting in the forgiveness found in Christ Jesus.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: Sin began its tragic, virulent spread the moment Adam and Eve took and ate. In consequence for their transgression, God condemned our first parents to exile and death, among other curses related to the Fall. Still, God graciously gave new life through children. Adam and Eve's family made a life east of Eden, multiplying in number but sadly also in transgression. The curse of sin and death impacts every generation, but the promise of an offspring to crush the serpent's head and bring salvation still remains.

DISCUSS: What are some traits you inherited from your parents? (eye color; hair color; skin color; temperament; attitudes; facial expressions; the sound of your laugh; the way you sneeze; physical strengths or weaknesses; weird body quirks)

TRANSITION: Similar to how eye and hair color are inherited traits, sin and death now plague each generation on account of our first parents (Rom. 5:12). We cannot explain our lives apart from God's revelation of the spread of sin found in these early parts of the Bible. God's Word says no one does what is good (Rom. 3:12). We do not merely make mistakes or slip up from time to time. We not only commit our sins, we enjoy them too. Our problem is a very deep one, a sin nature inherited from Adam that separates us from God.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: What are some ways the world minimizes the impact of sin, contrary to Scripture's emphasis on it? (downplay the consequences of sinful choices; claim that a sinful act won't hurt anyone; disconnect sin from the curse of death; claim that sin is natural and good; deny the existence of God, who will judge the earth)

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POINT 1

TRANSGRESSION SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS (GEN. 4:1-8).

1 The man was intimate with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. She said, “I have had a male child with the LORD’s help.” **2** She also gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel became a shepherd of flocks, but Cain worked the ground. **3** In the course of time Cain presented some of the land’s produce as an offering to the LORD. **4** And Abel also presented an offering—some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, **5** but he did not have regard for Cain and his offering. Cain was furious, and he looked despondent. **6** Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you furious? And why do you look despondent? **7** If you do what is right, won’t you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” **8** Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 4:1-8** from his or her Bible.

DISCUSS: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 9: I AM NOT MYSELF**, then ask: **What do you see in these verses that shows the effects of sin in the world?** (Cain’s displeasing offering; Cain’s attitude toward God; Cain’s dismissal of God’s correction and warning; Cain’s premeditated murder of his brother)

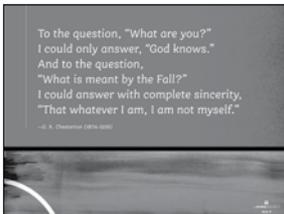
EXPLAIN: Use the commentary on **VERSES 1-2** to connect this passage to the previous week’s study. Then use the commentary on **VERSES 3-8** to expound on the spreading effects of temptation and sin in the world as displayed in Cain’s transgression against his brother and God (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #44: Temptation and Sin: Temptation is not the equivalent of sin. Temptation can refer to natural and good desires that are twisted and directed toward pleasing of self rather than giving glory to God. Jesus was tempted like we are (Matt. 4), and yet, He never sinned but faithfully **resisted** temptation and followed the **will** of His Father. Knowing our weakness, we are to be on **guard** against temptation that may lead us to sin (Matt. 26:41), and we **pray** for God to deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:13).

DISCUSS: How can we rule over sin? (heed God’s warnings in Scripture; pray for God’s wisdom and strength to recognize and resist temptation; live openly and honestly in fellowship with other believers; pray for a renewed heart)

TRANSITION: The spread of sin so early in the world helps us understand our present situation. We cannot look at Cain and claim a moral high ground because we all struggle with and have fallen to the lure of temptation and sin.

NOTES



VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Whoever hates is a murderer. You may not have prepared any poison or committed a crime. You have only hated, and in doing so, you have killed yourself first of all.”¹

–Augustine (354–430)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-2 / Genesis 4 opens with history's first birth announcement. It is important not to pass by these opening verses too quickly. After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, breaking their relationship with God and ushering death into the world, it is surprising that rather than death we see new life. Was the serpent right after all? Would Adam and Eve not surely die (Gen. 3:3-4)?

No. They would certainly die. In fact, spiritually, they already had. God banished them from the garden of Eden, away from His presence (3:22-24). They were "on their own" now, in the big, wide world without the tangible presence of God to comfort them. And the curse of sin, both without and within, plagued their lives. With the birth of Cain and Abel, we are prepared to see yet another tragedy of sin: sin is infectious. Sin spreads and is inherited by each generation. Eve gave birth to new life, but that new life was already dead and dying.

VERSES 3-5 / If this were a novel, we would see the boys grow up, play in the fields, fish in the river, get into a little trouble, learn, laugh, and do what kids do before the tragedy strikes. But the Bible includes no such details. Instead, all we have is a phrase ushering us into the relevant scene: **"In the course of time..."** (4:3).

One day, the brothers brought offerings to the Lord from their labor. Both had respectable jobs. Cain was a farmer. Abel was a shepherd. Cain's offering was from the ground. Abel's came from his flocks. Much has been made in commentaries and sermons about the value of Abel's gift over Cain's. Some say Abel's was better because God prefers a blood sacrifice. Others argue the value is in the quality of the offering: Abel gave of the firstborn of his flock and their fat, whereas Cain simply gave some of his harvest (4:3-4). But the Bible teaches the difference wasn't in the nature or quality of the offering itself but in the heart of the offerer (Heb. 11:4). God's regard for Abel's offering sprung from Abel's open heart toward God.

The apostle John taught about Cain's heart as he urged the church to love one another in 1 John 3:11-12. John gave incredible insight into who Cain truly was. He was born of Eve, just like his brother Abel, but Cain was "of the evil one" (1 John 3:12). Jesus, on the other hand, called Abel righteous in Matthew 23:35. Born of the same mother, Cain and Abel were worlds apart: the former of the serpent and the latter of faith (see Heb. 11:4).

VERSES 6-8 / Though Cain had yet to say a word in the narrative, his face spoke volumes from his heart (Gen. 4:5). God responded to his anger and despondency with a series of questions. Here again is the Lord's kindness, asking rather than demanding, drawing rather than driving. All Cain had to do was walk into the light of God. Confessing his sin was the way to the lifting of his head.

If Cain did what was right, God would accept him just as He accepted Abel. God was open to Cain, but Cain was not open to God. That was the difference. The heart that doesn't want God cannot have God. God's word goes out to all, but each must respond. If Cain would not do what was right, then sin would be crouching at the door. Sin's desire was to overpower Cain, but he had to rule over it (4:7). The danger wasn't outside of Cain. The enemy was within. Sin was present in Cain, clashing with God's word for the throne of his heart. Would Cain let sin rule or let the word of God reign? To do what was right or not to do what was right: that was the question.

The crouching sin pounced and overtook Cain because that was the desire of his heart. Like his parents before, instead of heeding God's word, Cain stepped over it, transgressing God's command. While in the field, Cain attacked his brother and killed him. As James said, "Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death" (Jas. 1:15). And the blood of Abel cried out from the ground, longing for justice.

POINT 2

WICKEDNESS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS (GEN. 4:17-24).

NOTES

17 Cain was intimate with his wife, and she conceived and gave birth to Enoch. Then Cain became the builder of a city, and he named the city Enoch after his son. **18** Irad was born to Enoch, Irad fathered Mehujael, Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. **19** Lamech took two wives for himself, one named Adah and the other named Zillah.

20 Adah bore Jubal; he was the first of the nomadic herdsmen. **21** His brother was named Jubal; he was the first of all who play the lyre and the flute. **22** Zillah bore Tubal-cain, who made all kinds of bronze and iron tools. Tubal-cain's sister was Naamah. **23** Lamech said to his wives: Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; wives of Lamech, pay attention to my words. For I killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

24 If Cain is to be avenged seven times over, then for Lamech it will be seventy-seven times!

READ: On account of the difficult names in this passage, read aloud **Genesis 4:17-24** from your Bible, or this guide.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 17-22** commentary to highlight the following idea (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

Cain's line of descendants grew, fulfilling God's **cultural** mandate (Gen. 1:28), even after their forefather's heinous **murder** of his brother. This is an example of God's **grace**.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we have experienced God's grace through people fulfilling God's cultural mandate? (we have resources to survive and thrive in this world; we have medicines and medical procedures to help address the effects of sin upon the human body; we have communities established for safety and mutual benefit; we have music, art, and media to engage and enjoy; we ourselves, sinners all, have families and support systems)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 23-24** commentary on to explain the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

Though God's grace was active, wickedness continued to spread deep in the hearts of sinners. Lamech, as an example, followed the path of his forefather, Cain, and **proudly** murdered a man in **vengeance**.

TRANSITION: Sinners often contribute good things to society by God's grace, but the wickedness in our hearts and the transgressions of our hands dominates our lives, and the end thereof is death, just as God promised in the garden.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 17-22 / Cain's wife is mentioned for the first time without any recorded history or details of her birth or where she came from. While this piques our curiosity, it did not seem to bother or concern the biblical author enough to address it. Yet Cain's wife plays an important role as the mother of Cain's descendants. That Cain was the father of any children after the heinous murder of his brother is a surprise to the reader. Shouldn't Cain be dead? Instead, Cain has children, and his children have children. They multiply.

Cain had moved east of Eden, farther away from the Lord (4:16), and he began building "a city," which he named after his first-born son, Enoch. No doubt this city could not compare to the cities we know, visit, and live in, but it was certainly something for its time. Just as our cities today are cultural forces in our communities and society, from Cain's first city flowed a host of artistic and inventive benefits the entire world has thereafter enjoyed.

Cain's line, like his city, grew with the generations (4:18). Fathers had sons who became fathers of sons, ancestors linked together without comment. Until Lamech. Unlike his forefathers, Lamech receives a few verses of biography, some of which are quite unflattering.

The first problem seen in Lamech's life is his defiance of God's intention for marriage between one man and one woman (see 2:24). Lamech took two wives for himself: Adah and Zillah. This was not good by God's standards, but that does not mean some good could not come from his line. Among his sons were the first nomadic herdsman, the first musician, and the first blacksmith. From these inventions flowed an immense amount of good into the world.

It is surprising to see such gifts rising from Cain's descendants, but as commentator Derek Kidner states, "The Bible nowhere teaches that the godly should have all the gifts." ² Here is a precedent set for so much

of what we see in the world: good things can come from bad people. As Kidner noted, Cain's line is a microcosm of humanity—technical prowess and moral failure.

VERSES 23-24 / After Lamech takes a back seat to the accomplishments of his children, he retakes the stage to offer the first stanza of human poetry since Adam's song upon seeing Eve for the first time (2:23). How different are the words!

Calling together his wives, Lamech launched into a taunt-song revealing how deeply sin took root in his heart. The crouching sin at Cain's door was shamelessly welcomed by Lamech. His heart was an open door to anything that appealed to his pride and a closed casket to the warning of God.

Cain showed no remorse for the murder of his brother, but he did not exult in it. No songs memorialized his grievous sin. But the heart hard enough to kill a brother was passed on to Lamech, who praised his own sinful action. Murder was the subject of his lyric, and his pride the theme.

Back in the garden of Eden, the serpent first twisted the word of God to plant doubt in the minds of Adam and Eve. Only a chapter later (though generations down the line), Lamech twisted God's word again. God had promised Cain that He would avenge Cain seven times over should anyone kill him for his crime (4:15). Without speaking with God, Lamech claimed divine vengeance for his own wicked deed: If Cain would be avenged seven times, then Lamech would get seventy-seven times to cover himself.

Cain's line shows the deep and pervasive spread of sin. What is our hope in the face of such dire passages? It is to look to the One who can save us from such depths. Sin is a foundational reality of our lives, but it doesn't have to be the final voice. Another, better word speaks to us the truth of who we are so that we can see the truth of who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

POINT 3

DEATH SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS (GEN. 5:3-5).

NOTES

3 Adam was 130 years old when he fathered a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth. **4** Adam lived 800 years after he fathered Seth, and he fathered other sons and daughters. **5** So Adam's life lasted 930 years; then he died.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 5:3-5** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 3-4** commentary to expound on the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the DDG):

The genealogy of Genesis 5 reveals God's **faithfulness** to His word. First, though righteous Abel was murdered by wicked Cain, God provided another son, Seth, through whom would come the promised "**offspring**."

GENEALOGY

The genealogies in the Bible trace family lines from generation to generation, though not always exhaustively and usually through patriarchal figures. They are more than merely historical information, sometimes functioning to swiftly advance the narrative of a story, connect various important figures in salvation history, and record family lineages, particularly that of kings and priests.

DISCUSS: Why might death cause us to question the faithfulness of God?

(death has a finality to it that we struggle to see past; since death is the rightful punishment for our sin, it seems impossible that God can remain faithful and bring good out of death; death puts an end to plans and promises as we see them)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 5** commentary on to discuss how Adam's death is the consequence of transgressing God's command and the result of God's word coming true.

Second, God was faithful to His word that Adam's sin would end in **death**, and we all suffer under the consequence of our forefather's choice. But God's faithfulness in this punishment **proves** we can trust Him for our salvation in Jesus.

DISCUSS: How have you seen God prove Himself faithful even through seemingly impossible circumstances? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 3-4 / Genealogies aren't the most riveting parts of the Bible. Nonetheless, they serve a purpose (e.g., 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Genesis 5 is the original family tree project. Beginning with Adam, the biblical author lists generation after generation, showing how God multiplied the original family into the world of people we now live among. God created Adam in His likeness and blessed him (Gen. 5:1-2). Then from Adam came Cain and Abel. Their tragic story included a short end for Abel. Cain's line went on, as we have seen, to create cities and music and tools. But it wasn't from Cain's line that the Christ would come. This is the lineage the author wants to take us through now.

Seth doesn't have much of a role in the pages of Scripture. He is mentioned as the son born after Abel is killed—a “successor” child, as it were. But chapter 5 is devoted entirely to his line. We don't have his deeds. We don't see or hear his words. Instead, we have his descendants (5:6-32).

When Adam was 130 years old, his son Seth was born. Now, 130 is old by any standard today, but to be a father once again at such a ripe old age is difficult to imagine. Genesis 5 includes more such fantastic ages, reaching the pinnacle with Methuselah at 969 years when he died (5:27). Much has been made about these advanced ages. Some ponder if perhaps ancient literature used numbers and time differently than we do today. More likely, these ages have some symbolic significance while being historically accurate according to their design (see Commentary in the Extra section below).

Seth was born in Adam's “**likeness**,” just as Adam was created in God's likeness. Yet this likeness now included not only the glory of the divine image but also the human fall into sin passed from generation to generation. Seth's origin was not Adam's. Adam was once perfect and sinless; Seth, on the other hand, never was, nor are we.

Adam lived another 800 years and had other sons and daughters, but the Bible

is silent on their names. Seth is the focus because, while he is not the “offspring” promised in Genesis 3:15, he is the first of the line that leads to the offspring—Jesus. Through Seth, God kicked His divine rescue plan into action.

VERSE 5 / Adam may have been old, but he wasn't immortal. He lost that privilege in the garden of Eden with the sin that undid the whole world. Adam's life lasted 930 years. Then it ended.

Death was introduced as a concrete reality when Cain struck Abel in the field and killed him. Death was promised in the garden through God's word. But it is still a shock when Adam dies, isn't it? Biblical deaths always are. Such significant and influential men and women now vanished from the earth. All that remains is a memory.

“**Then he died**” are the words that, in some way, we've been waiting for since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. The serpent's lie was they would not surely die. But here is Adam at his end. He *did* die. He died spiritually in the garden when his sin separated him from the holy God. And later he died physically, his body buried in the ground. From dust he came, and to dust he returned (3:19). What's more, all the people listed in the following genealogy die just the same. No matter their ages, they all died (Enoch being the lone exception in 5:24). Sin spread, and so did death.

How we understand this early genealogy is vital to understanding the promise of God. Yes, death has entered the scene, but life is coming. As child after child is born, we see the plan of God unfolding until the fullness of time when a child is given, the Son is born, Jesus our Savior (Gal. 4:4-5). From Seth's line comes the offspring of the woman who can finally undo all the death and destruction sin caused. We know the story now, but in these early pages of Genesis, it was only a hope. But it's a sure hope, grounded in the promises of God, which we are already seeing come to pass.

MY RESPONSE

Because sin is an affront to God and brings great harm to us and others, we are to fight against sin in our lives and stand against sin in our culture, all while declaring and resting in the forgiveness found in Christ Jesus.

NOTES

HEAD:

The first step in a proper understanding of the gospel is a proper understanding of sin. Sin isn't something that just happens to us; it is something deep within us. We not only suffer from the sins of others, but we also commit sins ourselves. Transgression, wickedness, and death spread from generation to generation. We must fight against sin in our lives and in our world. But even our best efforts will fall short. Our only hope in light of such depravity of heart is a Savior who can do such a miraculous work in the heart that we can love God again. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus took upon Himself the cost of sin and gives to His people, those who believe in His name, His perfect righteousness.

How does a proper understanding of sin prepare us for a proper understanding of the gospel?

HEART:

Feeling the weight of sin is never fun. It is embarrassing and humiliating. But until we feel our desperation, we will never reach for the Savior. God's revelation of how sin spread from generation to generation keeps us humble before Him. We should not look at Cain and his line and conclude we are simply better than them. Rather, we should look upon them as a warning and evaluate our hearts to root out any sins within, bringing them into the light of Jesus so we might have abundant life instead of death.

What does the gospel say to us when we feel the weight of our sins upon us?

HANDS:

Whenever the Bible exposes us to the depravity of the human heart, God means to drive us to Himself. A deep exploration of the doctrine of sin reveals our utter need for a Savior. It is wise, therefore, never to leave a passage about sin without coming to Christ in repentance and requesting forgiveness. Seeing our sin isn't easy, but God has grace for all sinners. Our best path forward after such a study is to trust Jesus, our sympathetic High Priest (Heb. 4:14-16), and to come to Him for mercy and grace.

What sins do you need to confess and repent of today?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Love is the great divide between the children of God and the children of the devil. Those who have love are children of God, and those who do not are children of the devil. Have anything else you like, but if you lack this one thing, then all the rest is of no use to you whatsoever. On the other hand, you may lack almost anything else, but if you have this one thing, you have fulfilled the law."³

-Bede (c. 673-735)

POINT 1: TRANSGRESSION SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS (GEN. 4:1-8).

+ COMMENTARY

The reason God favored Abel's offering and not Cain's remains a matter of debate. Both men brought offerings related to their vocation. Some commentators contend that this passage reflects a preference for blood sacrifice. **4** Others argue that the narrator gives no clues as to God's preference for one offering over the other, so we should recognize the freedom of God as the main point. **5** This latter view regards God's sovereignty and divine election as responsible. Another interpretation, based on Hebrews 11:4, suggests that God preferred Abel's offering because Abel demonstrated a righteous motivation in worship whereas Cain did not. **6** One more view explains that God rejected Cain's offering because of its quality. **7** Abel offered the "firstborn" (*bekhorah*) of his flock (Gen. 4:4); Cain, on the other hand, failed to offer the "firstfruits" (*bikkurim*) of his yield, only some of the produce (Gen. 4:3; cf. Ex. 23:19).

+ ILLUSTRATION

Robert Louis Stevenson's classic book *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a literary illustration of sin crouching at the door of a man's heart (see Gen. 4:7). It's the story of a scientist, Dr. Jekyll, who discovered a way to create a new man out of his current self by drinking a potion. That new man is Mr. Hyde. Near the end of the book, Dr. Jekyll writes an account of all that happened. He says of that first transformation, "I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine." Though the potion may have tasted bad, the sin did not. Stevenson illustrates the seductive nature of sin through the appearance of each man. Mr. Hyde is considerably smaller in stature than Dr. Jekyll, representing the smallness sin makes of a man: "The evil side of my nature, to which I had now transferred the stamping efficacy, was less robust and less developed than the good which I had just deposed." **8**

Dr. Jekyll theorized perhaps the problem was simply Mr. Hyde devoid of any good whereas every other person is a mixture. This mixture of good and evil is a nice thought, but the Bible shows that Mr. Hyde's wicked heart is the human being's natural state. The only difference between Hyde and Jekyll is that the filter has been removed. Without the filter, Mr. Hyde's (or Dr. Jekyll's) evil is unleashed. We all have a Mr. Hyde inside. Just as the evil of Mr. Hyde lay inside Dr. Jekyll, the same evil that lay inside Cain lies inside all of us, just waiting for the right opportunity to show itself.

EXTRA

POINT 2: WICKEDNESS SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS (GEN. 4:17-24).

+ COMMENTARY

“A biased account would have ascribed nothing good to Cain. The truth is more complex: God was to make much use of Cainite techniques for his people, from the semi-nomadic discipline itself (v. 20; cf. Heb. 11:9) to the civilized arts and crafts (e.g. Ex. 35:35). The phrase he was the father of all such acknowledges the debt and prepares us to accept for ourselves a similar indebtedness to secular enterprise; for the Bible nowhere teaches that the godly should have all the gifts. At the same time we are saved from over-valuing these skills: the family of Lamech could handle its environment but not itself. The attempt to improve on God’s marriage ordinance (v. 19; cf. 2:24) set a disastrous precedent, on which the rest of Genesis is comment enough; and the immediate conversion of metal-working to weapon-making is equally ominous. Cain’s family is a microcosm: its pattern of technical prowess and moral failure is that of humanity.”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

In 1875, the poet William Ernest Henley wrote a famous poem titled “Invictus”:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul. ¹⁰

Henley’s poem is the perfect companion to the mind-set of Cain and his line in Genesis 4. But if we’re honest, it is often our mind-set as well, isn’t it? We love the idea of being the master of our fate, the captain of our soul. We want our lives to be in our hands. We can overcome. We can conquer. We can go where we want, when we want, how we want. No one can hold us down. No one can hold us back. More than we realize, we not only serve our sin, but we also exult in it.

How desperately we need the grace of God! It is His grace that reveals the wickedness of heart that we see in Genesis 4. The Bible makes a big deal of our sin, revealing it in its full depravity so that we might cry out for salvation. God is honest with us about our desperate situation so that we might reach for His offer of rescue in Christ.

POINT 3: DEATH SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE GENERATIONS (GEN. 5:3-5).

+ COMMENTARY

“The expansive and incredible ages of the antediluvians have led some to explore the symbolic and poetic functions of numbers in the genealogy. In light of the narrator’s schematized use of ten and seven, it should come as no surprise if the other numbers in this genealogy also have symbolic value. M. Barnouin has proposed connections between the ages of the antediluvians and the astronomical periods known to the Babylonians. For instance, Enoch’s 365 years (5:23) equal the days of the year, Lamech’s 777 years (5:31) equal the synodic periods of Jupiter + Saturn, and Yared’s 962 years (5:20) equal the synodic periods of Venus + Saturn. Also, if the sum of the years at the time of fathering and of the total life spans from Adam to Lamech are each divided by sixty—based on the Babylonian sexagesimal system—the sum of the remainders is 365, again perhaps representing the perfect life span. The cycles of a man’s years may match the cycles of the heavenly spheres to show that their lives follow a meaningful pattern and end with a completed cycle. The symbolism is significant! However, it would be mischievous to pit this possibly symbolic use of numbers against their historical use. In Book 1 the narrator showed himself competent to present a story as both historical and symbolic. We have no reason to think that his artistic use of numbers is not restrained by real history. Its historicity is enhanced by its comparison and contrast with the list of Sumerian kings. The total number of years of the eight kings detailed in the Sumerian King List is 241,000. By contrast the total in Genesis 5 is a modest 1,656. The Sumerian King List then details twenty-three kings, who ruled 24,510 years, 3 months, and 3 1/2 days, which parallels the shorter generations of Gen. 11:10-26.” **11**

+ ILLUSTRATION

The brief account of Adam’s life and death in this passage, followed by the same thing for his descendants after him, is not unlike walking through a cemetery. Gravestones arranged through a field, marking grave sites, list names and the years people were born and then died. Cemeteries lie under a somber, sobering shroud. When we stand in one, everywhere we look, in some places as far as the eye can see, we are surrounded by death and memory. Graves and their memorials are physical reminders of the incessant onslaught of death and harbingers of our own impending death. Sin did its work well in Adam—it killed him. And it is in the process of killing us. Our only hope in the face of the monstrosity that is sin and death comes with the Son of God who was sent to defeat sin and death so that all who believe in Jesus may have eternal life (Rom. 8:1-2).

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A WORLD PURGED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God declares that wickedness will bring judgment (Gen. 6:5-7).
2. God offers grace as the means to escape judgment (Gen. 6:8-9,13-14,17-22).
3. God provides salvation through judgment (Gen. 7:11-13; 8:15-16,20-22).

Background Passage: Genesis 6–9

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God is righteous to judge sin, but He is also gracious to provide a way of salvation.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Because of our wickedness, all of humanity deserves judgment, but God is gracious and has provided a way of salvation. Jesus took upon Himself the punishment for our sin so that all who trust in Him might be forgiven of their sin and be saved from the coming judgment.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because Jesus has provided salvation from our sins as an act of grace toward us, we declare the gospel with great humility and compassion toward sinners in great need of a Savior.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: Once upon a time, God saw all that He had made and called it good. Then God saw what His creatures did and called it evil. The first sin involved disbelieving the judgment of God was real. Now just a few chapters later, judgment comes. God's judgment, however, is not an end to all things. In His gracious hands, judgment becomes the means of salvation.

DISCUSS: What are some uses of water? (drinking/hydration; cleaning clothes, cars, dishes, etc.; showers or baths to clean ourselves; operating hydraulics on machinery; cooling something down; swimming; play and amusement; filling water guns and water balloons; hydroelectric power)

TRANSITION: By God's good design, water is necessary to sustain life. It has a number of practical benefits for human flourishing as well. But water can also bring death; too much can drown and even crush you. In His infinite wisdom, God chose to use water to judge and cleanse the world of its spreading evil. He also chose water to demonstrate His grace and salvation.

POINT 1

GOD DECLARES THAT WICKEDNESS WILL BRING JUDGMENT (GEN. 6:5-7).

5 When the LORD saw that human wickedness was widespread on the earth and that every inclination of the human mind was nothing but evil all the time, **6** the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and he was deeply grieved. **7** Then the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I created, off the face of the earth, together with the animals, creatures that crawl, and birds of the sky—for I regret that I made them.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 6:5-7** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 5** commentary to emphasize God’s indictment of the people of the world for their sin and opposition to Him (*the bold words fill in a blank in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #46: The World Opposed to God: There are times in Scripture where the term “world” refers to more than the physical planet Earth or the collective human population. In many instances, the term refers to an **active** and evil spiritual force that is in direct conflict with God and His kingdom. This evil world force operates under **Satan’s** control (Eph. 2:2; John 14:30), displaying the same self-centeredness and **deceit** that is found within his character. Christians are called to overcome this world of spiritual evil by **faith** in the Son of God (1 John 5:4-5).

DISCUSS: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 10: TWO CITIES**, then hand out copies of this bookmark to your group and ask: **How does the world’s understanding of sin differ from the way the Bible treats it?** (the world sees sin as an invention of religions to oppress people, but sin is direct defiance against our holy and good Creator God; the world sees sin as a small issue with no real consequence, but sin is an offense against our infinite God and comes with an infinite judgment; the world defines sin as a violation of one’s conscience or true self, but the Bible defines sin as a willful rejection of God’s good commands)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 6-7** commentary to expound on God’s response to humanity’s sinfulness (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God is **“grieved”** by human sinfulness, and He acts to end and punish sin because it damages and **kills** what God created as good.

TRANSITION: God’s judgment against wickedness is certain, but just as certain is His heart to offer grace to the repentant and faithful that they may be saved.

NOTES



VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“The anger of God is not a disturbing emotion of His mind, but a judgment by which punishment is inflicted upon sin. His thought and reconsideration also are the unchangeable reason which changes things; for He does not, like man, repent of anything He has done, because in all matters His decision is as inflexible as His prescience is certain. But if Scripture were not to use such expressions as the above, it would not familiarly insinuate itself into the minds of all classes of men, whom it seeks access to for their good, that it may alarm the proud, arouse the careless, exercise the inquisitive, and satisfy the intelligent; and this it could not do, did it not first stoop, and in a manner descend, to them where they lie.”¹

–Augustine (354–430)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 5 / It is not hard today to find those who say people are basically good at heart. “Yes,” they say, “we all do bad things from time to time, but those are aberrations, they’re not who we really are.” The Bible begs to differ. By the time we reach Genesis 6, humanity is wicked all the time.

The increasing evil of humanity was not hidden from the eye of God. Just as the Lord once saw what He had made and declared it good (Gen. 1:31), He now saw that human wickedness was widespread on the earth.

The contrast is startling. Goodness is totally lost on humankind: **“Every inclination of the human mind was nothing but evil all the time.”** Every ... nothing ... evil ... all the time. The human heart was not basically good with a little badness sprinkled in but radically depraved, deeply dark, and constantly imagining and performing evil.

This is hard to swallow, but if we are to understand our utter dependence upon God for salvation, we must see the utter depravity of our rebellion against God. We as sinful human beings are not good people (Rom. 3:10-12).

VERSE 6 / What was God’s response to such evil in the land? **“The LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and he was deeply grieved.”**

This is not an easy verse to understand. Some translations say the Lord “repented” or “was sorry” instead of “regretted.” Still, the difficulty remains: How can God repent, be sorry, or have regrets? Is He not perfect and unchangeable? Did He not see this coming with His sovereign eye? Is a verse like 1 Samuel 15:29, using the same Hebrew word, not a direct refutation of Genesis 6:6: “The Eternal One of Israel does not lie or change his mind, for he is not man who changes his mind”? How are such verses reconciled?

Then add to this that God was **“grieved”** by the circumstances. Again we ask ourselves: Did God not see what was coming from

these sinful human beings? Is God fallible? Does He make mistakes?

No! God is perfect, holy, and omniscient, or all-knowing. God’s “regretting” and “grieving” are examples of anthropopathism—the assignment of human feelings to a non-human being. God is spirit and divine, not a human being, so our understanding of God is limited. To reveal how God “feels” in a way we might grasp, the God-inspired author assigned human feelings to God. The inspired Word of God talks to us in such terms for our benefit. As Augustine said, “It is only by the use of such human expressions that Scripture can make its many kinds of readers whom it wants to help to feel, as it were, at home.” **2**

The point should not be missed: God hates sin, and He hates what it does to His creation, His creatures, and especially His image-bearers. Because of His perfect holiness, God cannot tolerate sin; it requires His judgment.

VERSE 7 / Here is the judgment for sin: **“I will wipe mankind, whom I created, off the face of the earth.”** Not only would humankind suffer, so would the animals and the birds. Perhaps this seems harsh, but as rulers over the earth and all its fullness, humankind’s sin had planetary implications (see Rom. 8:19-21). Sin, no matter what we may tell ourselves, is not safe for ourselves or for others.

But not all is lost. God had an offer yet on the table. Salvation was still an option to the repentant and faithful. Derek Kidner states that God does not meet sin “with half-measures but with the simultaneous extremes of judgment and salvation.” **3** God acts, dealing with the sin that stained humanity’s heart and ruined His created world, but not without keeping His promise of salvation. He would start again with Noah. No half measures with God—judgment and salvation together.

POINT 2

GOD OFFERS GRACE AS THE MEANS TO ESCAPE JUDGMENT (GEN. 6:8-9,13-14,17-22).

NOTES

8 Noah, however, found favor with the LORD. **9** These are the family records of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among his contemporaries; Noah walked with God. ... **13** Then God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to every creature, for the earth is filled with wickedness because of them; therefore I am going to destroy them along with the earth. **14** Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it with pitch inside and outside. ... **17** Understand that I am bringing a flood—floodwaters on the earth to destroy every creature under heaven with the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. **18** But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives. **19** You are also to bring into the ark two of all the living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. **20** Two of everything—from the birds according to their kinds, from the livestock according to their kinds, and from the animals that crawl on the ground according to their kinds—will come to you so that you can keep them alive. **21** Take with you every kind of food that is eaten; gather it as food for you and for them.” **22** And Noah did this. He did everything that God had commanded him.

COVENANT

A covenant is an arrangement between two parties where promises are made and typically penalties are stipulated for disloyalty to the arrangement. Within the Bible, God enters into covenant relationship with human beings, such as Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and David, where the terms of the covenant serve His purposes for that stage of salvation history with the ultimate end goal of restoring His creation through Jesus, the true covenant-keeper.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 6:8-9,13-14,17-22** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 8-9** commentary to discuss how Noah became righteous by faith (*the bold word fills in a blank in the DDG*):

Noah found favor in God’s sight, not by his own doing but by God’s **grace** through his **faith**.

DISCUSS: What would it look like to “walk with God”? (a life marked by communion with God through prayer; a life characterized by faithful, joyful obedience to God’s commands; a devotion to God’s Word to know what He has said so we can obey; listening to the Holy Spirit and following His guidance)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14,17-22** commentary to expound on God’s command and Noah’s response (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God’s offer of grace required Noah to build an ark. Noah **believed** God’s warning and provision and was **faithful** to do what God commanded.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 8-9 / Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. Sin doesn't simply suggest judgment; it requires it. Therefore, God's judgment on sin is as sure as death and taxes. Yet Noah found favor with the Lord (Gen. 6:8). When God brought judgment upon the whole earth, including even the animals, Noah alone found favor in God's sight. What was special about Noah? A verse later, we read, "**Noah was a righteous man, blameless among his contemporaries; Noah walked with God**" (6:9).

Remember the preceding verses? God saw only wickedness in the land. No one was good. That included Noah. There wasn't anything in Noah that gave him favor with God. He didn't earn it or deserve it. God gave it freely. Noah's righteousness was the result of grace, not the cause of it. Yes, he walked with God, but Noah was sinful like his parents and peers. His blamelessness was not due to his avoidance of all sin but to his looking by faith to the God who saves.

VERSES 13-14 / Part of the way the favor of God came to Noah was in God's speaking to him. God told Noah about the things that were to come. Just as the people destroyed the earth by their sin, God would destroy the people with His judgment. Everyone, that is, except Noah. For him, God provided a way of salvation.

Notice, God didn't simply tell Noah to build an ark. He also gave Noah the instructions to do so. God does not leave the means of salvation up to human ingenuity or imagination. God provided the way, the instructions, and the faith necessary to take hold of it all.

What was this "**ark**" God asked Noah to build? The Hebrew word is found in only one other place in the Bible: Exodus 2:3, which describes the basket in which Moses was placed in the river for his protection. **4** Moses's "ark" was his means of salvation, just as Noah's was. Both were placed in the water and preserved by God.

With so much going on around them, both found safety inside a means of grace.

VERSES 17-22 / Can you imagine what Noah's neighborhood must have thought of him? He was building a boat big enough for pairs of each animal on the earth and talking about a coming flood as judgment for the sin of the world. Who would believe such a thing? Yet Noah built on. He was "motivated by godly fear" (Heb. 11:7). Seeing everyone around him go about their merry wicked lives, Noah trusted God's word and was delivered by it.

God's word was not just a bit of self-help motivation; it was a promise. In verse 18, God promised to establish His "**covenant**" with Noah. A well-understood concept and referenced often in Scripture, the word covenant appears for the first time in the Bible at this point. Essentially, covenant means "promise." God always operated with His people under terms of promise, so though the word may be new to the Bible at this point, the idea behind it certainly was not. God's promises began way back in the garden, and God was now re-affirming His covenant promises and expectations with Noah.

God's covenant with Noah was more than an assurance that he would survive the flood; it was a promise that God would begin again with him. God was not giving up on this world, plagued by sin as it was. He was cleansing it for a new age, establishing that new age with a covenant, and gracing Noah as the chosen vessel through whom salvation would come into the world.

Noah did everything God commanded. He didn't take shortcuts. People around him thought he was crazy, no doubt, but by faith, Noah listened to God's voice. Trusting God's word above all else, Noah and his family were saved from the flood waters, and God's grace settled upon him as the new beginning for the world.

POINT 3

GOD PROVIDES SALVATION THROUGH JUDGMENT (GEN. 7:11-13; 8:15-16,20-22).

NOTES

7:11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the sources of the vast watery depths burst open, the floodgates of the sky were opened, **12** and the rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. **13** On that same day Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, entered the ark, along with Noah's wife and his three sons' wives. ... **8:15** Then God spoke to Noah, **16** "Come out of the ark, you, your wife, your sons, and your sons' wives with you. ... **20** Then Noah built an altar to the LORD. He took some of every kind of clean animal and every kind of clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. **21** When the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, he said to himself, "I will never again curse the ground because of human beings, even though the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth onward. And I will never again strike down every living thing as I have done. **22** As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night will not cease."

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 7:11-13; 8:15-16,20-22** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 7:11-13** commentary to (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God's **judgment** against wickedness came upon the earth, just as God had said it would. And Noah and his family entered the ark, trusting that it would **save** them, just as God had said it would.

DISCUSS: How would you respond to someone who said a worldwide flood would be overkill to address the problem of wickedness on the earth? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 8:15-16,20-22** commentary to expound upon the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God saved Noah's family in spite of their sin. Seeking **atonement** for their sin and signifying their affection for God, Noah offered a sacrifice, which **pleased** the Lord. This too was salvation through judgment.

DISCUSS: How does this true account of the flood help to prepare us for the gospel of Jesus Christ? (we see the deadly consequences of sin; we see the heart of God to save sinners; we see God's grace to accept a sacrifice in the place of judgment upon His faithful followers)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 7:11-13 / These early pages of the Bible should confirm at least one thing for us: God keeps His word. That is good news, of course, to those who love Him. He will save, just as He promised. But He also will bring the promised judgment. In Genesis 7:11, judgment day arrives.

The author is detailed, down to the day of Noah's life, about when the judgment of the flood came. The event is rooted in history; it is not a myth. One day, it started raining, and it didn't stop for thirty-nine more days and nights. The world was flooded, just as God said it would be.

That rainy day, Noah, his wife, his sons, and their wives stepped inside the ark Noah built with his own hands according to God's design. By entering, they were all taking a step of faith. They were simultaneously trusting that God's word would come true about the judgment of the earth and that, by His gracious provision, judgment wouldn't fall upon them. Entering the ark, they entered salvation by placing their lives in God's hands. As a confirmation and perhaps as a way of saying, "Don't worry, you're not crazy," God shut them in (7:16). Safe and sound in the midst of a raging storm.

VERSES 8:15-16 / The rains came, and 40 days later they stopped, not one day more than God promised. It would be another 150 days, however, before the waters subsided enough for the ark to find its resting place. It was a full year before Noah and his family could finally walk out onto dry land (8:13-14). God's promises are sure, but that doesn't mean they're quick.

When the day finally came, God spoke again to Noah: **"Come out of the ark ..."** (8:16). They walked out into a new world. Not a single person, not a single dog, not a single bird of the air remained from before. It was a new start. One family to populate the world again.

VERSES 8:20-22 / Noah wasn't a perfect man. He was righteous by faith, but he was

also a sinner. So were his children and their wives. This cleansed world would not remain pure. The moment Noah walked out of the ark, sin entered the land again.

Yet this new world began with worship. Noah worshipped God. A sinner, yes, but one who looked to the God who saves. Noah built an altar, and he took some of the animals, some of the more numerous clean animals, and made sacrifices to God.

Noah was God's chosen vessel through whom the world would continue. Now based on Noah's sacrifice, God promised never to flood the earth again, despite humanity's continued sin (8:21; see also 9:12-17). People were still wicked, God was still holy, and sin still needed judgment, but the worldwide floodwaters were dried up and would remain so. The ground that was cursed from the moment Adam took and ate was now altered by the sacrifice for sin offered on the ark-builder's altar.

The flood ended not because all traces of sin were now drowned but because God had grace. "It was God's grace that ended the flood (Gen. 8:1), but Noah's sacrifice was necessary to end God's decree of judgment."⁵ Ending the flood is one thing; restoring the world to life is another. This new world started under the blood of clean animals—animals, remember, that God brought to Noah to load on the ark, sacrifices prepared beforehand (6:19-20; 7:2,8-9).

The judgment was over as the pleasing smell rose to heaven. God accepted the sacrifice of the righteous one. Noah's sacrifice for sin pointed to another one to come much later down the family line, one that would not only reboot the next age of this world but also inaugurate the world to come. On that day, the One more righteous than Noah would act as the saving ark for God's children and carry them through the ultimate judgment. Christ loved us and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God (Eph. 5:2).

MY RESPONSE

Because Jesus has provided salvation from our sins as an act of grace toward us, we declare the gospel with great humility and compassion toward sinners in great need of a Savior.

NOTES

HEAD:

Though we often downplay sin, God takes it very seriously. He flooded the world over it. Therefore, we should learn from this passage that we must not have a laissez-faire attitude toward sin. Our sin is great, but the mercy of God is greater still. Once we see the judgment our sin deserves, we should look to the God who will forgive our sin by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. His death is the pleasing aroma to God that guarantees our forgiveness. Receiving His forgiveness softens our hearts toward those who have yet to receive it.

What are some ways you fail to take sin seriously?

HEART:

In this passage, we learn that God is not an impersonal or distant deity. He is the holy Creator who relates to His creatures. To the wicked, the Lord pours out His wrath and judgment, but to those who have faith in the Lord Jesus, He shows His intense and infinite compassion. We believers likewise should relate to God with intense passion and show His compassion to others around us. We are all sinners in need of salvation. We must daily come to God for the grace to repent and believe, and we must ask for His help to show compassion to those around us who do not yet know Him.

Why is it important to show compassion to those around us, and what are some ways we can do that?

HANDS:

If we can take anything away from Noah's offering, it is that God's way of salvation is through sacrifice. It is His appointed way to deal with our sin and bring us back into a right relationship with Him. This is why Paul said in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship." Though we cannot atone for our sins—that belongs to Christ's cross alone—we can and should live in complete dependence upon God's mercy and grace, offering our lives in service to Him. That is true worship.

How do you need to offer yourself to God today in worship and service?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Be killing sin or it will
be killing you."⁶

-John Owen
(c. 1616-1683)

POINT 1: GOD DECLARES THAT WICKEDNESS WILL BRING JUDGMENT (GEN. 6:5-7).

+ COMMENTARY

“God’s grief. Moses first gives us a peek at God’s heart: ‘And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart’ (v. 6). We must not imagine that God was surprised or taken unaware. Elsewhere he said, ‘And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret’ (1 Samuel 15:29). Though God’s eternal joy and happiness cannot be disturbed, he is not a disinterested observer of the human scene. One of the marks of personality is feeling, and here in Genesis we read that God’s heart was filled with pain. The word expresses the most intense form of human emotion, ‘a mixture of rage and bitter anguish’—like Jonathan experienced when he learned of Saul’s plan to kill David (cf. 1 Samuel 20:34; 2 Samuel 19:2). God’s plan. So God responded with a declaration of irrevocable judgment: ‘So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them”’ (v. 7). His judgment would involve a complete erasure of man and all accompanying creatures from existence. The destruction of everything from man to animals had to do with man’s given sovereignty over the earth, for the irrational creatures were created for him and therefore were involved in the fall. There would be no half-measures in dealing with sin. God’s terrible resolution was grounded in the promise he had made that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent’s head (cf. 3:15). The race was thoroughly demonized and incapable of delivering such a seed, and thus it was only right that humanity be destroyed.”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

People are capable of doing good. We love. We care. We help. We provide. We do selfless things. Though we are sinners to the core, by God’s grace, we are as bad as we could possibly be. Still, our best efforts at doing good are always tainted by our sinful nature. We’re not as bad as we could be, but we’re far from as good as we ought to be. James Montgomery Boice illustrated this well:

“In one of his writings, Donald Grey Barnhouse imagines a thirsty person, who is in a doctor’s office, picking up a glass and going over to a cooler containing sterilized water and filling the glass in order to take a drink. The glass begins to foam a bit, so he asks the doctor if something has been in the glass. ‘Yes,’ the doctor says, ‘diphtheria solution!’ Our thirsty patient puts the

EXTRA

glass back down in a hurry. Why? Wasn't the water pure? Yes, the water was pure, but the glass was dirty. Everything that came in contact with the glass was contaminated." **8**

As good as our intentions may be, the contamination of sin remains in us. Nothing is left untouched. Thankfully, Jesus saved us from the punishment of sin, and one day He will free us from sin completely in our glorified bodies. But for now, the contamination of sin remains. We must be aware of that as we go about our lives, being quick to repent and ask forgiveness and serving others in humility and with all compassion.

POINT 2: GOD OFFERS GRACE AS THE MEANS TO ESCAPE JUDGMENT (GEN. 6:8-9,13-14,17-22).

+ COMMENTARY

"Covenant" is not simply a good biblical word. It is also a word found throughout the ancient Near East. A covenant is basically a promise to keep your end of a bargain. It is a contract, of sorts, but something that reaches beyond two parties on two ends, trying to strike a deal. A covenant ups the ante. It brings two parties into a relationship deeper than a contract. Think of marriage: it's a covenant, not a contract. There is skin in the game. When God made a covenant with His people, He was joining Himself to them. From man, God expected obedience and worship. From God, man could expect faithfulness, grace, and mercy—help when they most needed it. That was how ancient covenants worked. The lesser joined himself to the greater for protection—to gain something he otherwise could not gain.

But there is a twist in the covenants God makes with His people. Throughout the Bible, God's covenants are one-sided. Yes, He expects obedience and worship, but if they fail on their end of the bargain, He will pay the cost. God provided the sacrificial system to atone for their sins against Him and His covenant. The surprise of the covenants God makes is what He puts on Himself for the sake of His people. He not only promises to protect but to go under the knife on their behalf. In a typical covenant, if the lesser party breached, they would die. In God's covenants, the sins of the people cause the death of the Son of God. God makes the promise, seals the covenant, and becomes the guarantor.

POINT 3: GOD PROVIDES SALVATION THROUGH JUDGMENT (GEN. 7:11-13; 8:15-16,20-22).

+ COMMENTARY

"This passage provides a pattern for what sinful human beings must do to find God's favor. In a sense, we can do nothing; God has done everything. But we can at least come to God in the way God himself has appointed and be assured as we come that he will receive us and will remain faithful to us within the covenant of salvation. As sinners we appear before God as Noah did emerging from the ark. We have been recipients of his common grace. If God had not been favorable to us, we would have perished long before now. Yet we are sinners. We merit God's judgment, just as others do. Left to ourselves the sin within will undoubtedly bring us to perdition. We will perish utterly. What are we to do? We know not what to do. But God has set a way before us: the way of sacrifice. He has shown from the earliest days of the race, going back

to Eden, that although sinners merit death for their transgressions it is nevertheless possible for a substitute to take the sinner's place. An innocent may die. God himself showed this when he killed the animals and then clothed Adam and Eve in the animals' skins. This is the way Noah came to God after he exited from the ark. It is the way you and I must come today, though we do not actually offer sacrifices but rather look back in faith to the perfect sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ offered in our place. He is the lamb 'slain from the creation of the world' (Rev. 13:8). 'He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). What happens as we come to God through faith in the perfect and finished work of Jesus? We find that God is pleased, and we hear him promise that we are now his and that we shall never perish—not for this life, not for eternity. Our relationship with him 'will never cease.'" ⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

The cross of Christ is the ultimate illustration of the concept of salvation through judgment. In the cross, God shows in the most vivid way how salvation comes through his judgment of sin. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus became sin to take our sin away.

What does sin look like? It's looks like the ugliness of the cross. Sin looks like the blood and gore of the nails through the skin. Sin looks like a man struggling to breathe as the pressure from his body pushes down on his lungs, slowly and painfully suffocating him. Sin looks like the judgment of God poured out on those who deserve it. But the surprise of the cross is the judgment came to the only One who ever lived who didn't deserve it.

We are saved by the cross of Christ. Jesus took our sin and placed it on Himself, bearing the punishment it deserved. Our forgiveness in Christ is not God's passing over of sin but rather the judgment of it in His Son. Jesus received what we were owed: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and Jesus died. He paid our penalty. He was the sacrifice.

As we look back from the cross to the Old Testament, each sacrifice for sin is a pointer to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. We should remember that as we read. Our sin requires death, and a death has occurred. Jesus willingly exchanged His life for ours (Heb. 12:2). He died our death, and He gives us His life. He was judged; we are saved.

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A PEOPLE SCATTERED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Rebellious hearts seek to violate God's commands (Gen. 10:32–11:2).
2. Rebellious hearts seek to rob God's glory (Gen. 11:3-9).
3. Rebellious hearts seek to live other than God's way (Isa. 65:1-2).

Background Passages: Genesis 10:1–11:9; Isaiah 65:1-7

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Rebellion against God and His ways is in the heart of all people; however, God's grace is greater than all our sin.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

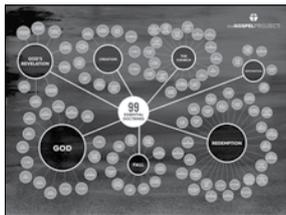
God responded to the people's act of rebellion in building the Tower of Babylon by confusing their language, forcing them to scatter. Many years later, God would respond to the source of all our rebellion by providing Jesus. At Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier, bringing people from every tongue, nation, and tribe together in Christ Jesus.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because in Christ our rebellious hearts have been replaced with hearts of love for God, we obey our calling with joy as we scatter throughout the nations, desiring to make God's glory known to all.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: The pristine setting of Eden’s garden is already a distant memory by the time we arrive in Genesis 10–11. The first act of human rebellion in Genesis 3 paved the way for countless more, and not even a worldwide flood could scrub the wickedness from our hearts. In Genesis 10–11, as Noah’s offspring multiply on the face of the earth, they too turned away from worshiping and obeying God. Seeking to ascend to God, humanity repeats the folly of their first parents and rebels against God—a case study for the doctrine of sin as rebellion.

DISCUSS: **What is something you built, crafted, or put together that you were proud of?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

DISCUSS: **How should we evaluate our pride in a job or project done well?** (we should take pride in doing a job well so that God is honored in the work and the result; something done in rebellion against God’s commands should be repented of; pride for self-glory should be rejected)

TRANSITION: Our propensity as sinful human beings is to make our world revolve around us. We opt to do what we want when we want. But the first chapters of Genesis, not to mention our own personal experiences, demonstrate time and again the foolishness of returning to the worship of self—the essence of our sinful rebellion—because of the consequences it brings.

POINT 1

REBELLIOUS HEARTS SEEK TO VIOLATE GOD'S COMMANDS (GEN. 10:32–11:2).

NOTES

10:32 These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their family records, in their nations. The nations on earth spread out from these after the flood. **11:1** The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. **2** As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 10:32–11:2** from his or her Bible.

DISCUSS: Why might a common language contribute to multiplying expressions of human sinfulness after the Fall? (easier to maintain unity together in our sinful trajectory; people would be less likely to be slowed down by confusion and misunderstanding; easier to know what sinful violations have been attempted in the past and to build off of them)

EXPLAIN: Pass out copies of **PACK ITEM 11: THE TOLEDOT FORMULA** to help you explain why this narrative is important. Use the **VERSES 10:32–11:2** commentary to expound on the rebellion demonstrated by Noah's descendants and following doctrinal point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

We've seen sin portrayed as transgression, but sin goes much **deeper** than an act. Sinful actions are an **overflow** of our rebellious hearts, which show disdain and **contempt** for God and His commands. We reject what God wants and **settle** for what we want.

DISCUSS: What are some implications of sin being a heart issue and not just a hands issue? (our solution to sin cannot be merely behavior modification; with the heart being the core of our being, we are shot through with sin and without hope on our own; salvation from our sinful hearts requires a new heart; salvation cannot be found in anyone else who, like us, has sin in their hearts; even though someone may look "good" on the outside, his or her heart certainly is not)

TRANSITION: Not only do our rebellious hearts of sin refuse to obey God's commands, they turn inward to glorify ourselves instead of our Creator. In this, by our actions, we attempt to rob God of the glory that is due Him.



“FROM THE EAST”

The phrase “from the east” in the early chapters of Genesis connotes humanity's rebellious, wayward trajectory from Eden and life with God. This detail about the eastward direction of humanity is less about physical location and more about spiritual condition, as Cain leaves Yahweh's presence to live east of Eden (Gen. 4:16; cf. 3:24) and the Babelites gather from the east before constructing their tower (Gen. 11:2).

COMMENTARY

VERSE 10:32 / An important word that occurs throughout Genesis is the Hebrew word *toledot*, which means “generations” or “descendants.” This word often occurs as part of a formulaic introduction for key passages that record a genealogy advancing the search for the promised seed of Genesis 3:15. **1** In Genesis 10:32, sandwiched between two key instances of this formula—the genealogies of Noah (10:1) and his son Shem (11:10)—we find the story of how the original family divided into the multiplied peoples, nations, and languages of biblical history and contemporary reality.

VERSES 11:1-2 / Following the flood and the genealogy of Noah’s offspring, Genesis 11 presents the people of the earth as being united by a common language. At this point in Genesis’s account, a shared language is to be expected with the people not being too far removed from the time of Noah.

Despite the diversity of nations listed in Genesis 10, a common language facilitated the gathering of people in a single place—the land of Shinar. The reader is expected to catch the hint that this gathering is contrary to God’s original commands to Adam and Eve and to Noah’s family to multiply and fill the earth (cf. 1:28; 9:7).

These details foreshadow the coming events that will show humanity stubbornly refusing to follow God’s commands in favor of following the sinful example of Adam and Eve.

Scripture often foreshadows events before they occur. For example, before Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the text records her as standing near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with her husband and considering the serpent’s lie about what God might be withholding from her. Likewise, Genesis 11:1-2 hints at the sinful hearts of Noah’s descendants by showing that they were gathering **“from the east.”** This recalls the trajectory of humanity after their eviction from Eden’s garden (3:24). Worse, in Genesis 4:16, as Cain settles in the

land of Nod, the text connects his eastward sojourn with a departure from the presence of Yahweh.

Separation and distance from God run contrary to the purpose for which human beings were created—to enjoy and glorify God. We were made to be in relationship with our Creator God, obeying His commands with joy and fervor. But instead, we find ourselves rebelling against His will for us, relishing in our distance from Him.

Practically, we see our purpose of worshiping God work itself out in God’s commands in Genesis 2:15. Commenting on this verse, Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer demonstrates that the Hebrew words underlying “work” and “keep” appear together throughout the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) specifically in places referring to the priestly work of worship at the altar. Sailhamer argues that Genesis 2:15 indicates the original human purpose is “to worship and obey.” **2** Obediently serving as God’s image-bearing stewards of creation, humanity was meant to offer worship to God in the very presence of God, as described in the Eden narrative. Even though we no longer inhabit Eden, we still have our purpose to worship God and obey His commands, in which we trust Him to be gracious and present with us.

In settling in Shinar rather than filling the earth, the Babylon (or Babel) community demonstrated the nature and persistence of human rebellion against God. Just as Adam and Eve rebelled at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so too the family of Noah chooses its own wisdom over faithful submission to God’s commands. That the people gather together against God’s instruction demonstrates that they believe themselves better prepared to seek their best interests than the God who created them. The narrative that follows provides further evidence of the folly of such endeavors.

POINT 2

REBELLIOUS HEARTS SEEK TO ROB GOD'S GLORY (GEN. 11:3-9).

NOTES

3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make oven-fired bricks." (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) **4** And they said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let's make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth."
5 Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. **6** The LORD said, "If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. **7** Come, let's go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech."
8 So from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. **9** Therefore it is called Babylon for there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 11:3-9** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 3-4** commentary to explain the following point (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

Our rebellious hearts turn us away from God and exclusively to ourselves. We become **self-reliant** and **defiant**, seeking to claim for ourselves what belongs only to God alone. Furthermore, we seek to **define** ourselves by our own standards rather than our Creator's.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we might "make a name for ourselves" in rebellion against God? (living for our reputation and fame rather than God's; identifying ourselves by our sin rather than repenting of it; making plans for the future without regard for God's will; doing "good works" so people will take notice of us)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-9** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

God, who is holy and just, will not long endure the sinful rebellion of His image-bearers. From His throne on high in heaven, the Lord **punishes** rebellion, which is both a **judgment** and a **grace** that sin would not have its full effect upon humanity.

TRANSITION: Not only is God gracious to punish rebellion, He is also gracious to call people to repentance, even though they turn and run from Him.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Just as when holy men live together, it is a great grace and blessing; so, likewise, that congregation is the worst kind when sinners dwell together. The more sinners there are at one time, the worse they are. Indeed, when the tower was being built up against God, those who were building it were disbanded for their own welfare. The conspiracy was evil. The dispersion was of true benefit even to those who were dispersed."³

-Jerome (d. 420)

COMMENTARY

The Babylon (or Babel) account of Genesis 11:1-9 is an intricately designed narrative with a structure packed with meaning. Kenneth Mathews notes the phonetic similarity between the Hebrew words for “name” (shem), “heavens” (shamayim), “there” (sham), and “from there” (mishsham). Drawing on this stylistic feature Mathews concludes that the reader is intended to see the complete failure of the Babel project. When the people seek to make a name (v. 4) for themselves there (v. 2) by reaching the heavens (v. 4), their plans are frustrated as God disperses them from there (vv. 8,9) at the end of the story. He writes, “By ironic twist, their efforts at obtaining a ‘name’ through their ‘heavenward’ tower results in the antithesis of their intentions since they succeed only in starting over where they began. ‘There’ leads to ‘from there’ (vv. 2,8).”⁴ What began as a rebellious project to establish themselves in Shinar resulted in humanity being scattered over the face of the earth in an act of God’s judgment.

VERSES 3-4 / In Genesis 11:3-4, the reader overhears the motivations and intentions of the people gathered at Shinar. Verse 4 especially reeks of rebellion against God and a desire to rob God of His glory. The people propose that they might ascend to heaven by their own efforts and thereby **“make a name”** for themselves for their own glory.

The concept of a person’s name is especially important in the Old Testament. A person’s name was attached to his or her reputation. A family name told the story of a person’s lineage and was to be protected from association with dishonor. In fact, as God covenants with the people of Israel, it becomes the case that the people of Israel are called by the Lord’s name (see 2 Chron. 7:14). For the people gathered in Shinar to propose that they might make a name for themselves was an indication that they had rejected the “named” condition of humanity given in Genesis 1:26-27—image-bearers of God.

Such a direct statement of rebellion against God’s commands is only outdone in audacity by the prideful attempt to attain to God-like glory. In their tower proposal, Genesis 11:4 records the people’s pride-soaked voices. This building project is conceived as a means for the people to achieve heaven’s pleasures by human means and for human glory. In stark contrast to this rebellion and rejection, the next chapter of Genesis portrays God promising Abram that He will make a great nation of him and that God will magnify Abram’s name (12:2-3). Completing the irony of this story, the name “Babel” given to this place and its project communicates not glory and fame but incoherence and shame.

VERSES 5-9 / Despite the people’s unreasonable faith in their own ability to create a tower to reach heaven, Scripture shows that their feat was not impressive to God. In fact, Genesis 11:5-7 appears to mock the people at Shinar. In 11:5, the text says, **“Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building.”** This passage twice references the descent of God—ostensibly from heaven—to glimpse the tower being built toward heaven (cf. vv. 5,7). Apparently the grandeur of the plans for a tower reaching the heavens exceeded the glory of the tower in reality.

We should see a parallel between God’s divine deliberation in Genesis 11:6-7 and that of 3:22, in which God evicts Adam and Eve from the garden.⁵ Both stories depict God’s action as having punitive and protective aspects. Through exile from the tree of life and the confusion of languages, God eliminates the possibility of unlimited persistence of human sinfulness.

Genesis 11:8-9 concludes this narrative with God’s deliberate act of multiplying languages, resulting in confused communication, abandonment of the building project, and the dispersal of humanity across the face of the earth as was intended.

POINT 3

REBELLIOUS HEARTS SEEK TO LIVE OTHER THAN GOD'S WAY (ISA. 65:1-2).

NOTES

1 "I was sought by those who did not ask; I was found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. **2** I spread out my hands all day long to a rebellious people who walk in the path that is not good, following their own thoughts.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Isaiah 65:1-2** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-2** commentary to highlight that God's patience and grace to sinners magnifies the evil of our rebellion against Him (*the bold words fill in a blank in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #38: *Sin as Rebellion.* Because the Bible portrays people as responsible beings, called to respond in **faith** and **obedience** to God's revelation, the Bible often portrays sin in terms of defiance and rebellion toward God the King. Isaiah 1:2 is one of many passages that describes sin in terms of rebellion against God: "I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against Me." Seen in this light, sin is personal and **willful** disobedience, the raising of a clenched fist toward the One who made us.

OPTIONAL VIDEO: Show the "99 in :99" video about the essential Christian doctrine *Sin as Rebellion* (1:08 in length) at this link:
<https://www.gospelproject.com/bible-sin-rebellion-video>.

DISCUSS: **How can we turn from the path of rebellion and instead walk the road that leads to life?** (first, we must repent of our sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from our sin; believers must listen to the Holy Spirit in their lives, confess their sin, and obey in faith; we must choose to seek the Lord; we must recognize that going our own way will result in death and hell; we must confess our sins one to another and be encouraged by the community of faith, the church)

TRANSITION: Rebellion is endemic to post-fall humanity. The hearts of humans are wicked and deceitful, and the biblical record plays that out. From Babylon's tower to Isaiah's stiff-necked audience, humanity rejects God's ways in favor of our own wisdom and discernment. Yet all is not lost. After Christ's accomplishment on the cross, His resurrection, and His ascension, we see in places like Acts 2 and Revelation 7:9 that even the human languages that once served to illustrate divine judgment are being redeemed to serve as vehicles of gospel proclamation and praise.

COMMENTARY

Isaiah is a book of paradoxes. On the one hand, it is a book that details the devastation of God's righteous judgment against the sins of ancient Israel and her neighbors. On the other hand, there are sections of such clear, messianic promises that some of the church fathers and contemporary scholars have referred to Isaiah as "the fifth Gospel." Toward the end of the book, as Isaiah points toward the eschatological, or end-times, hope of a new heavens and new earth (65:17), human rebellion is also shown for what it is: folly and self-harm. Recorded from the perspective of God's plea to His rebellious people, Isaiah 65 introduces a section that demonstrates how wicked and foolhardy was Israel's rejection of its Sovereign.

VERSE 1 / Isaiah 65:1 shows that God Himself was ready to respond to those who would ask Him but also acknowledged that such a request had not occurred. God's readiness to answer was not merely passive, however, as the verse continues on to record God's emphatic, double announcement of His presence, "**Here I am, here I am.**" The reader of Isaiah will likely catch the echoes of Isaiah 6:8, where Isaiah, in the presence of God, declared his readiness to be sent as God's messenger to a stubborn audience. This parallel emphasizes that Isaiah was ready to be sent, and here God was ready to be found, but the people persisted in their rebellious refusal to acknowledge their covenant God.

There is a question about how to translate the final phrase of verse 1. One option is to take the verb "call" in the passive voice: "a nation that was not called by My name." The other option is to translate the verb in an active voice, which would emphasize the failure of Israel to respond to God: "a nation that did not invoke My name."⁶ Since this address is God's response to Isaiah's plea on behalf of the people to whom the Lord was a Father (63:16; 64:8,12), the active translation seems more appropriate as an indictment that the people known by Yahweh's name had not called upon His name.

VERSE 2 / Isaiah 65:2 continues the Lord's contention against His people, emphasizing that His active outreach to them was ignored. It begins with the phrase "**I spread out my hands all day long**" as a way of rearticulating God's active pursuit of His people displayed in verse 1, wherein God twice declared, "Here I am!" God repeatedly appealed to His people. What grace that the glorious and holy Creator God would plead with His people to repent and return to His open, forgiving arms! What pride that the people of Israel—and indeed, ourselves—would refuse His pleas!

Having established that the people were guilty of ignoring God's active outreach, the people were identified as "**a rebellious people.**" Not only do these rebellious ones ignore God to their own peril, but their ignorance is paired with "**walk[ing] in the path that is not good, following their own thoughts.**" Just like the people of Babylon, who showed their rebellious hearts by building a tower to their own glory, the people of Israel walked contrary to the good life of obedience to God.

In Isaiah 30, amidst another section that appeals to rebellious Israel, God promised that a teacher would arise to help guide and instruct Israel along the way: "Whenever you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear this command behind you: 'This is the way. Walk in it'" (30:21). This guidance is intended to lead the people to the rejection of their idols and the return to blessed living in the land of promise (see 30:18-26). That the people in Isaiah 65:1-2 remain obstinately committed to walking in a way that is not good is an indication that they have foolishly refused the promise of Isaiah 30:18-19: "Therefore the LORD is waiting to show you mercy, and is rising up to show you compassion, for the LORD is a just God. All who wait patiently for him are happy. For people will live on Zion in Jerusalem. You will never weep again; he will show favor to you at the sound of your outcry; as soon as he hears, he will answer you."

MY RESPONSE

Because in Christ our rebellious hearts have been replaced with hearts of love for God, we obey our calling with joy as we scatter throughout the nations, desiring to make God's glory known to all.

NOTES

HEAD:

At its core, sin can be defined as misdirected worship, or idolatry. Following Adam and Eve's first sin, the first several chapters of Genesis demonstrate ways that subsequent humanity simply repeated our first parents' failure to worship and obey God. As history progresses from Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel to Noah and his neighbors and to Babel, Genesis shows humanity pursuing ever-broadening expressions of the initial impulse toward self-worship.

What are some ways we see self-worship on display in our culture and even in our own lives?

HEART:

The desire to build something as a means of glorifying oneself has not subsided since Babel. We all desire to excel and to achieve success in the realms that are important to us. Such a pursuit can be healthy and good, but it can also arise from a desire to build our own name, fame, and reputation. Even in ministry and in the church, the opportunity for people to seek their own glory remains a human temptation.

How can we ensure we are seeking God's kingdom instead of building our own name?

HANDS:

Having read Genesis 11, the multitude of languages spoken around the world reminds us of human rebelliousness. However, the New Testament also shows that human languages are being redeemed and repurposed to communicate the great forgiveness and redemption Jesus accomplished in the gospel. Furthermore, Revelation 7:9 gives us confidence that all of the world's languages will one day be used to worship to God.

How can you support missionaries and Bible translators who are taking the Word of God to the nations? More locally, how will you share the gospel with those around you who speak your language?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Now, therefore, pray we heartily to God that this evil time may be made short, for the sake of the chosen men, as he hath promised in his Holy Gospel, and that the large and broad way that leadeth to perdition may be stopped, and that the straight and narrow way which leadeth to bliss may be made open by the Holy Scriptures, that we may know what is the will of God, to serve him with truth and holiness, in the dread of God, that we may find by him a way of bliss everlasting."⁷

—John Wycliffe (d. 1384)

POINT 1: REBELLIOUS HEARTS SEEK TO VIOLATE GOD’S COMMANDS (GEN. 10:32–11:2).

+ COMMENTARY

“First, following the diffusion of people groups in Genesis 10, the hunkering down of the people in Genesis 11 can be more easily seen as a refusal to fulfill God’s command to populate the earth. Such unification is not what God wills. The story can thus be seen as an early witness to the importance—indeed, the divine legitimation—of pluralism and diversity ... There is, according to the story, a kind of unity (national, linguistic, otherwise) that God does not will and a diversity (national, linguistic, otherwise) that God does will ... Second, it is possible that the unusual ordering of Genesis 10–11 functions to bring these chapters into line with a pattern previously established in Genesis, according to which humans cause some sort of problem to which God must respond. Fitting Gen. 11:1-9 into this pattern means that it segues nicely into the call of Abram in Gen. 12 and beyond, which thus becomes God’s next ‘response’ to what humans have done ... [I]n the final analysis, whatever its literary features, gaps, and ideology, the tower of Babel story may be a setup for the story of Abraham, another iconic text from the Hebrew Bible.”⁸

POINT 3: REBELLIOUS HEARTS SEEK TO LIVE OTHER THAN GOD’S WAY (ISA. 65:1-2).

+ COMMENTARY

“God’s reason for so severely dealing with Israel is not changeableness in Him, but sin in them (vv. 2-7). Yet the whole nation shall not be destroyed, but only the wicked; a remnant shall be saved (vv. 8-10,11-16). There shall be, finally, universal blessedness to Israel, such as they had prayed for (vv. 17-25).”⁹

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I WILL MAKE YOUR NAME GREAT

“God Planned It for Good”

by Jamaal Williams

+

Esteemed pastor-theologian Dr. Tony Evans describes divine providence as “the hand of God in the glove of history ... the work of God whereby He integrates and bends events in the universe in order to fulfill His original design for which it was created. It is God sitting behind the steering wheel of time.”¹

Whew! This description of providence makes me want to stop what I’m doing, close my eyes, open my heart, and turn from any cynicism and doubt toward the One who has His hand “in the glove in history.” We need to remember that if we are in Christ—if we believe the gospel—then God, who is sitting behind the “steering wheel of time,” is driving my life and yours to a beautiful end. God intentionally directs every believer’s life to the end where everything works together for our ultimate good and where His multicultural bride lives in perfect peace for all eternity.

Through Abraham’s story, we see the providence of God at work in powerful ways. I believe that part of what made Abraham’s faith memorable and foundational is that his faith became rooted in a deep belief that God is sovereign and providential. The writer of Hebrews talks about Abraham’s faith in a way that points to God’s ability to direct all events toward a certain end. He

reflected: “[Abraham] considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead; therefore, he received him back, figuratively speaking” (Heb. 11:19). Abraham took his one and only son of promise to be sacrificed in obedience to God because he had learned to trust God through the most impossible of situations and circumstances. If God could provide a promised child through Sarah at 90 years old and Abraham at 100, then nothing is impossible with Him!

In other words, Abraham believed God as he experienced God’s unmerited, unfolding, and unstoppable providence.

GOD’S UNMERITED PROVIDENCE

When we meet Abraham in Genesis 11 (named Abram at the time), we know little about him besides he was in the lineage of Shem. If someone were reading the Bible for the first time and had no idea who the progenitor of the Hebrew people would be, then he or she would have a very slim chance of guessing that person based on the names given through the genealogy in Genesis 11. But that’s exactly the point!

Abraham comes into the story out of nowhere. Yet in Genesis 12:1-3, God placed His unmerited favor on Abraham,

or what Christians might call *grace*. Abraham was plucked like a grain of sand from the seashore, one among millions, and blessed ridiculously. Over the next few chapters, God lavished specific promises on him and repeated them to remind Abraham of His faithfulness as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. God promised Abraham:

- land (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-15,17; 15:7,18; 17:8);
- a great nation of people through him (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:2,4-7,16,19; 22:17);
- the promise of a covenant (17:7,19,21);
- and that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through him (12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

What's amazing is that the Bible never tells us why God chose Abraham and Sarah in their old age. However, we do know that God did not call Abraham because he was a perfect man who impressed God. Abraham was a sinner like all of us. God kept His covenant despite Abraham's proclivity toward deceit. And for all those who believe as Abraham did, we share in the same grace God poured out on him. This is how God works (Deut. 7:7; Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 3:5). God in His providence saves people like you and me so that we cannot boast in ourselves but rather in Christ's finished work alone (Eph. 2:9).

GOD'S UNFOLDING PROVIDENCE

As you read Abraham's story, you see that although God told him the end from the beginning, God didn't give him all the details at once. God promised Abraham would be a great nation, but He didn't say how or when. In fact, God allowed 25 years to pass before He delivered on the beginning of that promise. Within those years, there were significant tests, the pain of prolonged barrenness, and internal family stress. Numerous mistakes were made on Abraham and Sarah's part because of a lack of faith in and patience for God's plan to come to pass.

Yet through all of this, God is glorified and we gain wisdom, warning, and encouragement. As God's plan unfolded, Abraham experienced heartache, confu-

sion, and pain mixed with joy. At times, both Abraham and Sarah were tempted to doubt God's promises, but by His grace, they persevered. In the same way, we must learn to persevere when things aren't going the way we anticipate them to go. We know that God has a plan and, as Tony Evans has said, God is taking "what you and I would call luck, chance, mistakes, happenstance and stitching them into achieving His program."²

GOD'S UNSTOPPABLE PROVIDENCE

God promised to make Abraham's name great and to lead him to a new land that would be for him and his offspring (Gen. 12:2,7). But a lot happened between God's promise and its fulfillment. There were many victories, but there were also many losses through disobedience within Abraham's lineage. Yet through the providence of God, everything that God promised came to pass or is still in the process of coming to pass.

God's providence can be seen throughout Abraham's family story but nowhere as strongly as in the story of Joseph. After all that Joseph went through at the hands of his brothers and the Egyptians, he concluded powerfully, "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good" (Gen. 50:20). God is for us even when things are at their darkest.

Ultimately, as Christians, we know that God's providence is unstoppable because of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Ever since the Fall, God has been orchestrating His perfect plan in the face of evil, human sin, and the weakness of His own people, and God's plan to redeem those who place their faith and trust in Him came to pass. Any time you feel like your life is out of control, remember that in Christ, things are under control because God's providence is unmerited, unfolding, and unstoppable—God is "behind the wheel."



A PEOPLE PROMISED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God chooses to work through unlikely people (Gen. 11:27-30).
2. God promises a new people through Abram (Gen. 12:1-3).
3. God uses imperfect people (Gen. 15:1-6,17).

Background Passage: Genesis 11:10–20:18

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God established a covenant people through whom He promised to bring blessing to the world.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God promised that He would bless the world through Abram and his family, an unlikely and imperfect people. Jesus Christ, an unlikely but perfect Savior, is the fulfillment of God's promise, the descendant through whom salvation flows to the entire world.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we are brought into Abram's family of faith through Jesus Christ, we live as a united people used by God to proclaim the greatest blessing—salvation—to the world.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: At this point, the world looked bleak. The people of the earth are still sinful, even after the flood of God’s judgment. And now, after Babylon (or Babel), the people of the world are scattered and unable to communicate in a unified language. Will God’s image-bearers ever be unified again, or will sin and judgment separate and destroy what God made very good? Enter Abram, a man whom God chose to receive a promise to answer this very question.

INSTRUCT: Ask your group to think of a time when they were amazed at how many people attended an event, such as a birthday party, a parade, or a sporting event. Whatever the event, more people participated than they expected.

DISCUSS: **When you were in that setting, how did you feel?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: There can be a sense of awe when an unexpected amount of people show up to an event. Being awash in a sea of people can be overwhelming. Now imagine an opposite situation, being a elderly couple with no children and a promise that you will become a nation of people. Would such words fill you with despair or hope? The difference would lie in the one who made the promise. From a human being, this would be laughable; from the Creator God, however, the promise is sure, unbreakable, and sealed by His character.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: **What reasons do we have to trust God’s promises?** (we can trust God’s character; He never lies; He does what is good; He loves us; we have proof in Scripture that God always does what He says He will do)

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POINT 1

GOD CHOOSES TO WORK THROUGH UNLIKELY PEOPLE (GEN. 11:27-30).

27 These are the family records of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran fathered Lot. **28** Haran died in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans, during his father Terah's lifetime. **29** Abram and Nahor took wives: Abram's wife was named Sarai, and Nahor's wife was named Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. **30** Sarai was unable to conceive; she did not have a child.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 11:27-30** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 27-29** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in a blank in the *Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

God began creating a people for Himself with Abram, an unlikely person from a family of **idol** worshipers and a place marked by **rebellion**.

DISCUSS: Why does God often choose unlikely people to carry out His plans? (to bring about redemption for people who seem impossibly far from Him; to show His power to use anyone for His glory; this prevents people from boasting how great, smart, or amazing they are and instead promotes humility)

OPTIONAL QUESTION: What should we think about ourselves as God uses us to accomplish His will? (we are unlikely servants included in God's family; we are the recipients of amazing grace to be loved and used by God for His good purposes; we should remain humble in our work and in the God-given results that glorify His name)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 30** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the *DDG*):

Through Sarai's barrenness, we will see that God works through impossible circumstances to bring **blessing** to the world and **glory** to Himself.

DISCUSS: What are some ways God has used impossible circumstances in your life to bring Himself glory? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: Abram came from a pagan family and had a barren wife, but this didn't stop God from calling Abram and promising him blessing and descendants in Genesis 12.

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"The blessings of God were not restricted to Abram and those who were good to him, but were to flow from him to all peoples on earth. This is the first hint of God's ultimate purpose for Abram and his descendants."¹

-Jesudason
Baskar Jeyaraj

COMMENTARY

VERSES 27-29 / In these three verses we learn the “who” and the “where” of Abram’s family history. Family lineage is presented regularly in the Old Testament as a marker for a new chapter or narrative in the telling of God’s true story. That’s what is happening here. It is important to remember that the last big event was the disruption of languages at the Tower of Babylon. Now, the lineage of Abram takes center stage, and until chapter 25, his story is the focal point.

In this passage, we first learn about Abram’s immediate family: Terah was Abram’s father, and Abram had two brothers, Nahor and Haran, but Haran died, leaving behind a son, Lot. This bit of information may help explain why Lot traveled with Abram in Genesis 12:5.

After meeting the brothers, we learn about their wives. Abram is married to Sarai and Nahor is married to Milcah. Milcah is given a bit more description and the author tells us her father was Haran, the late brother of Abram and Nahor. This means that Nahor, then, married his niece, Milcah. We should understand this was not an uncommon scenario for the time. Abram himself married Sarai, who was his half-sister (Gen. 20:12).

Second, we learn a bit about where this family was from. We know, based on verse 28, that the native land of this family was in Ur of the Chaldeans. Where you are from has a significant influence on your religion, culture, and name. Ur was known as a place of pagan worship, which Abram’s family participated in (Josh. 24:2). This is not surprising when we learn that both the name “Milcah” (Abram’s niece) and the name “Sarai” (Abram’s wife) mean “queen” in Akkadian and are derived from the deities of this pagan region. **2**

There is some debate among scholars about the location of Ur of the Chaldeans, but it is likely that it was in the region of, or at least nearby, Babylon. It is helpful to consider the context that comes before these

verses—that God confused the languages of the earth after the events in Babel, or Babylon (Gen. 11:5-9). The world no longer spoke the same language and the people were then scattered across the earth. Those in Babylon sinned against God by trying to make a name for themselves, and their punishment was that they would no longer be unified. As God began His process of creating a people for Himself, He looked to the most unlikely of people. Not only was Abram from a region that worshiped pagan gods but he was also from Babylon, the place where the people sinned against God and from which they were scattered.

VERSE 30 / At the end of this lineage, one member of the family receives a more personal note: Sarai is unable to have children. This is emphasized twice, first that Sarai **“was unable to conceive”** and second that **“she did not have a child.”** Barrenness was an unfortunate and culturally dishonorable circumstance in the Old Testament. Women contributed significantly to society through producing children to carry on their husbands’ lineage. Sarai’s state meant she could not do this—she could not produce a child, let alone a son, to carry on the family line of Abram. This would have significant implications for the promises that God would make to Abram in the next chapter.

But for Sarai, how could she possibly fulfill God’s call to be fruitful and multiply without children (Gen. 1:28; 9:1,7)? Over and over again in Scripture, we see God take the barren or childless woman and turn her sorrow into joy. God, in fact, promised that even she who cannot bear children will have much reason to rejoice (Isa. 54:1-3; cf. 49:20-21). Blessing the earth may come through raising children in the knowledge of God for many, but for all of us, whether or not we have children, blessing the earth comes through sharing the gospel and producing spiritual children who then go and share the gospel themselves—until the knowledge of God covers the earth like water covers the sea (Hab. 2:14).

POINT 2

GOD PROMISES A NEW PEOPLE THROUGH ABRAM (GEN. 12:1-3).

NOTES

1 The LORD said to Abram: Go from your land, your relatives, and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **2** I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 12:1-3** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to explain the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God called Abram to leave everything he knew—**land, relatives,** and his **father's house**—to follow Him to a new land of promise.

DISCUSS: What are some things God has called you to leave behind in order to obey Him in faith? (a life of sin to receive salvation in Christ; leaving extended family to pursue God's call in a ministry and/or vocation; put away the worldly idea of the "good life" to sacrifice financially for others; leaving your comfort zone to go on a mission trip, teach a Bible study, or share the gospel)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 2-3** commentary to explain the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God's promises are trustworthy: He will bring **blessing** to the **earth** through Abram—a step closer to fulfilling the promise of Genesis 3:15.

TRANSITION: At the outset of his relationship with the Lord, Abram believed and obeyed and went. But some years later, Abram experienced some doubts because he still had not yet received the blessing of a child.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / God called Abram to leave everything he knew. The structure of this first verse moves from the general to the specific. **3** Specifically, God called Abram to leave behind the following:

- **Land:** This was the surrounding area Abram called “home.” As we know, this area was a pagan land, full of those who worshiped false gods.
- **Relatives:** In the Old Testament, extended families all lived together in villages, if not homes. All of Abram’s distant cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and the like would have been part of the community he was called to leave.
- **Father’s house:** Perhaps the most severe sacrifice, to leave his father’s house meant Abram would lose financial security, title, and most other comforts.

But God did not just call Abram from something, He also called Abram to something. The promise of land did not come with detailed descriptions of where this land would be, what it would look like, or how long it would take to get there. But the land is promised—God will show Abram the land.

VERSES 2-3 / After the promise of land, God emphasized His promise with five different “I will” statements:

“I will make you into a great nation.” This first promise from God required descendants. We already know Abram’s wife was barren, yet God promised to make Abram into a great nation. This seemed impossible, but God was stating here that He would make a people for Himself through Abram. Abram, whose name means “exalted father,” would be another Adam figure, following Noah (9:1-7). Adam was the father of all humankind, and Abram would be the father of God’s people.

“I will bless you.” God’s promise of blessing must have been a great comfort to Abram, who was called to leave his home. What Abram didn’t know, however, was that this blessing God promised would come through Abram’s seed (Gen. 17:7; see Gal. 3:16). The

blessing would be the Messiah, and this promise was completely fulfilled in Jesus.

“I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.” The promise of a great name stands in contrast to what took place at the Tower of Babylon when the people sought to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4). When pride was the motivation for a great name, the people were punished since they sought after fame by their own means. Abram, however, received the promise of a great name as a gift from God. He did not do anything to earn this great name except believe and obey. Additionally, God promised that Abram would not just receive a blessing but would be a blessing. It would be through Abram that God’s people are blessed—a blessing that extends to all the world, the blessing of Jesus Christ.

“I will bless those who bless you.” God promised that all who blessed Abram would also be blessed by God. This was a protective promise but also illustrates a larger theological truth: Those who bless Abram may become part of God’s people and receive Yahweh as their God.

“I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt.” Alternately, those who rejected the blessing of Abram also rejected God and would not become part of His people. As Abram went forth carrying God’s blessing, there would be some who despised and scorned that blessing. In response, God would curse them as their sins deserve.

Repetition is always a sign of emphasis. God stated “I will” five times in verses 2-3, making His promises absolute and sure. Each of these “I will” statements led to the declaration that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through Abram. The Genesis 3:15 promise was one step closer to fulfillment. God’s ultimate promise is to bring about universal blessing for the world, and He will accomplish this through the nation of Abram.

POINT 3

GOD USES IMPERFECT PEOPLE (GEN. 15:1-6,17).

1 After these events, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield; your reward will be very great. **2** But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what can you give me, since I am childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” **3** Abram continued, “Look, you have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house will be my heir.” **4** Now the word of the LORD came to him: “This one will not be your heir; instead, one who comes from your own body will be your heir.” **5** He took him outside and said, “Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “Your offspring will be that numerous.” **6** Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. ... **17** When the sun had set and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch appeared and passed between the divided animals.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 15:1-6** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-6** commentary to emphasize the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God grants righteousness to those who **believe** in Him. God’s people are those with the **faith** of Abram.

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #80: *People of God:* Scripture describes the **church** as “the people of God” (2 Cor. 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of **Christ**. The term “church” is used in two senses—of individual local churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God’s ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

DISCUSS: How can we, as imperfect people, grow in faith and believe that God will keep His promises to us? (read the Bible, which tells of God’s faithfulness to His people; confess our fears and sins to one another to be comforted by God’s grace through one another; pray for faith and ask others to pray; meet with the church regularly; read about faithful believers from the past who had great faith; seek relationships that spur us on toward faith)

EXPLAIN: Read **Genesis 15:17** from your Bible or this guide, and use the **VERSE 17** commentary to explain the covenant ceremony and the symbolism of Abram’s vision—God guaranteed His covenant promises on the basis of Himself.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / The only reason someone would say, “**Do not be afraid,**” to another is if he or she knew the person had a reason to be afraid. God provided specific statements about His character to assure Abram why he should not fear. God immediately promised protection (“**shield**”) and provision (“**reward**”). This raises the question: What did Abram fear? Why did he need the assurance of God’s protection and provision?

Certainly some of this could have been related to the battle Abram had just won (Gen. 14), but Abram’s response to God gives the reader a better understanding of Abram’s fear. In this first instance of dialogue between Abram and God, Abram expressed his hopelessness about his offspring. God already promised an heir and land, the very provision and protection Abram longed to receive. But here we see that Abram was still childless, and the only solution he saw was that a servant in his household would receive his inheritance. The fear was valid—Abram’s wife was barren and there was no child to bring about the great nation God promised He would create through Abram. God again answered Abram’s fears with His promise: Eliezer, Abram’s servant, would not be the heir God promised. Rather, God made His promise all the more clear—Abram’s promised heir would come from Abram’s seed.

VERSES 5-6 / God made it abundantly clear that Abram’s descendants would multiply beyond his wildest dreams. At God’s direction, Abram stood and looked at the open sky full of stars, an unfathomable number. The point: God promised Abram would have an uncountable number of offspring.

What, then, was Abram’s response? No longer was he overcome by fear and disbelief. Abram believed God. Abram knew that God’s word was sure and everything He said was true. He believed that God would do what He said He would do.

Abram was not immune from human feelings of fear, disappointment, and unmet

expectations (see 15:2-3). But Abram expressed these feelings to God, and God responded with His gracious and clear promise. After hearing God’s promise, Abram believed, and it was in this faith that God then blessed Abram with righteousness. It was not by works that Abram was considered righteous, but as we see in the New Testament, Abram is the example of saving faith in God (Rom. 4:1-5). As such, Abram is the father of a much larger family than his physical one—he is the father of all who believe in Jesus for salvation, in other words, the church (Rom. 4:23-25; Gal. 3:29).

VERSE 17 / God’s word was enough to seal the promise He made to Abram, yet He went one step further and made a covenant with Abram. A covenant was a binding legal contract of sorts. Typically it involved two parties who both made agreements to uphold their end of the covenant. God’s covenant with Abram, though, was rather strange. Instead of being a two-sided agreement where both parties have something on the line, God made an entirely one-sided covenant, taking the burden of keeping the covenant upon Himself.

In a vision, Abram saw a “**smoking fire pot**” and “**flaming torch**” pass through two rows of divided animals that he had cut and arranged as the Lord requested (Gen. 15:9-21). The smoking pot and flaming torch represented God (see Ex. 13:21-22), and He alone passed through these divided dead animals. This practice was common for covenants in Abram’s day. Both parties would pass through divided animals, thus symbolizing that if either of them did not uphold the covenant, they would be like these animals—dead. For God to be the only party to pass through the animals, He was stating to Abram that He would keep His word based only on Himself. An astonishing covenant like this shows the seriousness and surety of God’s promise to Abram. God is the One who is solely responsible in this covenant.

MY RESPONSE

Because we are brought into Abram's family of faith through Jesus Christ, we live as a united people used by God to proclaim the greatest blessing—salvation—to the world.

HEAD:

God is faithful to fulfill His promises to us. We do not need to be spectacular people with advanced degrees or extensive knowledge; we do not need to have a flawless family; and we do not need to have our lives in perfect order. We are simply called to believe that God will uphold His Word to us no matter the circumstances (Heb. 10:23).

How will you address the areas in your life where you are doubting God or working to earn your salvation instead of trusting in Jesus?

HEART:

By faith in God, we can see and trust that He upholds His promise of salvation for us. Through many generations of descendants after Abram, God brought forth the promised blessing of Jesus. This promised Son lived a perfect life, died on a cross bearing the punishment of our sins, and was raised to life so that we might be brought into God's kingdom forever. Like Abram, we are called simply to have faith to receive this promised blessing of salvation. God has upheld His Word for centuries, demonstrating His faithfulness to us even when we are not faithful. We can trust Him with our lives, both present and eternal.

When you are tempted to sin and disbelieve God's character and faithfulness to you, how can you remind yourself of God's trustworthiness and eternal commitment to you?

HANDS:

God's promise to Abram was not just for Abram's blood descendants. Rather, it is for those as numerous as the stars. God's promise of salvation comes to all who have faith, like Abram. These are the true children of Abram—they are the ones who believe and trust in the faithful God and in His perfect Son. It is remarkable that God offers salvation so freely! All who believe in Jesus belong to Him and have a place in His kingdom. No one is outside the reach of the gospel.

Who in your life needs to hear about the promised Savior, Jesus Christ, and how will you encourage them to have faith in Him?

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Abraham leaned wholly on the promise of God and the God of the promise. We are not saved by making promises to God but by believing the promises of God."⁴

—Warren Wiersbe
(1929-2019)

POINT 1: GOD CHOOSES TO WORK THROUGH UNLIKELY PEOPLE (GEN. 11:27-30).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“In Jeremiah (24:5; 25:12; 50:1,8,35,45; 51:24,54) and Ezekiel (1:3; 12:13; 23:15,23), the ‘Chaldeans’ are those who live in Babylon and who have taken God’s people into captivity. So it is in harmony with the view of these prophets that the author of Genesis already puts Abraham’s call in the context of ‘Ur of the Chaldeans,’ drawing a line connecting the call of Abraham (12:1-3) with the dispersion of Babylon (11:1-9) and thus making Abraham prefigure all those future exiles who, in faith, wait for the return to the Promised Land. In much the same way the prophet Micah pictures the remnant who await the return from exile as descendants of Abraham faithfully trusting in God’s promise (Mic. 7:18-20).” **5**

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Genealogies are something of interest to many of us. Think back on the first time you became interested in your lineage. Maybe you heard a fascinating story from a grandparent that made you want to know more. Maybe you wanted to learn what your last name means and it set you on a journey to uncover your ancestral history. Or maybe you took one of the genetics tests to learn more about your heritage. We tend to care about our genealogy or ancestry because it gives us information about those who went before us and where we are from. This deeply personal nature of a genealogy was even more important to those in Abram’s time, and remained important in Jesus’ day as well. Both Abram’s and Jesus’ genealogies were full of people we would never expect. Abram’s lineage served false gods (Josh. 24:2-3). Jesus’ lineage was full of shocking people as well (Matt. 1:1-17). The men and women who made up the genealogies of the most important figures in God’s story were ungodly and sinful, and some surprisingly were barren and even Gentiles, non-Jews. Through these lineages, we see that God does not require perfect people to accomplish His will. Rather, He chooses whomever He wants to bring about His plan, even a most unlikely man (1) married to a barren woman and (2) from a family that worshiped false gods (Gen. 11-27-30). Even that kind of man is used for God’s glory.

EXTRA

POINT 2: GOD PROMISES A NEW PEOPLE THROUGH ABRAM (GEN. 12:1-3).

+ COMMENTARY

“Did God call Abram from Ur or from Haran to leave Mesopotamia for Canaan? According to 11:31, it was Abram’s father Terah who decided to take his family from Ur in Mesopotamia to Canaan, though we are not told why. The context of verses 1-3 suggests that Abram was in Haran when God summoned him to Canaan. According to Stephen in Acts 7:2 God appeared to Abram in Mesopotamia ‘before he settled in Haran’ and called him to leave for a new land. If God had spoken to Abram while Abram was in Ur, this could have been part of Terah’s motive for moving his family. God could then have repeated His summons to Abram to proceed to Canaan after his father had died in Haran (Gen. 11:32).” **6**

+ COMMENTARY

“Wherever the call was issued, its substance was the same: he was to leave and to go. He was to leave three things—his country, his people, and his father’s household (**12:1b**). These are the very things that give anyone a sense of security but Abram is told to leave them. He is not told specifically where he is to go, but is told that his destination will be his inheritance from the Lord. He need have no fear or anxiety about where he will end up, for the Lord’s presence will be there for him.” **7**

+ ILLUSTRATION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a man who understood the costly nature of obedience to God. He looked at the German Reich Church and stood in opposition to their ideology. Bonhoeffer rejected the practices of the Nazi Regime, and this eventually cost him his life. In his book *Discipleship*, he wrote about the costs of obedience to Jesus—clearly a topic he took seriously in his own life. He wrote:

“Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death. Whether we, like the first disciples, must leave house and vocation to follow him, or whether, with Luther, we leave the monastery for a secular vocation, in both cases the same death awaits us, namely, death in Jesus Christ, the death of our old self caused by the call of Jesus.” **8**

All through the Bible, and for centuries after, God calls men and women to obedience. For all of them, and for all of us, this is a call to die. Abram faced this same call to give up all that he knew to follow God’s call. It cost him everything. Though Abram did not yet know the name of Jesus, he knew that Yahweh, the Lord Most High, was asking for obedience. He believed God was trustworthy, and though all the specifics of what it would cost for Abram to follow God were not laid out, he obeyed. If you are a follower of Jesus, He has called you to obey Him. Obedience to God will always be full of sacrifice. This is not because God is unloving but because He knows what is best and knows what is good. God demands full allegiance, and in turn, He promises the blessing of salvation and eternal life with Him. A promise like that is worth everything we have, even our very lives.

POINT 3: GOD USES IMPERFECT PEOPLE (GEN. 15:1-6,17).

+ COMMENTARY

“Abram’s complaints show that a person of faith at times feels keen disappointment and frustration. Nevertheless, such a person is not afraid to express that feeling to God. On hearing God’s answer, Abram had to decide whether to continue to exercise faith or not. Now as then, God often demands that one maintain faith in the face of improbable circumstances in which belief appears ridiculous. Such was Abram’s experience. If he had told one of his Canaanite neighbors about God’s promise, his words would have sounded incredible. Nevertheless, God wanted him to believe the promise despite the physical improbabilities of its being fulfilled.”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

“God reiterates and specifies his promise. The heir will not simply be a legal heir, he will be the offspring of Abram’s own flesh (which of course is the heart cry of anyone from a tribal society). Moreover, through this child Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the night sky. I first traveled to Israel in the winter of 1992. My entire experience from start to finish could be summarized in a line from an old John Denver song, ‘coming home to a place I’d never been before.’ I loved every hour of it. But the hour I loved the best was somewhere around 4:00 am, halfway up Mount Sinai. The goal of the hike was to reach the summit for sunrise. Being more than eager, I forged ahead of my group with a few friends. While trying to navigate a place where the path was particularly steep and narrow (and in the dark and ice a bit frightening), we stopped to look behind us. And what a sight we saw. There, high above the plain, without another human in sight or earshot, we saw the desert sky. I’d never been in a desert at 4:00 am before, so I didn’t know that without streetlights and car lights the sky looks as though it is encrusted with diamonds. I didn’t know that when you are perched on the side of a mountain it seems as though you can reach out and touch them. I didn’t know. Now I can’t read Genesis 15:5 without picturing that night sky in the southern reaches of the Sinai: ‘Count the stars, Abram, if you can ... So shall your descendants be.’ It is particularly interesting to us New Testament types that the narrator resolves the tension in Genesis 15 between Yahweh’s promise and Abram’s unbelief by the concluding phrase: ‘Then he [Abram] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.’ Because when we turn our eyes to the New Testament we find that in Galatians 3:1-9 Paul states that what was asked of Abram is exactly what is asked of new covenant believers as well. Hmm ... maybe this old and new covenant thing is not as drastically different as I once thought.”¹⁰

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A PRIEST OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's servant rescues a captured relative (Gen. 14:8-16).
2. God's servant is blessed by a priest to God Most High (Gen. 14:17-20a).
3. God's servant tithes to a priest to God Most High (Gen. 14:20b; Heb. 7:1-10).

Background Passages: Genesis 14; Hebrews 5-7

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Abram tithed to Melchizedek, a priest to God Most High, which would point to a greater priesthood than the one that was to come through Aaron.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Abram's encounter with Melchizedek, a priest to God Most High, points to a greater priest who would come, Jesus Christ. Jesus would bless all the families of the earth through His sacrifice on the cross so that all who believe might be saved.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have been given so great a high priest in Jesus, we live as priests in our land, pointing others to the sacrifice of Jesus and interceding before the Father for their salvation.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: From the moment the first two people sinned, a promise has weaved its way through the story of Genesis: the promise of an “offspring” (Gen. 3:15)—a descendant of the first humans who would defeat the serpent that led them to sin against God. Generations later, we are introduced to Abram, whom God promised He would bless and through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). God made a covenant with Abram that would never be broken and further confirmed it by a priest of God Most High.

INSTRUCT: Ask your group members to think back to a time they had to be rescued from some kind of trouble or difficult situation.

DISCUSS: **What did you have to be rescued from, and what was the potential, or actual, cost of your rescue?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: In Genesis 14, we see the promise that God made to Abram begin to come to fruition, yet ultimately the promised blessing would come in Jesus. In this session, we’re going to see how a victory, a blessing, and a tithe to Melchizedek point to the priesthood of Jesus.

POINT 1

GOD'S SERVANT RESCUES A CAPTURED RELATIVE (GEN. 14:8-16).

NOTES

8 Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out and lined up for battle in the Siddim Valley **9** against King Chedorlaomer of Elam, King Tidal of Goiim, King Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar—four kings against five. **10** Now the Siddim Valley contained many asphalt pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, but the rest fled to the mountains. **11** The four kings took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food and went on. **12** They also took Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, for he was living in Sodom, and they went on. **13** One of the survivors came and told Abram the Hebrew, who lived near the oaks belonging to Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshcol and the brother of Aner. They were bound by a treaty with Abram. **14** When Abram heard that his relative had been taken prisoner, he assembled his 318 trained men, born in his household, and they went in pursuit as far as Dan. **15** And he and his servants deployed against them by night, defeated them, and pursued them as far as Hobah to the north of Damascus. **16** He brought back all the goods and also his relative Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the other people.

READ: On account of the difficult names in this passage, read aloud **Genesis 14:8-16** from your own Bible, or this guide.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 8-16** commentary to explain the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

With concern for his relatives, Abram's small force pursued and defeated the armies of four kings who had just beaten the armies of five kings. God proved His **promise**, His **strength**, and His **glory** through Abram's victory and recovery of Lot's family and possessions.

DISCUSS: What are some ways God has proven Himself on your behalf when circumstances seemed stacked against you? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: Abram's upset victory to rescue Lot led to a surprise meeting with and blessing from one of Scripture's most enigmatic figures.

COMMENTARY

After Abram arrived in the promised land that God showed him, Abram and his nephew, Lot, separated to keep the peace between their herdsman. Given the choice of direction to go, Lot took up residence in the lush land east of the Jordan River, but this land was also overflowing with wickedness and would have some serious implications for Lot's life and family (Gen. 13:5-13). While Lot made some unwise choices, and certainly sinful ones, the New Testament witness about Lot describes him as a "righteous man" surrounded by wickedness, out of which God rescued him (2 Pet. 2:6-10).

VERSES 8-9 / In Genesis 14, we begin to see the promise of blessing from God to Abram become a reality. In Genesis 14:1-7, we're introduced to a king by the name of Chedorlaomer (Kədarla'ōmer), king of one of the most powerful nations in his day. He, along with three other kings, set out both to punish several nations that rebelled against him and to seize all of their possessions, which included their fertile land.

Among the nations that rebelled against King Chedorlaomer was the king of Sodom. Sodom was full of wickedness (Gen. 13:13), yet Lot decided to take up residence in that city. This placed Lot in harm's way as King Chedorlaomer made his way to Sodom to punish them. Being in the world but not of it does not keep the righteous from trials and hardship.

VERSES 10-16 / King Chedorlaomer successfully conquered both Sodom and Gomorrah. In his conquest, he and the kings with him took the possessions of the land as well as anyone who wasn't able to escape through the Valley of Siddim. Amongst the people in the city of Sodom who didn't escape was Lot. He, his family, and all of his possessions were taken by Chedorlaomer as the spoils of war.

Everything in verses 1-11 has been setting us up for what we see in verse 12. Here, King Chedorlaomer bites off far more than he can chew. Not because Lot was a formidable

opponent. Not even because Abram was such a mighty force. Chedorlaomer meets his match and loses because the God of Abram, Lot's uncle, is the mightiest force.

In verse 13, one of the members of Lot's household escapes from capture and goes straight to Abram to tell him what had happened with King Chedorlaomer. As soon as Abram heard that his nephew had been taken prisoner, he sprung into action.

God had promised to make Abram into a great nation, but that promise from God was far from a fulfillment at this point for Abram. In fact, at this point in his life, Abram had yet to have a child born to him and Sarai. The 318 men born in his household who fought for him were more than likely his servants, servants whom he trained to defend his household. With these 318 men, Abram pursued King Chedorlaomer and the fighting forces of three other kings in order to rescue his nephew.

Though likely outnumbered, Abram was successful in his mission to rescue his nephew from the four kings. Not only did he free Lot and his family, he reacquired all of his nephew's possessions, along with the people and possessions from the other conquered territories.

Looking at this story, it seems almost impossible for such a small army of men to defeat the likes of four kings. But that's exactly what happened. Abram and his 318 men not only defeated the four kings but they caused them to retreat (14:15). This victory is one that could only have been achieved in the strength that the Lord provides (see Judg. 7 for a similar military victory that displayed God's power).

If God would have allowed Abram to go into the enemy's camp and sneak his nephew out of it, that would have been sufficient to prove the glory of God, but God took it quite a bit further and returned everything that was taken, including Lot, his family, and the spoils of five conquered kingdoms.

POINT 2

GOD'S SERVANT IS BLESSED BY A PRIEST TO GOD MOST HIGH (GEN. 14:17-20A).

NOTES

17 After Abram returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the Shaveh Valley (that is, the King's Valley). **18** Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest to God Most High. **19** He blessed him and said: Abram is blessed by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, **20a** and blessed be God Most High who has handed over your enemies to you.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read **Genesis 14:17-20a** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 17-18** commentary to expound on the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Melchizedek is an obscure figure in the Bible, but he is significant, in part, because he was both a **king** and a **priest** to God Most High.

DISCUSS: Why might we struggle to grasp Melchizedek's significance in Scripture? (the Old Testament roles and rules about kings and priests are unknown to us; we expect importance to parallel the amount of space given to telling a person's story in Scripture; we don't understand the variety of ways the Old Testament points forward to Jesus)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19-20A** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Melchizedek's blessing of Abram reinforced the promise that God made to Abram: He would be a great nation to bless the earth because God was for him, giving him **victory** over his **enemies**.

DISCUSS: What are some ways God continues to bless us? (the sun continues to rise and the rain continues to fall; in general, we have everything we need; the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world; God is patient in His judgment so that people will repent of their sin and find eternal life in Jesus; for believers, we have God's Word that teaches us about God's love and care for His children; believers also have the witness of the Holy Spirit and the encouragement of the church to trust in God's care)

TRANSITION: Abram's greatest blessing upon the world would come in his descendant Jesus Christ, whom we see foreshadowed in the person and ministry of the king-priest Melchizedek.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 17-18 / Melchizedek is an obscure figure in the Bible. He's only mentioned in three books in the Bible—Genesis, Psalms, and Hebrews—and though he is an Old Testament figure, we learn more about Melchizedek in the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews than we do from the Old Testament's references to him. Still, we must first look at Melchizedek's brief appearance in Genesis to understand who he was and his purpose.

Melchizedek was the king of Salem, and most Bible scholars agree that Salem is what we now call Jerusalem, the same city where Jesus was crucified. Melchizedek also was a priest. Jesus is the only other person whom God anointed to be both a king and a priest. According to God's law, these two roles were mutually exclusive. For example, King Uzziah, also known as Azariah, reigned over God's people, and the Bible says he did what was right in the sight of the Lord (2 Chron. 26:3-4). But toward the end of his life, as he strengthened his kingdom, he became arrogant and acted as a priest. He burnt incense to the Lord in the temple, and the Lord struck him with a plague because only the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe, was commissioned by God to do such things (26:16-21). Priests and kings in Israel descended from two different tribes.

Melchizedek, however, preceded the Law of Moses and was not constrained by this distinction. As we will see in the next point, Melchizedek's priestly kingship is the order from which Jesus' priestly kingship comes. Another important fact about Melchizedek is that he was not associated with Abram, the father of the people of God, prior to this occasion, yet this king was a priest to the one true God.

VERSES 19-20A / Melchizedek's only recorded words to Abram after the victory over the four kings was a blessing that simultaneously declared that Abram was already blessed by God and offered praise to God, who keeps His promises.

Melchizedek used El Elyon as the name for God. El Elyon is the personal Hebrew name for God that emphasizes the power and might of God. **1** It was not the might of Abram that brought Lot back home but the might of God Most High—El Elyon. The victory Abram “won” was divinely orchestrated. Melchizedek's blessing reiterated what God had already promised: God's favor upon Abram resulted in victory over his enemies (12:2-3).

At the beginning of verse 20, Melchizedek blesses God. To bless God is to acknowledge God's goodness. It is to acknowledge that God really is the giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas. 1:17). It is a declaration of trust in God's provision and care. If you go back to verse 14 of this chapter, you'll notice that nowhere in Abram's response to the news of his nephew's capture was he concerned for the possessions that his nephew had lost, and rightfully so.

Abram's primary concern was the rescue of his relatives—the value of human lives. God had blessed both Abram and Lot. They both had so much that the two had to separate in order to prevent quarreling over land and possessions between their servants (Gen. 13:5-7). Though this was not the primary purpose of Melchizedek's blessing God, it deserves mention. For that which was taken away was restored because of God's goodness. (It should be noted that God's favor is not necessarily tied to possessions or the lack/loss thereof. God provides for our needs and we are called to be content in whatever circumstances God places us; see Phil. 4:10-20.)

Melchizedek's blessing reinforced the promise that God made to Abram: God blessed Abram, and he would bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3). The primary way that Abram would bless the world would not be through liberation from political forces, as was the case for his nephew, Lot, though that will be included. Rather, Abram would bless the world through Jesus the Christ, the One who would come to save the world from sin once and for all.

POINT 3

GOD'S SERVANT TITHES TO A PRIEST TO GOD MOST HIGH (GEN. 14:20B; HEB. 7:1-10).

NOTES

Genesis 14:20b And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

.....
Hebrews 7:1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High, met Abraham and blessed him as he returned from defeating the kings, **2** and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means king of righteousness, then also, king of Salem, meaning king of peace. **3** Without father, mother, or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. **4** Now consider how great this man was: even Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the plunder to him. **5** The sons of Levi who receive the priestly office have a command according to the law to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their brothers and sisters—though they have also descended from Abraham. **6** But one without this lineage collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises. **7** Without a doubt, the inferior is blessed by the superior. **8** In the one case, men who will die receive a tenth, but in the other case, Scripture testifies that he lives. **9** And in a sense Levi himself, who receives a tenth, has paid a tenth through Abraham, **10** for he was still within his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read **Genesis 14:20b** and **Hebrews 7:1-10** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **GENESIS 14:20B** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

A tithe is a **tenth**, a representative gift acknowledging God's **ownership** of everything and declaring trust in God's continued **provision**

EXPLAIN: Use the **HEBREWS 7:1-10** commentary to explain the following doctrine (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #53: *Christ as Priest:* As our Great High Priest, Jesus accomplishes the work of **reconciling** us to God. He is the One whose perfect **righteousness** is presented to the Father for our justification. He is the One who intercedes for us before the Father (Heb. 7:25; 9:24) and **prays** for us to remain faithful (Luke 22:31-32; John 17).

DISCUSS: **What are some ways we can honor Jesus Christ as our Great High Priest?** (recognize that we enter God's presence by virtue of Jesus' righteousness, not our own; pray in Jesus' name; confess and repent of sin; trust in the forgiveness Jesus grants us through faith in His death and resurrection)

THE TITHE

As prescribed in the Law of Moses, the Israelites were to give sacrificial tithes, a tenth of resources or income, to Yahweh, and these tithes supported the Levites, the tribe of priests (see Lev. 27:30-32; Num. 18:21-30; Matt. 23:23).

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Likewise, in the priest Melchizedek, we see the sacrament of the sacrifice of the Lord prefigured according to what the divine Scripture testifies ... For who is more a priest of the most high God than our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered sacrifice to God the Father and offered the very same thing that Melchizedek had offered, bread and wine, that is, actually, his body and blood?"²

—Cyprian (d. 258)

COMMENTARY

GENESIS 14:20B / Melchizedek's blessing of Abram included praise to God for who He is and a reminder that it was ultimately God who gave Abram the victory. In response, Abram gave a tithe, a tenth, of everything he had to Melchizedek to acknowledge God's protection and also to acknowledge that everything he had belonged to God. This representative gift to God's representative priest-king was a declaration of trust in God Most High's continued provision for Abram and his household.

HEBREWS 7:1-3 / The brief Genesis passage about Melchizedek leads to one reference to Melchizedek in Psalm 110:4 and then some significant space devoted to him in Hebrews 5–7. In both of these places, however, the emphasis is not on Melchizedek per se but about the One who would come after him.

As stated earlier, Melchizedek's dual kingship and priesthood foreshadowed Christ's. First, being a priest in the order of Melchizedek (5:5-6), Jesus is a high priest forever (6:20).

The author of Hebrews here points out that Melchizedek's name means **“king of righteousness.”** Melchizedek is also the **“king of peace,”** as Salem, his city, means “peace” in Hebrew. Righteousness and peace are eternal qualities that ought to define anyone who would come after him. Whereas Melchizedek reflects these attributes by name, Jesus embodies them by nature.

- **“Righteousness”** means to be right before God. As our ultimate and final high priest, Christ is the only one who can give us right standing before God. And the right standing before God that Christ offers gives us peace before God.
- The **“peace”** that Christ brings is both the removal of hostility (the removal of the wrath of God against sin) and a state of being (that which says, “Even though there is chaos all around me, I am okay because I belong to God”).

Jesus, as the Son of God, made direct relationship with the Father possible. He did this by becoming like us in every way, except for sin, so that He might offer Himself as the only sacrifice to make true atonement for our sins (2:17; 4:14-15). Through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, we receive His perfect righteousness and peace with God.

Though Jesus came long after Melchizedek, the inspired author of Hebrews recognized that the inspired author of Genesis described Melchizedek, or better yet, didn't describe him, so that he might resemble the eternal **“Son of God.”** In a book of the Bible that thrives on genealogies, here is presented an important man without reference to father or mother, birth or death. His priesthood seems to have no end because there is no death or successor. And that's precisely the way he prefigures Jesus, the resurrected priest-king who lives forever to make intercession for us (7:24-25).

HEBREWS 7:4-10 / The second way Melchizedek points us to Christ relates to the tithe he received from Abram. The original audience of the Book of Genesis, ancient Israel, lived under the direction of God's law, which included the priesthood of the Levites and the command for tithes to be given to them. The tithes honored God and supported His appointed servants.

But as important as the Levitical priesthood was for Israel, Melchizedek's priesthood was even more so, both for Israel and the world. Without a command, Abram gave his tithe to Melchizedek, and since Levi would come much later, it was as if Levi, who received tithes, also gave them to Melchizedek through Abram. And Abram, as great as he was, being the forefather of the people of God, was blessed by someone greater than him. This divinely orchestrated meeting points to the reality that Abram's life, and that of his descendants, was meant to give way to someone greater—the promised Son who would forever be a king and priest to save the world.

MY RESPONSE

Because we have been given so great a high priest in Jesus, we live as priests in our land, pointing others to the sacrifice of Jesus and interceding before the Father for their salvation.

NOTES

HEAD:

God is the Creator of heaven and earth. As such, He is in control of every situation in our lives. At times, God may lead us to do something that seems impossible. But like Abram and his small band, as long as we go in the strength that God provides, God will always give us the victory He desires. As our Great High Priest and King, Jesus ultimately brings about the victory that we need in order to be reconciled to the Father. The victory that we receive in the gospel through of the work of Jesus is the victory that our world needs.

How does realizing that Jesus is both your Great High Priest and King change your understanding of the gospel?

HEART:

Melchizedek gave glory to God for the victory He gave to Abram. While Abram's victory was great, having rescued his nephew, Lot, we have something that Abram could have only wished for. We have the rest of the story. Abram and Melchizedek both foreshadowed the coming of the Savior, but we are on the other side of the cross. The stories in the Old Testament, coupled with what we know from the New Testament, give us a more well-rounded picture of what the Lord has been working toward, namely, the coming Savior who shall one day return to defeat His enemies and restore all things.

What are some ways you will bless the Lord because of the great victory over sin that He has accomplished for us through Jesus?

HANDS:

Abram's tithe to Melchizedek could easily be overlooked in a reading of the events in Genesis 14, but this gift represents what the story as a whole communicates about God's desire for us—that we give Him our full and complete allegiance, trusting Him to provide for our every need according to His riches. Today, this means giving of our treasure as well as our time and talents to see the gospel advanced in our local communities and around the world.

What are some specific ways you will give to support the mission to proclaim the gospel of Jesus both locally and globally?

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"The Bible recounts lives set in the ever-present context of relationships. And behind all the lives looms the Life, the Story, the great Lover, who from before time has envisioned and worked for a relationship with you and me."³

—George Guthrie

POINT 1: GOD'S SERVANT RESCUES A CAPTURED RELATIVE (GEN. 14:8-16).

+ COMMENTARY

“Abraham may be the most important character in Genesis. The Bible mentions him 115 times outside of Genesis and presents him in the New Testament as the outstanding Old Testament example of justification by faith. Many people have observed that his life was characterized by two things—tents and altars. Together these symbols reflect his pilgrimage in the world, controlled and energized by his constant worship of God. But Abram was also characterized by crisis after crisis. The battles of Genesis 14 reflect this clearly. This is the first war mentioned in the Bible. Four powerful tribes from the northeast came to punish rebellious tribes in the south that included the five cities of the plain, including Sodom, Lot’s new home ... This invaded land belonged to the country God promised to Abram. All this occurred on low ground that **was full of tar pits**. The Dead Sea is the lowest body of water on earth (1,300 feet below sea level). One can still see lumps of asphalt floating in the southern end of this body of water. The residents of Sodom and Gomorrah abandoned their cities before invading kings plundered **all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food**. The account clearly tells us the battle was a rout. Lot now lived in the city, whereas in 13:12 he had only “pitched his tents near Sodom.” This offers an important key to understanding this chapter. Abram was content to let the inhabitants of the land do what they wished while he lived in peace. But now they had forcibly involved him by taking Lot away along with the captives.”⁴

+ COMMENTARY

“Abram’s character has been tested by obedience to God’s call, by the severe famine, and by a family dispute. Now he is tested by the capture of Lot, when Sodom and Gomorrah are captured and plundered by a group of collaborating kings from the east. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee the battle; Abram, on the other hand, proactively takes his men and sets out to rescue the captives. This account highlights Abram’s trust in the Lord as Abram leaves the Promised Land to rescue Lot. It also highlights God’s protection of Abram as the one through whose descendants the covenant promises will be fulfilled.”⁵

EXTRA

POINT 2: GOD'S SERVANT IS BLESSED BY A PRIEST TO GOD MOST HIGH (GEN. 14:17-20A).

+ COMMENTARY

“**Melchizedek** (which means ‘king of righteousness’; see Heb. 7:2) generously provides a meal for the returning victors. **Salem** is possibly a shortened version of ‘Jerusalem’ (see Ps. 76:2) and is related to *shalom*, the Hebrew word for ‘peace’ (see Heb. 7:2). **He was priest of God Most High**. Although very little is known about Melchizedek, he provides an interesting example of a priest-king linked to Jerusalem. There appears to have been an expectation that later kings of Jerusalem should resemble him (see Ps. 110:4). The book of Hebrews presents Jesus Christ, from the royal line of David, as belonging to the ‘order of Melchizedek’ and therefore superior to the Levitical priests (Heb. 5:5-10; 6:20–7:17). **6**

+ COMMENTARY

“For Abram the harder battle begins, for there is a profound contrast between the two kings who come to meet him. Melchizedek, king and priest, his name and title expressive of the realm of right and good (see Heb. 7:2), offers him, in token, a simple sufficiency from God, pronounces an unspecified blessing (dwelling on the Giver, not the gift), and accepts costly tribute. All this is meaningful only to faith. The king of Sodom, on the other hand, makes a handsome and businesslike offer; its sole disadvantage is perceptible, again, only to faith. To these rival benefactors Abram signifies his Yes and his No, refusing to compromise his call. Such a climax shows what was truly at stake in this chapter of international events. The struggle of kings, the far-ranging armies and the spoil of a city are the small-change of the story; the crux is the faith or failure of one man. At this distance we can see that this is no artificial judgment. More hinged on this than on the most resounding victory or the fate of any kingdom.” **7**

+ ILLUSTRATION

“A Chicago bank once asked for a letter of recommendation on a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and others of Boston’s finest families. His recommendation was given without hesitation. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: ‘We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work.’ Neither is God a respecter of persons but uses those from every family, nation, and race who want to work for his kingdom.” **8**

Connect this story to that of Abram and Melchizedek: Abram was not chosen by God because he had amazing references on his resume or because of how awesome he was. In fact, Abram sinned greatly against God (see Gen. 16). But even so, Abram had the one thing on his “resume” that mattered most—a strong desire to be obedient to the Lord. It was because of his obedience that Melchizedek blessed him. And his obedience is the reason that God’s favor remained on him. And it was the same with Melchizedek. Melchizedek, being both a priest and king established by God, shows us that God is after every tribe, nation, and tongue.

POINT 3: GOD'S SERVANT TITHES TO A PRIEST TO GOD MOST HIGH (GEN. 14:20B; HEB. 7:1-10).

+ COMMENTARY

“Melchizedek plays a unique role in the Scriptures and the biblical story line, for he is a priest-king (7:1-3). As a priest-king he blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave him a tenth of the spoils. Melchizedek’s priesthood was unique, for it wasn’t based on a genealogy, and thus he was a perpetual priest. In this sense he was like Jesus, the Son of God. The greatness of Melchizedek is evident, for he received a tenth from Abraham and blessed Abraham (vv. 4-10), and the greater person blesses and receives gifts from the lesser. The Levitical priests who descended from Abraham also collected a tenth from fellow Israelites, but Melchizedek was superior to Levi as well, for Levi, so to speak, paid a tenth to Melchizedek. The logic is as follows: Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek, and Levi was a child of Abraham, and thus there is a sense in which Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek. The excellence of Melchizedek is also evident, for his priesthood never ends, for he is a living priest, whereas Levitical priests are constantly replaced since they die. The discussion on Melchizedek seems foreign to contemporary readers, but it is designed for a pastoral purpose. Since the Melchizedekian priesthood is clearly superior to the Levitical one, the readers must not abandon or forsake Jesus.”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

The American flag is an iconic symbol. It represents life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as well as freedom. The flag is used to display both American patriotism and rebellion as its parts represent America’s history. At times the American flag is flown at half-staff as a show of mourning across the nation. The flag is only meant to be flown at half-staff when someone of particular importance to the nation dies. As you can imagine, this usually is reserved for an American citizen. And yet, at times in America’s history, the flag has been flown at half-staff for people who were not citizens of the United States. One of those people was Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War II. He and the few others received this honor at their deaths because of their universal influence, not just in America but around the world.

Melchizedek was the only non-Jewish priest in the Bible to receive a tithe from an Israelite because he represented the universal influence that Jesus would have throughout the entire world. Melchizedek was not a Jew. In fact, we don’t know anything about his ethnic heritage. We don’t have his family background. We don’t know anything about when he was born or when he died. And yet, he received the gift that was later reserved for the Levitical priests in honor of their work for the Lord.

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A PROMISE TESTED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God provides the son of promise (Gen. 21:1-5).
2. God demands the sacrifice of the son of promise (Gen. 22:1-10).
3. God provides a substitute for the son of promise (Gen. 22:11-14).

Background Passages: Genesis 21–22; Hebrews 11:17-19

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God calls on His people to place a deep faith in Him, a faith that believes God can do the impossible.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, the long-awaited son of promise, because he believed that God could raise him from the dead (Heb. 11:19), but God provided a substitute at the last minute. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the beloved Son whom God the Father did not spare, the willing sacrifice God provided as a substitute to pay for our sin.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we have experienced God's resurrection power in Christ Jesus, we share the gospel with everyone, trusting that God can give new life to all who are spiritually dead.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: For years, Abram lived believing God’s promise that he would have many descendants—that he would become a great nation and through his offspring all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. God’s promise carried him through trials and troubles, though at times Abram unwisely tried to help the process along. God even changed Abram’s name as a sign of this promise, and Abram became Abraham. Through many long years, Abraham’s faith in God did not waver. And then one day, Abraham’s faith became sight.

DISCUSS: **How did you prepare for planned tests in school?** (didn’t prepare; just became anxious; studied regularly and daily; crammed the night before; developed a system for cheating)

PACK ITEM 12: TESTS OF FAITH: Pass out copies of this bookmark so group members will recognize that God’s tests are meant to help us grow stronger in our faith.

TRANSITION: Each and every day, our allegiance to God gets tested. We may see these tests coming or they may come as a surprise. These tests can take many forms. Some involve resisting temptation; others focus on our obedience, yet these distinctions are not mutually exclusive. For Abraham, one test in particular took him to the extreme of both. Would Abraham obey his God or would he succumb to the personal temptation to disregard the Lord’s command? Faith in God had sustained him to this point; would it be enough to carry him through his test?



POINT 1

GOD PROVIDES THE SON OF PROMISE (GEN. 21:1-5).

NOTES

1 The LORD came to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. **2** Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time God had told him. **3** Abraham named his son who was born to him—the one Sarah bore to him—Isaac. **4** When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him. **5** Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read **Genesis 21:1-5** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-2** commentary to explain the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Through many long years of God's **faithfulness**, and in spite of some moments and choices of **unfaithfulness** on Abraham and Sarah's part, the Lord fulfilled His promise, and Isaac was born. **Nothing** is impossible with God.

DISCUSS: How should this biblical account affect our hope in God's promises? (we should remain hopeful in God's faithfulness to His Word regardless of our circumstances; we can trust that our salvation is secure in Christ, even though we often prove ourselves faithless; even when we can see no way forward for God to keep His promises, we can trust that He can)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 3-5** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

The name Isaac means "he laughs." Abraham and Sarah previously laughed in **disbelief** at God's promise, but later they laughed with **joy** at the birth of their son in their old age.

TRANSITION: The birth of the son of promise to Abraham and Sarah in their old age proves that nothing is impossible with God (Gen. 18:14). God kept His promise here in a miraculous way. Yet this is a foreshadowing of an even greater promise and fulfillment in the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:37), who would become a sacrifice to save us from our sins.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-2 / Back in Genesis 12, God made a promise to Abraham—to make him into a great nation (12:2). After Abraham defeated King Chedorlaomer in Genesis 14, he refused the king of Sodom’s offer of all the possessions recovered from the raid because Abraham trusted the Lord alone to make him great (14:22-24). So once again, God told Abraham that his reward would be great, a reminder of His promise (15:1).

But Abraham didn’t understand how the Lord would fulfill His promise to make him into a great nation because he still had no child (15:2-3). In the ancient world, the inability of a father to have a son with his wife meant that his name would die out and his property would either go to one of his servants or his next of kin. Thus, the inability for Abraham and Sarah to have a son likely caused them considerable grief, and this was taking its toll on Abraham’s faith.

So the Lord got specific: Abraham would have an heir from his body, not a nephew or a servant but a son (15:4). Through this son his descendants would be too numerous to count, like the stars of the sky (15:5). And again, Abraham believed the Lord (15:6).

Some years later, however, Abraham’s concerns crept up again. Thinking God’s promise might need some help along, Sarah and Abraham hatched a plan to have a child. Sarah presented her servant, Hagar, to Abraham as a wife so they might have a son and build a family with her help (16:2). Their plan worked, and Abraham had a child, Ishmael, with Hagar. But it also backfired and completely missed the point of God’s promise. Instead of joy, their shortcut brought misery (16:4-5). Their compromise with the promise of God led to Sarah and Abraham feeling defeated.

The promise was for a son to come from Abraham’s body, but that son was also to come from Sarah’s. God’s promise to Abraham by nature applied to the one he was one with through marriage. So in Genesis 17, when Abraham was 99 years old and his wife

was 90, the Lord visited him once again to remind him of the covenant that He had made with him.

Expressing his doubts, Abraham again pointed to Ishmael as a son and potential heir of God’s promise (17:18). But God made it abundantly clear that Sarah would have a son in spite of her old age. This son—Isaac—would be the son of promise, and he would be born within the year (17:19,21). True to His word, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to her firstborn and only son (21:1-2). Truly, nothing is impossible for God (18:14).

VERSES 3-5 / Though their grief had been great and their journey filled with doubts and missteps, now Abraham and Sarah were holding in their aged arms the firstfruits of God’s promise. So their next steps, of course, were ones of obedience.

On the eighth day, according to God’s command, Abraham circumcised his son, just as all the males in Abraham’s household had been. This act, this sign, marked him as one under God’s covenant with Abraham (17:9-14).

Abraham and Sarah also named their son **“Isaac”** in obedience to the Lord (17:19), and not without a touch of irony. When God emphasized His promise in Genesis 17 to provide Abraham a son through Sarah, Abraham laughed incredulously. They were both old, nearing the century mark, and together they would have a son? But when God doubled-down on His words, Abraham believed his God (17:17-27).

A short time later, Sarah laughed at the same promise and for the same reason (18:10-15). This blessing was beyond their comprehension, but it came true nonetheless. The laughter of doubt was transformed into the laughter of awe and joy (21:6-7). **Isaac** means “he laughs” in Hebrew. **1**

After 25 years of waiting, the son of promise finally came. But one day the great nation descended from him would miraculously give birth to Jesus Christ—the Son of God.

POINT 2

GOD DEMANDS THE SACRIFICE OF THE SON OF PROMISE (GEN. 22:1-10).

NOTES

1 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he answered. **2** “Take your son,” he said, “your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” **3** So Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took with him two of his young men and his son Isaac. He split wood for a burnt offering and set out to go to the place God had told him about. **4** On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. **5** Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we’ll come back to you.” **6** Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac. In his hand he took the fire and the knife, and the two of them walked on together. **7** Then Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, “My father.” And he replied, “Here I am, my son.” Isaac said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” **8** Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Then the two of them walked on together. **9** When they arrived at the place that God had told him about, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. **10** Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read **Genesis 22:1-10** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-2** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God tested Abraham not to **tempt** him or to **know** what would happen but to “**see**” Abraham’s resolute faith in real time and space.

DISCUSS: What are some truths about God’s tests that we should know?

(God Himself never tempts us to do what is evil; God’s tests are designed for our good; God’s tests are never contrary to His holy character, which He has revealed in His Word; God loves us and wants what is best for us)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 3-10** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold word fills in a blank in the DDG*):

Abraham was willing to make the sacrifice of his son because he **believed** God’s purposes were unstoppable and His promises certain.

DISCUSS: How have you seen faith in God lead to extraordinary acts of obedience? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-2 / God's promise to Abraham that he would become a great nation and would bless the world was no trivial promise. It was a promise that carried with it eternal consequences. So the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22 is not only alarming, but it would seem to endanger a promise that had already been partially fulfilled by God.

The word **“tested”** in verse 1 comes from a Hebrew word meaning “attempt to learn the true nature of something.”² God was testing Abraham's character, integrity, and allegiance to God and God alone. Of course, God is omniscient, all-knowing, in Himself, yet God desired to “see” in real time, as we might say, what Abraham was made of.

It could seem like God was tempting Abraham to sin by asking Abraham to murder his son. But in the story of Abraham, we can easily see that this would be inconsistent with God's character. God, in testing Abraham, was not trying to lure him out to do something wrong, for God doesn't tempt anyone (Jas. 1:13).

If we go back to Genesis 15, we can see God giving Abraham all the confidence he needed to believe that God was going to do as He said He would do. When God established His covenant promise with Abraham, He did so in the way oaths were established, namely, by invoking a covenant curse should the covenant be broken. God placed the full obligation of the covenant upon Himself and not upon Abraham (see Gen. 15:12-21).

Here in Genesis 22, God was not trying to get Abraham to do a bad thing so as not to fulfill His end of the bargain. Abraham had no bargain to fulfill. All of the covenant promises depended on the Lord's actions. The testing of Abraham would reveal Abraham's resolve to trust and obey God, meaning God desired to test and demonstrate Abraham's resolute faith in real time and space.

VERSES 3-5 / Abraham trusted in God to keep His promises, so he did as the Lord

commanded. He got up, took two of his servants, his son Isaac, and all the supplies he needed to carry out the sacrifice, save one—a lamb.

After three long days of travel, during which Abraham probably hoped a different command would come, Abraham saw the mountain from a distance. Abraham's words in Genesis 22:5 to his servants, however, are extremely telling of what he believed the Lord would do: **“The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we'll come back to you.”** He didn't say, “We will worship and then I will return.” Abraham still believed that the Lord would remain faithful to His promises and provide a way for him to bring his son home alive (see Heb. 11:17-19).

VERSES 6-10 / As Isaac carried the wood that would burn the sacrifice, he realized they were missing one crucial element—the sacrifice itself. When Isaac asked his father about this seeming oversight, Abraham simply stated that the Lord would provide the sacrifice for them. Essentially, Abraham's words to his son were an exhortation for his son to trust in the goodness and provision of God, just as he had.

It didn't take long at all for Isaac's trust in the Lord to be tested. After they set up the altar, the father tied his son down and laid him on the very wood the son had carried up the mountain!

For those who know how this story ends, the wording in verse 10 may seem a bit exaggerated: Abraham **“took the knife to slaughter his son.”** But the context of the story—namely, Abraham's obedience and belief in God's goodness—lets us know that Abraham was very much prepared to kill his son on the altar in obedience to the Lord's command. Whatever thoughts were going through his head, whatever emotions were flooding his heart, Abraham's resolve in the goodness of God showed his allegiance to be with God and God alone.

POINT 3

GOD PROVIDES A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE SON OF PROMISE (GEN. 22:11-14).

11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” He replied, “Here I am.” **12** Then he said, “Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from me.” **13** Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. **14** And Abraham named that place The LORD Will Provide, so today it is said, “It will be provided on the LORD’s mountain.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read **Genesis 22:11-14** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 11-12** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Abraham’s willingness to give up his son was a **foreshadow** of what God Himself would do one day in the sacrifice of His **Son**.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to explain how the substitution of the ram for Isaac pointed forward to the substitution of Jesus on the cross for us (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #58: Christ as Sacrifice: There are several signs, symbols, and pointers in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christ as being the sacrificial **Lamb** of God who would take away the sins of the world. However, unlike the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, whose sacrifices were unable to take away sin (Heb. 10:4), Christ’s sacrifice on the **cross** was able to permanently, “once and for all,” take away sins.

DISCUSS: How should we respond to the grace of God in providing His **Son as a sacrifice in our place for our sins?** (we should be eternally grateful; we should obey our Father’s commands with joy; we should praise and worship our triune God for the salvation He has accomplished for us; we should proclaim God’s goodness and grace in Jesus to the world so others will believe and be saved)

NOTES

SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

In the Old Testament, God graciously accepted an innocent, unblemished animal as a sacrifice to stand in the place of a guilty person for the sake of ceremonial cleansing from wrongdoing (see Lev. 1-7). This pointed forward to the final, once-for-all substitutionary atonement in Jesus’ death on the cross (Rom. 3:25-26; Heb. 10:4,10; 1 John 2:1-2).

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“In the ram that hung in the tree and had become the sacrifice in the place of Abraham’s son, there might be depicted the day of him who was to hang upon the wood like a ram and was to taste death for the sake of the whole world.”³

—Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 11-12 / If there were ever any doubt about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to the Lord, the angel's emphatic call of, "**Abraham, Abraham!**" removes that doubt. In reading the story, you can almost hear the urgency in the angel's voice as the tension gets as tight as it can possibly get before snapping. For Abraham, we can imagine a huge sigh of relief as he answered the angel, "**Here I am.**"

Even knowing his belief in God to be able to bring his son back to life, this moment must have been difficult for this father. But as hard as it was, Abraham wasn't afraid of the consequences of his obedience. The covenant that he shared in with God was wholly dependent on God, and he believed God would hold fast to the covenant He made.

Even more relief must have come to Abraham as he heard the angel tell him not to lay his hands on his son of promise. It's here in verse 12 that Abraham learns what the Lord was doing. The Hebrew word for "**fear**" in verse 12 means, "revere, or show profound respect for one, that borders on fear of the object."⁴ Abraham's unconditional reverence for God was proven by his obedience to what the Lord had commanded. Abraham had such a reverence for God that he was prepared to lose that which he valued most on earth, if only for a little while, in order to be faithful to the Lord.

Abraham's willingness to give up his son was a foreshadow of what God Himself would do one day. In John 3:16, Jesus tells Nicodemus, a sympathetic Pharisee, that it is the love of God that led God the Father to send God the Son to earth to die in the place of humanity. What was an unpayable sin debt on our part was paid in full by the death of Jesus. In His sacrifice on the cross, Jesus truly took upon Himself the covenant curses of Abraham and all those who share his faith—God Himself in Christ paid the price for our failure to keep the covenant so that we might live.

VERSES 13-14 / After the angel of the Lord communicated God's pleasure with Abraham's obedience, Abraham looked up and found the final piece he was hoping for in order to carry out the sacrifice—a ram. The Lord brought a ram to Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son. Therefore, it was fitting that Abraham would call that place "**The Lord Will Provide.**" From the very beginning of this test, Abraham was obedient. He trusted in the goodness of God and believed in God's faithfulness to His promises.

God's provision of a ram for Abraham is yet another foreshadowing of Christ as it illustrates the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. While pre-dating the Mosaic Law, this sacrifice likely would have been a burnt offering to atone for one's sins (see Lev. 1:1-13). The call for a sacrifice of a human being highlights what is required for our sin—death. In the Old Testament, God graciously allowed animals to be used in sacrifices for atonement, but in truth, an animal cannot stand in the place of a human being and take away the sin of God's image-bearers (Heb. 10:4).

Here, the Lord provided a substitution for Isaac with the ram. But there would come a day when a human sacrifice would be required. Father Abraham was spared that sacrifice; God the Father made it Himself. When it was time for God's Son to be sacrificed, there was no substitute because Jesus was humanity's substitute.

Without the sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God, we would have no chance at all for salvation (John 1:29). Even our best deeds are as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). There is no such thing as trying to make our good outweigh our bad because when we sin, we sin against an infinitely holy and righteous God. Therefore, our sin deserves an infinite punishment that we could never pay. So we stand condemned in our sin and sentenced to separation from God in hell forever. But Jesus made Himself our substitute to bring God's disobedient image-bearers back into a right relationship with Him.

MY RESPONSE

Because we have experienced God's resurrection power in Christ Jesus, we share the gospel with everyone, trusting that God can give new life to all who are spiritually dead.

HEAD:

God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son is a reminder of the payment that had to be made for our salvation. In order for us to be saved from the wrath of God, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, for whom there was no substitute, to die in our place. This helps us to understand that the grace of God isn't all sunshine and rainbows because sin can't just be forgiven. Our sin has eternal consequences, which were placed on the eternal Son of God for all those who believe in Him.

How does Jesus as our substitute affect the way we see the need for repentance?

HEART:

Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross in our place demands that He have our sole allegiance. Each and every time we give ourselves to sin, we communicate that Jesus' death in our place wasn't that amazing. But the love that Jesus displayed on the cross was the greatest act of love the world has seen or known. As such, we should respond by giving ourselves to the worship of Jesus. With all that we are and all that we have, Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf deserves our full and sole allegiance.

How does Jesus as our substitute push us to seek accountability for our sin?

HANDS:

The gospel is amazing because it is the good news that our sin debt has been paid in full through Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross. The gospel is wonderful because it is good news, which is what "gospel" means—good news that is meant to be shared. The gospel is the greatest news ever told. It is the news that should be a part of every conversation we have with those who don't know Jesus because Jesus didn't just die for our sin but for the sin of the world. If we believe that Jesus' substitution is the greatest news ever told, then we should share that news with urgency with those who don't know or haven't received it by faith.

How might you share the gospel with someone who feels he or she can never be good enough for God?

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Real satisfaction comes not in understanding God's motives, but in understanding his character, in trusting in his promises, and in leaning on him and resting in him as the Sovereign who knows what he is doing and does all things well."⁵

—Joni Eareckson Tada

POINT 1: GOD PROVIDES THE SON OF PROMISE (GEN. 21:1-5).

+ COMMENTARY

“Verses 3-4 describe Abraham’s obedient response at Isaac’s birth: he names (17:16) and circumcises the child on the eighth day (17:10,12,19) precisely as the Lord had directed. The name ‘Isaac’ is a typical west Semitic form *yishāq*, derived from *shq*, means ‘he [i.e., child or father] laughs, smiles.’ The name is appropriate for the joy a newborn brings parents. Sarah creates wordplays on the name by ‘laughter’ [*sēhōq*] and ‘will laugh’ [*yishāq*] in her exuberance at his birth (v. 6). The description of the child’s mistreatment by Ishmael, ‘mocking’ (*mēsahēq*, v. 9; cf. *mēsahēq*, 26:8), is another play on its meaning. The name also recalls the reactions of the father (17:7) and mother (18:12), who snickered at the announcement of a forthcoming son by Sarah.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

A preacher once told this story of Abraham Lincoln: “As a young man, Abraham Lincoln went to the Black Hawk War a captain and, through no fault of his own, returned home a private. His military career was over. Subsequently, he went into business, which did not endure. As a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, he was considered too impractical, too temperamental to be a success. Turning to politics, Lincoln was defeated in his first campaign for the state legislature. He was defeated in his desire to be commissioner of the General Land Office. He was defeated for the United States Senate in 1854; defeated for the vice-presidency of the United States in 1856. He was again defeated in his effort to become senator from Illinois in 1858. Yet, in 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected president of the United States.”⁷

No doubt that when we look at Abraham Lincoln’s life, we applaud him for not only his success, but mainly his willingness to put his life on the line to abolish the practice of slavery in the United States of America. Much like Abraham Lincoln, the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah had lives that were riddled with failure. Not just in terms of their failure to trust God in Abraham having a son with Hagar but also in Sarah’s inability to get pregnant. Time and time again, they must have tried. Even after God initially promised to make Abraham a great nation, they waited twenty-five years. But no one would call Abraham a failure. In fact, in Romans 4:18-22, Paul said this of Abraham: “He believed, hoping against hope, so that he became the father of many nations according to what had been spoken: So will your descendants be. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body to be already dead (since he was about a hundred years

EXTRA

old) and also the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver in unbelief at God’s promise but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, because he was fully convinced that what God had promised, he was also able to do. Therefore, it was credited to him for righteousness.”

POINT 2: GOD DEMANDS THE SACRIFICE OF THE SON OF PROMISE (GEN. 22:1-10).

+ COMMENTARY

“It goes without saying that Abraham is utterly distraught at the prospect of losing his son, Isaac, in this way. Despite that emotional response, however, the command to sacrifice his son would not have been as shocking to Abraham as it is to us. In the Canaanite worldview, the god who provided fertility (El) was also entitled to demand a portion of what had been produced. This was expressed in sacrifice of animals and grain and in the sacrifice of children. Texts from Phoenician and Punic colonies, such as Carthage in North Africa, describe the ritual of child sacrifice as a means of ensuring continued fertility. The biblical prophets and the laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus expressly argue against this practice, but that also implies that it continued to occur. Abraham’s compliant acquiescence, as much as it reflects the power of his faith, also suggests that human sacrifice is familiar to his conceptual worldview. However saddened he may have been, he is not dumbfounded by the macabre or peculiar nature of Yahweh’s demand. It was culturally logical, despite being emotionally harsh, and only baffling in light of the covenant promises. There is sufficient emotional drama in the scenario alone—the narrator does not have to build it up literarily. As a result there is no discussion about informing Sarah, no exploration of Abraham’s feelings, and no heart-rending father-son exchanges. Abraham appears almost artificial in the subdued, matter-of-fact way that he moves from one step to the next.”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

Imagine that someone came to you and wanted to give you a house for free—the biggest house in town with the biggest price tag. This house comes fully furnished and has everything you could ever possibly need or want. It even comes with a maid and cook. It would be a no-brainer that you’d take this house. But imagine the owner of the house, reaching out to give you the key, suddenly pulls back and says, “You can have this house under one condition: The entire house belongs to you except one tiny closet right in the middle of the house.” Most people would still have no problem taking that house. So imagine you take the house from the owner and you move in. Then one day, the owner comes to you needing to get to the closet. You let him in. As he enters, you notice him dragging the carcass of a dead deer behind him. He takes that deer, nails it to a wall in the closet, locks the door, and leaves. There’s nothing you can do about it. Over time you begin to notice an awful smell coming from the closet. Maggots, worms, and flies begin to hover around the closet door, and they get all over the house. Eventually you get sick because of the presence of the dead deer in a small closet of the house you supposedly own. Soon, because of the presence of the decaying deer, you no longer feel like you own the house. Analogously, God’s test of Abraham was to reveal that God ruled over all of him and that there were no competing interests hiding in the closets of Abraham’s life.

POINT 3: GOD PROVIDES A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE SON OF PROMISE (GEN. 22:11-14).

+ COMMENTARY

“instead of his son. The fact that a ram died in the place of Isaac has led many Christian interpreters to see introduced here the principle of substitutionary atonement, which would later become a reality in the substitutionary sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, as ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29).”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

“A husband and wife had prayed for a son who would take care of them in their old age and bring prosperity to the family. They had a son, who studied to become a surgeon. They were happy that God had given them their hearts’ desires. One day their son told them he would no longer practice surgery but was going to become a pastor. The couple was devastated. Their dreams were shattered. Pastors do not make enough money to take care of anyone. Does this sound familiar? You fervently pray for something and God gives it to you with one hand, and then he seems to take it back with the other. Abraham was in such a situation with Isaac, but he did not resist God as most of us would do. He obeyed, and God blessed him with a son who became a great blessing to many. When God asks you to give him the things that he has given you, do not resist. He knows best. Just obey and see how God will bless you and provide for you even as God provided a lamb for a sacrifice in place of Abraham’s son.”¹⁰

+ ILLUSTRATION

There’s a story about a ship that was wrecked at sea: “The lifeboats were not enough to take all the passengers. A man who was swimming in the water swam up to one of the lifeboats that was full and seized it with his hand. They tried to prevent him, but the man was terribly in earnest about saving his life, and one of the men in the boat just drew a sword and cut off his hand. But the man didn’t give up: he reached out the other hand. He was terribly in earnest. He wanted to save his life. But the man in the boat took the sword and cut off his other hand. But the man did not give up. He swam up to the boat and seized it with his teeth. Some of them said, ‘Let us not cut his head off,’ and they drew him in. That man was terribly in earnest, and, my friends, if you want to get into the kingdom of God, be in earnest.”¹¹

Even with all the man’s effort, he couldn’t get into the boat alone. In the same way, no matter how hard we work at being good, the only way into the kingdom of God is to lean on the salvation that Jesus provides through His substitutionary death on the cross. He died in our place because He knew we could never do enough or be good enough to get ourselves into the kingdom of God.

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A PLAN UNHINDERED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's plan continues despite sin and deception (Gen. 26:7-11).
2. God's plan continues despite family dysfunction (Gen. 29:31-35).
3. God's plan continues through changed people (Gen. 32:24-32).

Background Passage: Genesis 25–33

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God's plan to bless the world continued, even in spite of the sin and dysfunction of His people, a people He was remaking in His image.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God delighted in using a broken family to bring blessing to the world, showing that all the glory goes to Him alone. God, however, was not just at work though this family but in them as well as He changed and remade them in His image. As Christians, we have been changed and remade in Christ, and we now bear His name, both a privilege and a responsibility before the watching world.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we too are a broken people, forgiven and declared righteous in Christ, we serve God with humility and gratitude, pointing others not to ourselves but to God and what He has done.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: Abraham died, but his legacy miraculously continued with his son Isaac, whose wife faced the same struggle as her mother-in-law, Sarah. Rebekah was barren, but God heard the prayers of Isaac and she had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. These brothers competed from the beginning, and early on, Jacob convinced Esau to give up his birthright. After this, Isaac followed in his father's footsteps and listened to the God of Abraham as he settled in Gerar, yet the descendants of Abraham also followed various paths of sin and dysfunction.

INSTRUCT: Ask your group members to recall an argument or fight with siblings, cousins, or close friends with whom they spent their childhood.

DISCUSS: What was the result of that fight? Was your relationship altered in any way? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

TRANSITION: Life is full of broken relationships, and none of us are immune to this sort of conflict. Some relationships even seem irreparable because of the hurt that remains unforgiven or unresolved. Abraham and his descendants were broken and sinful, just like us. These were God's people, the ones who would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Yet time and time again, they chose themselves over one another and over obedience to God. Still, God redeemed these sinful people and used them to bring about His plan, just as He does with us.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: Why does God use sinful people to accomplish His purposes? (it brings Him glory to use people who are imperfect; it helps us stay humble, knowing that He is the One doing the work through us; God loves us and wants to redeem us)

POINT 1

GOD'S PLAN CONTINUES DESPITE SIN AND DECEPTION (GEN. 26:7-11).

NOTES

7 When the men of the place asked about his wife, he said, “She is my sister,” for he was afraid to say “my wife,” thinking, “The men of the place will kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is a beautiful woman.” **8** When Isaac had been there for some time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from the window and was surprised to see Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. **9** Abimelech sent for Isaac and said, “So she is really your wife! How could you say, ‘She is my sister?’” Isaac answered him, “Because I thought I might die on account of her.” **10** Then Abimelech said, “What have you done to us? One of the people could easily have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt on us.” **11** So Abimelech warned all the people, “Whoever harms this man or his wife will certainly be put to death.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 26:7-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 7-9** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Isaac, the son of promise, deceived the Philistines to **protect** himself above all others. This expressed a **diminished** faith in God.

DISCUSS: How does our faith relate to our actions? (obedience to God's commands gives proof of our faith; disobedience betrays a lack of faith on some level; if we believe God will keep His word, then we can obey freely and without fear)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 10-11** commentary to expound on the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Our sin never just affects us but **always** affects those around us. Yet sin **cannot** stop God's plan and promises from going forward.

TRANSITION: Despite Isaac's sin and self-centeredness, God still worked to fulfill His promises. We cannot mess up God's plan with our sinfulness—He is more powerful than our sin. But Isaac wasn't the only member of his family who struggled. In the next few chapters of Genesis, many difficulties and family dysfunctions arise, and even in these, God will prove His faithfulness.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 7-9 / If you are reading through the Book of Genesis, this story sounds oddly familiar. In Genesis 20 (also in Gen. 12:10-20), Abraham did exactly what Isaac does here. Abraham was in Gerar and told King Abimelech that his wife, Sarah, was his sister, a half-truth that omitted their marital relationship. God revealed the truth to Abimelech to protect Sarah.

Enter Isaac. No doubt he knew the story of his father's half-truth and God's continued protection, but still Isaac lied! The author of Genesis draws our attention to this parallel. Isaac committed the same sin as his father. And once again we see sin cannot overthrow God's plan. This illustrates that God will uphold His promises no matter what, though we ought not sin as if sin doesn't matter.

Isaac's lie was entirely self-centered. He was not seeking to protect his wife, Rebekah, from the men of Gerar. Instead, he sought to protect himself and saw his life as more valuable than hers. Isaac allowed fear to rule in his heart instead of trusting in God, and his sin was soon found out. King Abimelech discovered the truth with his eyes, seeing Isaac interact with Rebekah not as a sister but as his wife.

Here is where King Abimelech called Isaac out for his lie. This pagan king was the one who declared the truth. **1** Isaac confessed that he lied and explained that his reason was to keep himself from death should someone notice Rebekah's beauty and attack him to have her. Again, this was not for Rebekah's protection but for Isaac's. Isaac did not have the decency or the faith to tell the truth from the beginning, even though he was to be the continuation of God's plan for His people.

VERSES 10-11 / With the truth in front of him, King Abimelech declared that Isaac's sin did not just affect him. He didn't just put himself and Rebekah at risk but the whole of the Philistine people.

How could this be? It is important to understand the ancient ways. King Abimelech

understood that if one man from his community slept with Rebekah, Isaac's wife, even in ignorance of that fact, then the whole community would be guilty. **2** The ignorance of one man would have brought punishment on all the people, and this would all be because Isaac sought to protect one man—himself.

Sin never affects only one person. A secret sin such as lust means that one person objectifies another. You degrade another human in your mind if you look at him or her with lust. Jesus went as far as to say that looking at another with lust is the same as committing adultery in your heart (Matt. 5:28). Even if secret sins are not discovered by others in this life, they are known to God and will come to light (Luke 8:17). The all-knowing God is aware of all the sins ever committed, even those in our heads.

Isaac thought that his sin would not hurt anyone. He convinced himself that he was doing good by protecting his life with this lie. But sin is always deceiving. It twists the truth and desires to destroy us, and Satan is always looking to devour us (Gen. 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8). Here in these verses, we see that Isaac sinned to protect himself, while in reality, all he did was put an entire community, including his wife, in grave danger of committing sins that would destroy them all.

Yet even in his sin, Isaac did not destroy God's plan. God used an unlikely man, a Philistine king, to uncover the truth. Not only that, but Abimelech put a warning out to all the people not to harm Isaac or Rebekah. The king protected these people by this decree. What an act of mercy from a man who did not need to be merciful! King Abimelech, in this way, upheld God's plan. On this occasion, it was not the wisdom of Isaac, the promised son of Abraham and soon-to-be father of many nations, that furthered God's plan but a Philistine king in the hands of the all-wise, covenant-keeping God.

POINT 2

GOD'S PLAN CONTINUES DESPITE FAMILY DYSFUNCTION (GEN. 29:31-35).

31 When the LORD saw that Leah was neglected, he opened her womb; but Rachel was unable to conceive. **32** Leah conceived, gave birth to a son, and named him Reuben, for she said, "The LORD has seen my affliction; surely my husband will love me now." **33** She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, "The LORD heard that I am neglected and has given me this son also." So she named him Simeon. **34** She conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, "At last, my husband will become attached to me because I have borne three sons for him." Therefore he was named Levi. **35** And she conceived again, gave birth to a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she named him Judah. Then Leah stopped having children.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 29:31-35** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 31-34** commentary to explain the following point:

God provided sons for Leah, Jacob's neglected wife. She hoped these children would change her husband's heart toward her, but they did not.

DISCUSS: How have you experienced God's comfort in the midst of hardships or afflictions? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

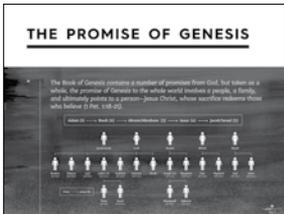
EXPLAIN: Use **PACK ITEMS 3 AND 4: THE PROMISE OF GENESIS (POSTER AND HANDOUT)** and the **VERSE 35** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Leah's focus changed from her husband to the Lord who loved her. Even through dysfunction, the Lord began creating the great nation of **Israel** and providing the **King** for her salvation.

DISCUSS: Why are God's plans more trustworthy than our own? (God is sovereign and knows all things; God is good and always does what is good; God knows what will bring Him the most glory, which is our purpose in life)

TRANSITION: Through Leah's story, we can see that God is gracious, loving, and cares deeply for His children. We also see that a broken family still was not enough to disrupt God's plan to bring salvation to the world. As with Leah, God is in the business of changing hearts and giving them a song of praise. We'll see God do the same thing with Jacob next.

NOTES



VOICES from THE CHURCH

"When we meet trials, we do not rejoice in the suffering they bring but in the faithfulness of God to use them to shape us, that we might become like Christ. God is faithful in the midst of trial, and faithful in the aftermath of trial to work all things for our good."³

-Jen Wilkin

COMMENTARY

To say Isaac's family was filled with dysfunction would be an understatement. Isaac had twins, Jacob and Esau, who parted with a death threat between them. Jacob, the younger of the two, deceived his father and stole the blessing of the first-born. Then he left his home and journeyed to his uncle's for protection. There he met his wives—yes, wives (Gen. 27–29).

VERSES 31-34 / Leading up to these verses, Jacob desired to marry beautiful Rachel, his uncle's younger daughter, but Uncle Laban tricked him into first marrying Leah, the older daughter. Now married to both sisters, Jacob fulfilled his marital role by consummating his marriages, but Leah felt the weight of a husband who loved her sister more than her. She was weighed down, yet God would lift up her head.

The status of a woman in these times was tied to her ability to bear sons and carry on the lineage. So God responded to Leah's neglect by graciously giving her four sons over the next four verses. Each son's name was a play on words that emphasized a different truth or hope in Leah's situation.

First came **"Reuben,"** a Hebrew name meaning "See, a son!" **4** Through God's blessing, Leah provided Jacob the assurance that his lineage would continue. But Leah believed this son would solve her larger problem and cause her husband to finally love and care for her. If she bore the son who would carry on God's promise to Abraham, that would deserve some notice, right? We can assume, however, that the birth of Reuben did not change Jacob's heart toward her because of her next son's name.

Leah gave birth to **"Simeon,"** another son to help carry on the lineage of Jacob. Simeon's name means "to hear." **5** Leah named him this because God heard about her continued neglect and blessed her with another child. She still was not loved by Jacob, but it seems this time she communicated with God about her afflictions, and that is how He heard her.

Leah's third son, **"Levi,"** entered the world, and she believed that this time her lot in life would change. The name Levi means "to join," and she hoped Jacob would be forever joined to her now that she had given him three sons. **6** But it was not so. Jacob loved only Rachel.

Leah may have been ignored, unloved, or even hated by her husband or her sister, but this was not God's attitude or heart toward her. God didn't give her exactly what she wanted, but He gave her a substantial gift of love and purpose in her sons. The Lord of all the earth cared for this neglected woman and would work through her to accomplish His larger plan of redeeming the world.

VERSE 35 / In this last verse, one more son is born to Leah. But this time, Leah's focus is different. **"Judah,"** this newborn child, was not a means to the end Leah sought with her other children. Instead, Leah simply stated that she would praise God. This was a profound shift from her hopes with her other children. The Hebrew name Judah means "God will be praised." It seems Leah finally understood, at least in part, what God was doing. Leah's children did not enter the world to fulfill her plan to receive affection, nor were they born according to Jacob's will and desires, and certainly they did not fit Rachel's plans. Rather, God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob a great nation that would be as numerous as the stars. These four sons each would become a nation and further God's plan of redemption (see Gen. 12:1-3; 22:17).

By God's grace, a neglected wife became the mother of sons whose lineages would have major significance in the redemptive plan of God. The Lord sought to bless the whole world through Leah, namely, through her son Judah's line. Jesus—the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5)—came to redeem the world. Broken families, neglected wives, jealous sisters, lying husbands, and sinful children all find forgiveness, security, and hope in Jesus.

POINT 3

GOD'S PLAN CONTINUES THROUGH CHANGED PEOPLE (GEN. 32:24-32).

NOTES

24 Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip. **26** Then he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." **27** "What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob," he replied. **28** "Your name will no longer be Jacob," he said. "It will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed." **29** Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he answered, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. **30** Jacob then named the place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared." **31** The sun shone on him as he passed by Penuel—limping because of his hip. **32** That is why, still today, the Israelites don't eat the thigh muscle that is at the hip socket: because he struck Jacob's hip socket at the thigh muscle.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 32:24-32** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 24-32** commentary to explain the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Jacob wrestled with his brother, Esau, all his life, but here he wrestled with the all-powerful **God** and came away **changed**.

DISCUSS: **What experiences has God used to transform you the most?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Make the connection between Jacob's encounter with God and the believer's new identity in Christ (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #83: New Identity of the Believer: When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an **enemy** under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved **child** (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "**new creation**" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, becoming more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

COMMENTARY

Leah's focus began to shift from Jacob to God, but that didn't eliminate the dysfunction in Jacob's immediate family. And then Jacob had to contend with the dysfunction in his extended family, which was largely his own fault. After twenty years, Jacob left Laban to return home, only to find that his brother Esau, whom he had swindled, was on his way to meet him with four hundred men (Gen. 30–32)!

VERSES 24-28 / Jacob had wrestled with his brother, Esau, all his life, even in their mother's womb, and now it seemed his deceptions were about to catch up with him. So Jacob planned, sending gifts ahead to his brother and dividing his family and possessions so as to save one should the other be attacked. But Jacob also prayed, asking God to deliver him on account of His promises (32:1-23). On the eve of his meeting with Esau, Jacob spent some time alone, but then something extraordinary happened—Jacob wrestled with a stranger. Who was this man? Why did they wrestle? What was the purpose of this encounter?

Most collegiate wrestling matches go for 6-7 minutes. Yet this encounter lasted through the night. The darkness hid the identity of Jacob's assailant, but as daylight came, the man took action to end their struggle by intentionally injuring Jacob with one stroke. All Jacob could do was hold on for dear life as a conversation ensued.

This encounter revealed that the stranger was stronger and even supernatural, so Jacob asked him for a blessing before he would let him go. As we've heard before, the greater blesses the lesser (recall Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham). So the man asked for Jacob's name, which carried with it the guilt of all his past deceptions. **7** Then he changed Jacob's name to **"Israel,"** which means "one who struggled with God."

VERSES 29-32 / After he received the blessing of a name change, Jacob asked for the stranger's name. But rather than give it, the man blessed Jacob and then

left the scene. Jacob's question was left unanswered, yet in verse 30, we see that Jacob had already discerned the answer. God Himself, manifested in a bodily form, struggled with Jacob. What happened there was so significant that Jacob named the place **"Peniel"** as a reminder that he had wrestled with **"God face to face,"** and yet, God had pulled His punches to spare and save a deceiver.

With the rising sun, the divine stranger has disappeared, and Jacob hobbles away, not lauding his victory but limping in pain, a changed man. This extraordinary struggle revealed not Jacob's strength but his physical weakness, yet it also strengthened Jacob's faith in God. The details of this event are vague and mysterious, but the message and intent of this encounter could not be more clear. Jacob witnessed firsthand that the all-powerful God was gracious to him and spared his life. This meant that Jacob could face his brother, Esau, with full confidence in God to provide for and protect him according to the word of His promise.

We move now to the final verse of this passage. Note the way verse 32 begins: **"That is why, still today, the Israelites ..."** All that occurred between Jacob and God would impact the nation of Israel. Jacob's new name pointed to a nation that would struggle with God for the rest of Old Testament history. Yet we know that God remains faithful to them and to His promises. God continually spares the lives of His people and changes them by His grace. Because of God's faithfulness to Jacob on this occasion, the Israelites (the people of Jacob) remembered what God did by not eating the thigh muscle.

The Israelites would see salvation one day (Jer. 31:31-34); a Redeemer would come and lead them out of their struggles and sins (Isa. 59:20-21). But this salvation is not just promised to the blood relatives of Jacob. It is through Jesus that salvation is brought to both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 1:16-17).

MY RESPONSE

Because we too are a broken people, forgiven and declared righteous in Christ, we serve God with humility and gratitude, pointing others not to ourselves but to God and what He has done.

NOTES

HEAD:

The sovereign God is able to use the sinfulness of humankind to further His purposes. He is not surprised when we fail, nor are His plans upset. There is no way for us to mess up God's plan. This does not mean that we should sin freely. Rather, when we sin or when circumstances do not go our way, we know that God is bigger than these mistakes and He is able to use even the most disruptive circumstances for His glory and our good.

What sins are we tempted to believe God cannot redeem?

HEART:

God's care for His people transcends what we deserve. The God of the universe, who can do no wrong, who is holy and perfect in every way, sees our sinfulness, yet the ways He cares for us and provides for us are unimaginable. We do not deserve the love and provision of God. He could have decided Isaac, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and all the rest of Abraham's family were not worth the effort and abandoned them. But God made a covenant with Abraham, and He is the One who keeps His word no matter what we do. Our God loves His children so much that He will not allow our sins to get in the way of loving us. God provided our Savior through broken people, and this Savior is the way we receive God's care forevermore.

What are some ways you will express your praise for God's gift of Jesus?

HANDS:

These passages of Scripture demonstrate the need for confession of sin and weakness to God and to our fellow believers. Exposing our weaknesses is a terrifying task. We want to be strong and appear like we have it all together. Yet we are all broken and sinful people. Hiding our sins and weaknesses can only hurt those we love. When we let our brothers and sisters in Christ see the truth, they are able to come alongside us and encourage us. If we all recognize that we are broken and weak, then we can expose those struggles to others, and by so doing, we strengthen our relationships with them and with God.

What sins or weaknesses will you confess with others in the church that you may be healed?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"With God, we have power and prevail, when we weep, when we cry, when we're broken, when we're pleading, when we're clinging, when our heads are bowed. The blessing comes when we're crippled, when we're hurt."⁸

-W. A. Criswell
(1909-2002)

POINT 1: GOD'S PLAN CONTINUES DESPITE SIN AND DECEPTION (GEN. 26:7-11).

+

COMMENTARY

“Despite his encounter with God and his reminder of God’s promise, Isaac fell into the same error as his father. Like Abraham, Isaac was afraid that the men in Gerar would kill him so that his beautiful wife Rebekah could belong to someone else (26:7; see 12:11-12; 20:11). So, just as Abraham had done, he referred to her as his sister. This was stretching the truth even more than Abraham had done, for Sarah was Abraham’s half-sister, whereas Rebekah was Isaac’s cousin. Isaac’s lie was uncovered when Abimelek by chance saw him caressing Rebekah (26:8). Abimelek confronted Isaac, angry that Isaac’s lie could have led one of his men to commit adultery unknowingly (26:9-10). Like Abraham, Isaac would then have brought guilt rather than blessing to others ... When he discovered the truth, Abimelek mercifully just ordered his people not to harm Isaac or Rebekah under penalty of death (26:11). Once again a king of Gerar proved more righteous than God’s chosen man.”⁹

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ILLUSTRATION

Deception can be a useful tool to make a point. It is often compelling to hide the truth until the “grand reveal” at the end. In the novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the main character is wrongly imprisoned, and once he escapes, he creates a new persona and punishes those who have done him harm while blessing those who were good to him. He deceives many into thinking he is a wealthy count, but at the end, he reveals himself as the one who was originally wronged. The revelation at the end is shocking because of how deeply all the characters were deceived.

We may not concoct a massive conspiracy to get revenge against all our enemies, but we are all inclined to deceive to save our own skin. We may twist the truth to make ourselves seem better than we are. We may veil the truth because we are ashamed of it. We might even tell bald-faced lies to protect our reputation or our status. When we read of Isaac’s deception, we should not think, “I would never do that,” but rather humbly see ourselves in Isaac and ask that God would keep us from sinning in this way. We desperately need God to grow our trust in Him so that when we are tempted to deceive to save ourselves, we would be reminded that this can only harm us and others. Even if we are able to deceive the whole world, God is not able to be deceived and He always knows the truth. We can honor Him and others when we are honest, even if it means some harm or shame might come upon us.

EXTRA

POINT 2: GOD’S PLAN CONTINUES DESPITE FAMILY DYSFUNCTION (GEN. 29:31-35).

+ COMMENTARY

“And truly if Leah could have seen down the generations, she would have been astonished at how blessed she was, because her last two sons, Levi and Judah, would respectively father the priestly and kingly tribes of Israel. Leah’s blood would flow in the veins of Moses and Aaron and David and Christ the Messiah!” **10**

+ COMMENTARY

“In his family relations Jacob continued to sow bitter seed. His coolness to his unwanted wife was understandable, but 29:31ff. shows what God as well as Leah thought of it, and there are few things more pathetic than the naming of her first three sons. Some fruits of the miseries and intrigues of this period emerge in the last chapters of the book, and the tribes were to go through history labelled with reminders of their stormy origins. On the human plane the story demonstrates the craving of human beings for love and recognition, and the price of thwarting it; on the divine level it shows once again the grace of God choosing difficult and unpromising material.” **11**

+ ILLUSTRATION

Barrenness, being unable to have children, and singleness are not new struggles for the church. As we saw in the story of Leah and Rachel, and as we see in many places throughout the Old and New Testaments, the inability to have children is a painful and unfortunately common struggle. If you stopped for a moment, you could probably think of someone who wants to have children but cannot. Maybe it is a family who struggles with infertility. Maybe it is someone who has had a miscarriage. Or maybe it is a woman or man who is single and hopes to have children one day in the future. All of us can think of someone who has struggled, or we ourselves have struggled in this way.

We pray and ask that God would give the blessing of children, but what if He does not answer? If we look to Isaiah 54, we see great hope for the childless. This passage begins with a command to the childless woman to rejoice. What reason does she have to sing? God states that she will have more children than the married woman (it is implied here that she has many children). The reason this woman can rejoice is that her children extend beyond those she has birthed. God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1:28 is further expanded in God’s commandment to make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28:18. Those who are without children (and those who have biological or adopted children) can rejoice because their children are not limited to their birthing years. All are able to reproduce the gospel in as many sons and daughters as possible, and this is a reason to sing.

POINT 3: GOD'S PLAN CONTINUES THROUGH CHANGED PEOPLE (GEN. 32:24-32).

+ COMMENTARY

“How blessed we are when we yield to God at the beginning of God’s call, the way Abraham and Joseph did. But so many of us are like Jacob. We struggle independently of the God whom we believe and love. We want to be part of his plan, but alas, we make our own plans—and we never truly succeed. Then a crisis comes through which he lays his hand upon us (life becomes dislocated—out of joint), and we have an appalling sense of our own incompetence and weakness. That is the great hour—the hour of grace, because from there on our walk is never the same.”¹²

+ COMMENTARY

“The man of physical prowess, Jacob, is made weak through the wrestling—a match that ends with God ironically declaring that Jacob has ‘prevailed’ (32:28), despite showing his divine power by crippling Jacob with a touch (32:25,31). Thus, we understand that Jacob prevailed not by strength but by declaring his dependence upon the blessing of God (32:26)—a vital lesson in grace. So, despite ‘prevailing,’ Jacob lives the rest of his life with a limp (32:31)—another lesson in what it means to be a conduit of God’s grace.”¹³

+ ILLUSTRATION

Americans are averse to the concept of weakness, yet we love a story with an unexpected hero or underdog. In the classic Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*, we see a character who does not seem heroic at all become willing to sacrifice himself in the place of others. The Beast is a bitter man trapped in the fur, sharp teeth, and domineering stature of a creature he once was not. Over time, he becomes compassionate, warm, considerate, and thoughtful. It is his vulnerability and care for Belle that ultimately puts him in a position to be fatally wounded by the villainous Gaston. Though Gaston perceives the Beast’s love of Belle to be weakness, it actually becomes the most powerful character in the story. It is love that keeps the Beast from dying, and it is love that restores the entire castle and all its inhabitants to their original form.

Vulnerability and weakness can be perceived as a fatal flaw, but it is actually in our place of weakness that the light of God shines the strongest. Think of Jacob, who limped after he was weakened by God. Was he less of a man now that he walked with a limp? Absolutely not! The opposite is true. Jacob was stronger now that God had weakened him, and it is in our weakness that God is able to prove how strong He really is (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

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A FAMILY PRESERVED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God is faithful to be present with His people, even in adversity (Gen. 39:21-23).
2. God is faithful to prompt forgiveness and reconciliation in His people (Gen. 45:4-8).
3. God is faithful to bring good, even from evil (Gen. 50:15-21).

Background Passage: Genesis 37–50

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God works through adversity and even the evil actions of people to bring about good.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God used the evil deeds of Joseph's brothers for His greater plan of saving Joseph's family from a famine. In a greater way, God used the evil injustice of those who crucified Jesus to bring about His master plan of providing salvation from sin and death.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we are a people who have been forgiven of our evil deeds, we forgive those who sin against us, recognizing that God is working everything for the good of those who love Him.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

SETTING: We now enter the story of Joseph. We learn in Genesis 37 that Joseph was Jacob' favorite son, and once again, favoritism caused problems in this dysfunctional family. Joseph was one of the youngest of Jacob's children, yet in his dreams, Joseph saw his family bowing down to him (Gen. 37:5-11). In their jealousy and spite, the brothers sold Joseph, and he became a slave to Potiphar in Egypt (Gen. 37:36). Joseph earned great favor in Potiphar's household but was thrown into prison when Potiphar's wife lied and said Joseph had tried to sleep with her.

DISCUSS: **When have you been falsely accused, and how did that experience make you feel?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion).

TRANSITION: False accusations against us can cause us to feel betrayed, helpless, and defeated. We know the truth, but others have questions, if not doubts, and this can lead to a sense of loneliness. Joseph likely experienced these same feelings while in prison for a crime he did not commit, an accusation made against him for doing the right thing. But he was not alone. In fact, God was with him and working through all of his circumstances for the good of him and God's people so that God would be glorified.

OPTIONAL VIDEO: Show the "99 in :99" video about the essential Christian doctrine *God's Plan and Human Action* (1:57 in length) at this link: <https://www.gospelproject.com/human-action-god-plans>.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: **What does Scripture tell us about false accusations?** (Exodus 20:16 forbids bearing false witness; 1 Peter 3:16-17 encourages believers to live in such a way that false accusations lead to shame for the one who would level them; Matthew 5:11-12 says we are blessed when persecuted and falsely accused for the sake of Christ; Romans 12:17-21 says we should not repay in kind but leave vengeance to the Lord)

POINT 1

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO BE PRESENT WITH HIS PEOPLE, EVEN IN ADVERSITY (GEN. 39:21-23).

NOTES

21 But the LORD was with Joseph and extended kindness to him. He granted him favor with the prison warden. **22** The warden put all the prisoners who were in the prison under Joseph's authority, and he was responsible for everything that was done there. **23** The warden did not bother with anything under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him, and the LORD made everything that he did successful.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 39:21-23** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 21-22** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Though the worst circumstances put Joseph in slavery and in prison, God's **presence** and **kindness** comforted Joseph in his situation.

DISCUSS: How can we know God cares for us in difficult circumstances?

(God has said and demonstrated that He is always faithful to His people; the Bible reminds us of times He has redeemed difficult circumstances; He gives us church members to encourage us in our weakness; God sent His Son to save us from our sin while we were still His enemies)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 23** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Joseph was **faithful** in his circumstances, but God's presence alone resulted in the **good** things that would follow.

DISCUSS: Why are we tempted to rely on our own strength or ability and not trust God? (we are sinners; we like to think we can hold our destiny in our own hands; we forget that God cares; our circumstances take our gaze off God to focus on what we see and think we know)

TRANSITION: Joseph's lot in life looked a bit brighter with his responsibility in prison, but he was still in jail for something he did not do. Was God's presence and kindness just about comforting Joseph in his situation? No, God was going to redeem Joseph's circumstances. This was God's plan all along.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"There is no victory without opposition. God has not called you to a life of ease. He has called you to a life of victory through His Son Jesus Christ."¹

-Adrian Rogers
(1931-2005)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 21-22 / After being sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph found some relief and favor in the house of Potiphar. Though Joseph was not an Egyptian, he was trusted to oversee all of Potiphar's affairs and manage everything that belonged to Potiphar. Everything was going well until Potiphar's wife noticed how attractive Joseph was, and she took action. Her lust overcame her, and she begged Joseph to sleep with her. But he was a man of honor and refused daily (Gen. 39:1-8).

Joseph did not appeal simply to his master's trust as grounds for his refusal. He additionally said that to do what she was requesting would be a sin against God Himself. Angered by Joseph's repeated rejection of her advances, Potiphar's wife took her revenge and accused Joseph of attempted rape, framing him for a crime he did not commit. Enraged, Potiphar did not question the truthfulness of the accusation and threw the slave he had given so much authority into prison (39:8-20).

Joseph lost everything he had earned. We do not know his inner thoughts, but it would not be surprising if he questioned God's purposes. Why would God put Joseph through such a sad chain of events? His own brothers had sold him as a slave and faked his death so no one would come looking for him. Joseph then built a decent life only to have it stripped from him by a false accusation. But this was not the end of his story. Because of God's substantial kindness, Joseph's time in prison paralleled his time with Potiphar. The warden saw Joseph as trustworthy and gave him great responsibility within the prison.

We have no record of Joseph defending himself or trying to escape. He remained quietly faithful, committed to do what was right even when he was accused of wrong. Yet the reader knows the larger reason Joseph received such favor. The beginning of verse 21 tells us that it was Yahweh who was both present with and kind to Joseph.

Surely the comfort of God's presence gave Joseph the endurance he needed not to crumble under the lies spoken about him. With God, what was once a situation that seemed hopeless turned into a redemptive situation where God's kindness brought goodness.

VERSE 23 / The final verse of this chapter repeats two details the reader has seen before. First, the warden did not concern himself with anything under Joseph's authority. The same was true of Potiphar in his house (39:6). Twice the Lord gave Joseph authority, and twice Joseph stewarded his responsibilities so well that his master had no concern and trusted him fully.

Second, the reader should notice the repetition of the statement **"the LORD was with Joseph."** This phrase bookends these verses (39:21,23; see also 39:2). Any time something is repeated in Scripture, we should pay attention. The writer wanted us to know that God was with Joseph and blessed what he did. The emphasis is not on Joseph's special skills nor the perfect timing of the situation. Rather, the very presence of God with Joseph produced what was good. Yes, Joseph was a good steward and did well with what was entrusted to him. Yet it must be noted that Joseph would not have received anything to steward if God had not provided it for him.

The most important player in this story is not Potiphar, his wife, the warden, or even Joseph. The most important character is God. God is the source of goodness, and He extends kindness to His children. What grace! God was not obligated to make Joseph's time in prison successful, yet He blessed him. Anything good that Joseph experienced found its origin in God. It is easy for pride and self-centeredness to rise up if we think what we have is ours or secured by our hands. Instead, like Joseph, we ought to receive the kindness of God as the grace that it is and steward what He gives us for His glory.

POINT 2

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO PROMPT FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN HIS PEOPLE (GEN. 45:4-8).

NOTES

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Please, come near me,” and they came near. “I am Joseph, your brother,” he said, “the one you sold into Egypt.

5 And now don’t be grieved or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because God sent me ahead of you to preserve life. **6** For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there will be five more years without plowing or harvesting. **7** God sent me ahead of you to establish you as a remnant within the land and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.

8 Therefore it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 45:4-8** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 4-5** commentary to emphasize the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Joseph forgave his brothers because he recognized God’s **sovereign** plan and **purpose** in what had happened to him.

DISCUSS: How does trusting in God’s sovereignty factor into our willingness to forgive others? (the sovereign God commands believers to forgive as He has forgiven them in Christ; our forgiveness does not absolve another’s wrongdoing but signifies our trust in God to address the sin; we can know that God will redeem in us the sins others perpetrate against us).

EXPLAIN: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 13: GOD BEHIND THE WHEEL**, and use the **VERSES 6-8** commentary to expound upon the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God’s sovereign plan ensured that His **people** were cared for and **provided** for during seven long years of famine in the land.

TRANSITION: After reconciliation with Joseph, Jacob and his sons moved to the land of Egypt so Joseph could provide for them during the famine. But would their reconciliation last? Would this family survive the potential for bitterness and revenge?

Providence is God sitting behind the steering wheel of time.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 4-5 / After thirteen years in prison, a series of interpreted dreams, and an elevation in status even above what he had before, Joseph stood in a position of great authority. Because a severe famine was on the way, Joseph began to prepare the land of Egypt for the crisis so there would be grain available during the long, hard years to come (Gen. 40–41).

The sons of Israel, Joseph's brothers, came to Pharaoh's land to find food for their families, and Joseph, in charge of the grain distribution, encountered his brothers for the first time in more than a decade. In their interactions, the brothers did not recognize their own. But after a series of tests, Joseph finally decided to reveal himself (Gen. 42–45). Imagine the mixed emotions Joseph must have felt as he stood before his brothers!

At first, Joseph's brothers were dumbfounded and terrified, but when Joseph recalled the brothers' sin of selling him into slavery, there was no doubt who stood before them. Shockingly, Joseph spoke to them with immediate forgiveness. He did not rehearse all the terrible things he had suffered but rather comforted them with the truth he knew in his heart: God was the One who orchestrated it all.

Joseph forgave quickly because he was confident in God's sovereignty. The word sovereignty has many definitions, but one succinct way to put it is that God is "seeing to everything."² God is all-powerful and all-caring. He has the power to plan everything. But more than just power, He also has great care for His people and brings about good for them. Joseph saw the purpose of all those years—all the terrible things happened so that Joseph could ensure that his family stayed alive during this famine and beyond.

The sons of Israel intended to remove Joseph from their family history, yet Joseph was the one God used to keep the family alive. God's perfect orchestration of the life

of Joseph brought him to a position where all of Egypt and the surrounding lands could be sustained through the famine. It was Joseph's complete confidence in God's plan that allowed him to forgive his brothers immediately. He revealed here that he trusted the God of Israel.

VERSES 6-8 / As Joseph continued, he helped his brothers (and the reader) understand even more of God's sovereign plan. First, Joseph revealed that this famine would continue for five more years, for a total of seven years. God had revealed this famine to Pharaoh in a dream, and God also revealed its meaning to Joseph. Joseph's God-given wisdom and understanding earned him the position of having responsibility over all of Egypt as second in command to Pharaoh.

Second, God's plan to preserve His people was revealed as the ultimate purpose of all that had occurred. Joseph was certain that God's main objective was not the survival of Egypt, though they would be blessed through Joseph's work. No, God's main objective was to ensure that the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled. God promised to make a great nation for Himself, one so expansive that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants. God's plan was not just for Joseph to forgive his brothers or for Joseph to become a great leader. Rather, God's plan was to keep His plan going. Through Joseph, the sons of Israel survived the famine and would continue to be the people God used to bring salvation to all the earth.

Finally, if it was not clear to the brothers yet, Joseph repeated that God was the One who sent him to Egypt and made him a great leader. No one could take credit for this marvelous work besides God. God's plan was bigger than Joseph or his brothers could have ever dreamed. Because God preserved His people, the nation of Israel would continue to grow and a Savior, Jesus Christ, would come from this nation to redeem the whole world.

POINT 3

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO BRING GOOD, EVEN FROM EVIL (GEN. 50:15-21).

NOTES

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said to one another, "If Joseph is holding a grudge against us, he will certainly repay us for all the suffering we caused him." **16** So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before he died your father gave a command: **17** 'Say this to Joseph: Please forgive your brothers' transgression and their sin—the suffering they caused you.' Therefore, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when their message came to him. **18** His brothers also came to him, bowed down before him, and said, "We are your slaves!" **19** But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? **20** You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. **21** Therefore don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your children." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 50:15-21** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-21** commentary to emphasize the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Joseph trusted the sovereign God to do what is **good** and **right** even through the evil of human beings.

EXPLAIN: Use the following essential Christian doctrine to show how the circumstances in Joseph's life mirrored that of Jesus' crucifixion (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #29: *God's Plan and Human Action:* God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the **free** actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many plans are in a person's heart, but the LORD's decree will prevail." In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen **sinful** actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the **crucifixion** of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

DISCUSS: How does Joseph's story affect the way you understand your **life circumstances?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 15-18 / From the moment his brothers first came to purchase food during the famine, there were many opportunities for Joseph to exact revenge upon them, to treat them as they had treated him. Joseph could have refused them food when they came to Egypt, but he did not. He could have turned one of his tests into a trial for stealing, but he did not do that either. He could have done anything with his near limitless human authority. Yet time and time again, Joseph operated with kindness and forgiveness toward his brothers, though it may not have felt that way to them. Even Pharaoh himself, upon learning that Joseph had an extended family, welcomed them to live in Egypt in the best part of the land and gave them charge over his own livestock (Gen. 47:1-12).

Then Jacob, the patriarch, died (49:33).

Despite Joseph showing them undeserved kindness time and again, his brothers feared that with their father dead, Joseph's kindness may have finally run out. Perhaps now he would have his revenge upon them since their father was no longer present. Perhaps his kindness was only motivated by his love for his father and not actual forgiveness after all.

Instead of facing Joseph directly, the brothers sent him a message. We don't know whether or not the quote from their father was legitimate. But what we do know is that verses 16-17 are the first recorded time the brothers confessed their sin against Joseph. They knew they had wronged Joseph, and they asked him for his forgiveness. Joseph felt deep emotion once he received this message, though the reason for his weeping is not spelled out for us.

Then the brothers came before Joseph and bowed down, assuming a lowly posture and calling themselves slaves. This should remind the reader of Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37. The dreams alluded to a time when the brothers and their parents would bow down to Joseph. In part, they did so

when they asked for food from Joseph during the famine. Here we see them physically bowing down to Joseph, asking for forgiveness. Joseph had all the power. He could have turned them away and forced them to work as slaves in Egypt. Joseph could have done as he wished with them, yet his brothers also knew they needed to confess their sins to him, regardless of the outcome. Would their brother show mercy or would he exact justice?

VERSES 19-21 / Joseph's first response to his brothers is one familiar to God's people. **"Don't be afraid"** is repeated often through the Old and New Testaments. Not only did Joseph seek to diminish their fears, he also made another bold statement. He asked something that might also sound somewhat familiar to us: **"Am I in the place of God?"** The sentiment is "Am I like God?" Does this not sound similar to the serpent's statement that eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would make Eve like God (Gen. 3:5)? **3** Instead of seeking to be like God, to be one sitting on the throne of judgment, Joseph did the opposite. He trusted the Lord with any vengeance necessary because he had seen how God worked His good will through his brothers' evil choices (Deut. 32:35).

Joseph did not explicitly say to his brothers, "I forgive you," yet his actions at the end of this passage affirmed he had already forgiven them. Though their father was dead and revenge ready for the taking, Joseph reiterated his promise to care for his brothers and their families and to provide for them in Egypt.

Joseph's actions displayed God's character and God's providence. God's character is evident in Joseph's quickness to forgive sins and to lavish love and care over his family. God's providence is clear in Joseph's statement that all these events took place according to God's plan to ensure that many people would survive and that God would continue to have a people for Himself, no matter what evil might come about.

MY RESPONSE

Because we are a people who have been forgiven of our evil deeds, we forgive those who sin against us, recognizing that God is working everything for the good of those who love Him.

HEAD:

God is the orchestrator of all things. Our human minds cannot comprehend all that He does and how all the pieces of His plan fit together. Even evil tactics used against us or sins that seems impossible to overcome are no match for God. He orchestrates all things for His glory and our good. He did this at every point in Joseph's life, proving His perfect execution of His plan. Even the darkest moment of human history—while Jesus hung on the cross, that most evil and undeserved murder—was used to bring about redemption for the whole world! God is powerful and orchestrates all things according to His divine and perfect purposes.

How will you change the way you think about the power of evil in this world?

HEART:

In most religions, gods are distant, uninvolved, and cold. The true God is the opposite of this. He is near, He is in control, and His warmth has no end. God cares deeply about us. Even the small parts of daily life that seem insignificant to us are important to God. It is staggering to realize that the same God who created every blade of grass and every fish in the sea cares about our hurt feelings, broken relationships, and struggles with sin. We do not serve a cold god who turns away from pain. Our God is involved at the most granular level, showing great kindness as He did with Joseph.

In what circumstances do you need to rejoice, knowing that God cares and provides for you?

HANDS:

Joseph and his brothers suffered through over a decade of hurt and sin. Jealousy fueled horrible actions and caused deep wounds. When given the option between revenge and forgiveness, Joseph chose forgiveness. If Joseph were left to his own devices and God were uninvolved, there would be little doubt he would have acted out of his pain and sought revenge. Because God has intervened in our lives and lavished forgiveness on us when we deserved His wrath, we now have all the power by the Holy Spirit to forgive others. God's kindness toward us ought to fuel our kindness and forgiveness toward others.

How will you demonstrate the kindness and forgiveness you have received in Christ?

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"The cross shows us that God can take the worst possible evil and through it accomplish the greatest possible good—the destruction of evil itself."⁴

—Christopher Wright

POINT 1: GOD IS FAITHFUL TO BE PRESENT WITH HIS PEOPLE, EVEN IN ADVERSITY (GEN. 39:21-23).

+ COMMENTARY

“**The LORD**, who is present in Sheol (Ps. 139:8), was also **with Joseph** in prison. God, who is rich in ‘faithful love’ (**kindness**; Heb. *chesed*; see Ex. 34:7), demonstrated his love by granting Joseph **favor with the prison warden**. For the third time in his life (cp. v. 4; Gen. 37:14), Joseph was given authority over his peers—in this case, **all the prisoners who were in the prison**. Mirroring Potiphar’s level of confidence in Joseph, the warden did not ‘see anything in his hand’ (**bother with anything under Joseph’s authority**) because **the LORD** caused everything Joseph did to be **successful** (Heb. *mats-li-ach*; cp. Ps. 1:3 ‘prosper’).” **5**

+ ILLUSTRATION

In one of the most crucial moments of the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, the readers learn of a heroic character they assumed was a villain. Behind the scenes, this character was working to help Harry and his friends succeed and survive the schemes of Lord Voldemort. We learn the hero’s motivation is love of another, and when asked, “After all this time?” the hero answers, “Always.” **6** The realization for the readers and for Harry Potter and his friends is that through all the suffering they endured, this character was present and working, even though they didn’t realize it. This character’s motivations were not completely pure, of course, but the shock of someone who cared all along makes for a compelling story.

Now imagine someone who is present and working behind the scenes with perfect, pure, and good motivations. In Joseph’s life, God was constantly at work. His hand was not always visible, but whether Joseph or his brothers could see it or not, God was present and working. He did not disappear when life became difficult, when the situation felt impossible, or if He was not getting any credit. God simply worked and wove all the threads of these circumstances together for His grand purpose in the life of Joseph and his family. God does the same for all His children. His providential hand is at work in every area of our lives. We do not have to look hard to see His hand, though we could never grasp all He has done, is doing, and will do.

If God revealed all that He has done in our lives, we would marvel and ask with bewilderment, “After all this time?” And He would declare, “Always!”

EXTRA

POINT 2: GOD IS FAITHFUL TO PROMPT FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN HIS PEOPLE (GEN. 45:4-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“Joseph immediately called them closer and tried to set their minds at rest (45:5-7). They were not to be distressed or angry with themselves for what they had done. They need not feel guilty for God had overridden their plans to destroy him and had used him to save the lives of many people. And God would continue to use him to preserve his family and to save their lives too. He made it clear that he was not accusing them about what had happened in the past, but was explaining it. God had enabled him to forgive his brothers and to show magnanimity towards them. Joseph gave God all the glory and the honour for having raised him up to be the lord of Pharaoh’s household and ruler of all Egypt (45:8).”⁷

+ COMMENTARY

“Joseph tells his brothers that God was behind their evil act of selling him into slavery. God has brought him out of slavery and prison (his humiliation) to a powerful position in Egypt (his exaltation) for a purpose: to see that the family of promise would survive a devastating famine. The immediate consequence of the survival of the remnant would be the people of Israel, who themselves will be placed in slavery (their humiliation) but freed and brought into the promised land (their exaltation) by God. But there is of course a longer term and more powerful consequence for the survival of the family who received the promise of the seed. This family will become a nation that will produce the Messiah. Paul sees the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of the seed to be Jesus [see Gal. 3:16].”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

Immediate forgiveness is not something familiar to the world. In most cinematic representations of forgiveness, the one who is wronged requires some sort of payment or proof that the action will not happen again. Maybe you’ve seen this in a film before. Say a woman does something terrible in secret, is overwhelmed by guilt, and goes to the man she wronged to confess her mistake. “I am so sorry I did this to you,” she says. He looks at her, obviously hurt and offended, and says “I need some time to think about this.” Of course, this is a Hollywood ploy to build dramatic tension as the man ponders the situation, and then in some grand gesture, he forgives her and all is made right in the world.

This drawn out, contemplative form of forgiveness is not at all what we see in Joseph’s encounter with his brothers. In fact, it seems he had already forgiven them before they even arrived. Immediate forgiveness is radical and countercultural. Our society is prone to hold grudges, ask for payment when wronged, and give bitterness the upper hand in relationships. We must analyze our relationships and see if we are prone to punish or withhold from those who ask for our forgiveness. We must ask ourselves what is holding us back from immediate forgiveness. What do we gain or lose by not forgiving immediately and with no questions asked? If we look at Joseph’s relationship with his brothers, we can see that he lost nothing by forgiving them immediately. In reality, he gained the ability to love and care for them in a way he couldn’t have had he held a grudge. Joseph’s example of immediate forgiveness is a lesson to us all.

POINT 3: GOD IS FAITHFUL TO BRING GOOD, EVEN FROM EVIL (GEN. 50:15-21).

+ COMMENTARY

“While the phrase *tahat elohim* [‘in the place of God’] is not explicit in the text, it is implicit in the serpent’s question to Eve. In essence, he tantalizes her with, ‘Would you like to be in God’s place?’ ‘Would you like to be your own God?’ There is a considerable contrast between Adam and Eve and Joseph. Genesis begins by telling us about a primeval couple who tried to become like God, and ends by telling us about a man who denied he was in God’s place. Adam and Eve attempted to wipe out the dividing line between humanity and deity. Joseph refuses to try to cross that line. Joseph will only be God’s instrument, never his substitute.”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

Have you ever asked for something and been given more than you thought you would? In India, most meals are served with massive amounts of food, yet it is considered rude not to clean your plate and ask for a second serving. Asking for seconds is a dangerous endeavor, however. You may get another heaping plate of food if you are not careful. We have all experienced something like this. You ask for more food, for directions, or for some help moving, and all of a sudden you have more on your plate than you can stomach, you have an extra passenger in your vehicle, or you have friends unloading boxes in rooms they shouldn’t. In these situations, we know that people have good motivations and we don’t want to seem ungrateful, so we just grin and think to ourselves, “This is a ‘give an inch, take a mile’ kind of person.”

The opposite of this is when you ask for very little and are overwhelmed with more than you could have ever imagined. In desperate situations, this is especially humbling. If you’ve had to ask for money or donations before, you know that one of the most shocking events is when you receive far more than you expected. When Joseph’s brothers stood before him to ask for forgiveness, they could not have imagined what they were about to receive. Not only did they gain Joseph’s forgiveness, he vowed to provide for their families while they lived in Egypt. This kindness lavished on the brothers was unexpected in the best way. Joseph’s radical generosity and care confirmed to his brothers that not only did he forgive them, he loved them and wanted to do anything he could to ensure their wellbeing.

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THE GOD OF PROVIDENCE

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Lord's hand holds together all of creation (Col. 1:15-17).
2. The Lord's hand rules over all in righteousness (Ps. 103:15-19).
3. The Lord's hand provides what we need (Matt. 6:25-34).

Background Passages: Psalm 103; Matthew 5–7; Colossians 1

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

The Lord, through His providential work in creation, holds all things together, rules over all, and provides all that is needed.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

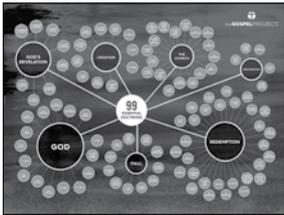
Jesus is at the center of creation. All of creation exists by Him and for Him. The Son of God is the One who holds all of creation together.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because Jesus is at the center of creation, all that we do is done for Him and His glory as we live with complete dependence and trust in His faithful provision.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

SETTING: In the wake of the flood and the scattering of humanity at the Tower of Babylon (or Babel), God's plans seem to be struggling, if not failing. His image-bearers largely reject His sovereign and benevolent rule. But things are not as they seem, for God continues to hold all things together and works in His creation and creatures to accomplish His will. God demonstrated this by calling Abraham and making a covenant with him and his descendants to bless the world. In spite of human sin, and often through it, God providentially took care of His people and worked all things for His glory and our good.

DISCUSS: What impossible human feat would you like to be able to do? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: We live in a world with physical limitations. There are a number of things we as human beings cannot do, which can give rise to daydreams or frustrations. But that is not the case with the all-powerful God. He doesn't need to wonder or imagine about what could be because He is the great "I AM." The only thing Scripture says God *cannot* do is sin, which is often what we're best at! The triune God has existed in eternal bliss between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Never for one moment has God been in want. He didn't need to create us, and He doesn't need to sustain us. But He did and He does. In His providence, God literally holds the subatomic particles of our universe and each of our bodies together by His matchless and effortless power, even as He cares for us and provides for all of our needs.

POINT 1

THE LORD'S HAND HOLDS TOGETHER ALL OF CREATION (COL. 1:15-17).

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

16 For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. **17** He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Colossians 1:15-17** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 15** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Jesus Christ is the **eternal** Son of God, **the** image of the invisible God.
To look at Jesus is to see God Himself.

DISCUSS: How should we read the Bible in light of the fact that Jesus is God? (Jesus has preeminence over all of creation, so He has preeminence over every person and nation in Scripture; we should read the Bible as pointing us to Christ, who is the epitome of “good” humanity; the Son of God is everywhere and always active in Scripture, from creation to restoration)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 16-17** commentary to emphasize the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Because Jesus is God, the **Creator** and **Sustainer** of all things by His divine power, our salvation is sure and our hope is secure.

DISCUSS: How can we show that Jesus is our foundation in life? (we sing His praises as our Creator and Sustainer; we joyfully obey His commands as leading us to a full experience of life; we proclaim to others the salvation from sin that we have found in Jesus; we live for the glory of Christ, not our own)

TRANSITION: God the Son has held creation together from the moment it was spoken into being. Even on the cross, as Jesus died, our fragile existence was upheld by His powerful hand. But God sustains the creation with more than just power; He rules it in righteousness.

NOTES

“FIRSTBORN”

To be declared “firstborn” in Scripture is a statement of preeminence, not necessarily birth order. As the Creator, the Son of God has preeminence over all of His creation, which He eventually entered as a human being. Jesus Christ is also the “firstborn” from the dead by virtue of His eternal resurrection, making Him preeminent over the church and everything (Col. 1:15-20).

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“As this all-wise, all-gracious Being created all things, so he sustains all things. He is the Preserver as well as the Creator of everything that exists.”¹

—John Wesley (1703-1791)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 15 / Many point to John 1 as one of the clearest depictions of Jesus' divinity. If you want to show someone that Jesus is God, point them to this beautiful language: "The Word was with God, and the Word was God," through whom "all things were created" and who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1,3,14). Yet our passage here in Colossians 1 offers similarly clear language about the deity of Christ.

In the context of his Letter to the Colossians, Paul used this miniature confession or hymn to center the Colossian believers' hope on Christ. Their hope was not built merely on Jesus' good deeds or simply His death on the cross and victorious resurrection. These are important pieces to the salvation puzzle and are mentioned right after this passage (Col. 1:18-20), but those truths about His earthly ministry rest on the fact that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He is **"the image of the invisible God,"** meaning when you look at the life, ministry, and work of Jesus, you see God Himself because He is the eternal Son of God, one with the Father. He is not merely a mirror or an example but is the image. As Hebrews 1:3 says, He is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature."

Paul also described Jesus as **"the firstborn over all creation."** At first, this seems to call into question the full deity of Christ. Is the Son of God eternal or not? "Firstborn" language in Scripture is not ultimately about biological birth order but about rank or status. For example, in Exodus 4:22, the Lord called the people of Israel His "firstborn son," indicating a special and unique relationship. Similarly, in Psalm 89:27, God's "firstborn" would be one who is appointed by God to rule over the earth. Furthermore, Isaac technically wasn't Abraham's firstborn son either; Ishmael was. But God had specified that the promise would go through the son of Sarah.

The firstborn, biblically speaking, is not required to be the first or oldest son but

rather the son who has a special status or title as the heir to an inheritance. So to speak of Christ as the firstborn over creation is to speak of His special status as the ruler over creation. He is the eternal Son of God, and thus, His unique relationship with the Father as His eternal, only-begotten Son affords Him special privilege because He is God. He is separate from creation, not the first created being.

VERSES 16-17 / Not only is Jesus the firstborn over creation, the Son is identified as the Creator. Everything was created by Him, through Him, and for Him. Just as Jews have taught for thousands of years and Christians have affirmed the last two thousand years, there is a clear distinction between the Creator and His creation. The Creator is the potter and creation is His clay. Paul placed Jesus on the Creator side of the Creator/creature divide.

Paul underscored his previous words by saying that Jesus is **"before all things, and by him all things hold together."** This Jesus, who is the image of God and the One by and through and for whom all things were made, existed before all of creation. The triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is eternal, and "all things" that come after are dependent upon Him.

The Colossians' hope, then, was their Savior and King, who is not a mere man who died for them but God Himself who stepped into human history to save them. The sure plan of God has never been left to chance. Because Jesus is God in the flesh, our salvation is sure and our hope is secure.

God the Son was always there, through all eternity and in every moment of creation. So as our Redeemer, we know that He is still there for us and will never leave us. Our very existence depends on His existence; our fragile state is held together by His perfect power. One day, our triune God who created all things will make all things new (Rev. 21–22). He is providentially moving all of history toward that day.

POINT 2

THE LORD'S HAND RULES OVER ALL IN RIGHTEOUSNESS (Ps. 103:15-19).

NOTES

15 As for man, his days are like grass—he blooms like a flower of the field; **16** when the wind passes over it, it vanishes, and its place is no longer known. **17** But from eternity to eternity the LORD's faithful love is toward those who fear him, and his righteousness toward the grandchildren **18** of those who keep his covenant, who remember to observe his precepts. **19** The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Psalm 103:15-19** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-16** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Because of **sin**, all of humanity faces **death**. We are fragile, finite, and broken people who deserve eternal judgment.

DISCUSS: What are some ways human beings run from their mortality?

(through making healthy choices to try to prolong length and quality of life; choosing not to focus on the reality of death; engaging in medical procedures that give the appearance of health and youth; some invest in experimental procedures with the hope of being revived some day)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 17-19** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The solution to our mortality and judgment cannot come from ourselves but must come from Jesus, who **rules** in heaven, who **loves** us, and who fulfilled all **righteousness** on our behalf.

PACK ITEM 14: PROVIDENCE HYMN: Pass out copies of this hymn and sing it together to worship God for His providence and grace shown to us in sending the Son and the Spirit to secure our salvation and seal us for all eternity.

TRANSITION: Our triune God stands outside of time and space as the Creator and Sustainer of all things. But God is not distant. He came into this world in Christ and He cares for our provision so that we would call on Him in faith and be saved.



COMMENTARY

VERSES 15-16 / Paul said, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). We all want to believe this beautiful truth, but contemplating mortality is never fun. Who wants to die? This passage in the Psalter offers no real comfort at first glance: “Good news, friends!” says the psalmist, “Your life is fleeting and your time is short!”

Because of sin, death is our great enemy (Gen. 3). Our lives are short in the long run of human history. In comparison to eternity, we are but a blip. This may cause us to feel discouraged or even anxious, but the psalmist is setting up his audience for the true good news by setting our minds on reality: We are fragile, finite, and broken, but we are not alone.

VERSES 17-18 / Though our lives here on earth are fleeting, we all have a future in eternity. Many, by rejecting our Creator, will find themselves subject to the eternal and just anger of God against sin (see Ps. 103:9-10). But the righteous ones—those who pledge their worship and allegiance to the King of the universe—receive God’s faithful love that will never stop and never fade, whether in this life or the next.

God’s faithful love for His people is a consistent refrain in the biblical storyline. From the very beginning of human history with Adam and Eve and throughout subsequent generations, God has made covenants with His people. Most covenants have a consistent core to them: God sets stipulations for blessing and cursing. Keep the covenant, and blessing will come; break the covenant, and curses will come. As you might imagine, sinners don’t keep covenants well. God’s people failed over and over again, but God keeps His covenant promises and He has established new covenants that built on previous ones.

Portions of these covenants were fulfilled throughout biblical history. But all of these covenants have an end goal and final fulfillment centered on a descendant or “offspring” who would one day come.

God always required every person under a covenant to keep its commands, though He was exceedingly gracious, patient, and understanding of the sinners He called as His people. Yet through His covenants, God was also telling a larger story centered on His Son, the One who would come to fulfill the covenants as the promised offspring of the woman, the second and last Adam, the true Israelite, and the Son of David.

“From eternity to eternity,” God’s faithful love is not dependent on us but wholly dependent on His goodness and grace. The Old Testament saints hoped in this coming descendant. New Testament saints and those of us who have come after hope in that same descendant whom we now know as Jesus Christ, the God-man who kept God’s covenants and redeemed us as the God who saves and the man who died and rose again.

VERSE 19 / Because God sits on His heavenly throne above and beyond all of creation, He is able to guide providentially all of history to His desired culmination. We may never know why God allowed Satan to tempt Adam and Eve or why He allowed them subsequently to sin—the Bible gives no clear answer—but we know that He has promised to make all things new. We know that His plans cannot be thwarted and that His promises always come true.

As God’s people, we are called to approach our sovereign God’s throne of grace with boldness because we know there we will find the mercy and grace we need in any given moment (Heb. 4:16). We know that our transcendent, glorious triune God loves us, desires to save us, and promises to reward us eternally for our faith in this life. We are not perfect and we cannot keep His covenants, but this is why the Father sent the Son and the Spirit to secure our salvation and seal us for all eternity (Eph. 1:3-14). God’s kingdom is not of this world; it is eternal, unchanging, and the place where we will one day live for all of eternity, according to the providential plan of God.

POINT 3

THE LORD'S HAND PROVIDES WHAT WE NEED (MATT. 6:25-34).

25 “Therefore I tell you: Don’t worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothing? **26** Consider the birds of the sky: They don’t sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth more than they? **27** Can any of you add one moment to his life span by worrying? **28** And why do you worry about clothes? Observe how the wildflowers of the field grow: They don’t labor or spin thread. **29** Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was adorned like one of these. **30** If that’s how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, won’t he do much more for you—you of little faith? **31** So don’t worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ **32** For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. **34** Therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 6:25-34** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 25-32** commentary to explain the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God knows what is **best**. In wealth or poverty, God is working a plan for your **good** and His **glory**.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 33-34** commentary to emphasize the essential doctrine for this session (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #30: God’s Providence: Providence refers to God’s continuing work and involvement in His creation. This includes, in various degrees, God’s preservation of the created order, His governance, and His **care** for His people (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; Gen. 8:21-22). Christians believe the world, and even the cosmos itself, is contingent upon God, incapable of existing apart from Him. Christians also believe in God’s personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the natural order but also the **individuals** and **events** within human history.

DISCUSS: **What are some ways you have seen the Lord provide when you were focused on trusting Him?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

NOTES

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As theologians have sometimes defined it, the kingdom of God refers to God’s rule over God’s people at God’s place and time. While God is at all times the King of all creation, the kingdom of God is specifically where His reign is rightfully acknowledged and lived out by His creatures.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 25-30 / This passage can be applied from two different perspectives. On the one hand, some people have much more than they could ever need; they are rich by just about any standard. On the other hand, some people barely scrape by; they are poor by just about any standard. Yet the same point applies to both: Your abundance of possessions or lack of possessions does not define your life.

By way of illustration, Jesus started on the bottom shelf. Look around at God's creation—even those who are often viewed as passive receive provision. The birds and the flowers aren't apex predators. They don't have barns and storehouses to stock up their food, or to put it in modern terms, neither do they have pantries and a 401(k). And yet, God takes care of them. It is worth remembering here that God cares about all of creation. Beyond political talking points and debates about what it means to take care of the planet or our communities, we must agree based on this passage that God cares for everything He has created. But He does play favorites in the case of humanity. So Jesus moved to the top shelf, turning the illustration to human beings.

Since the beginning, humankind has clearly been the pinnacle of God's creation as His image-bearers. He cares for us. Recall the story of Joseph to see God's providential care. Years before the famine hit, before it was even foretold, God worked to send Joseph to Egypt so that food would be available to preserve God's people when none could be sown or grown. Even through poverty and prison, God cared for Joseph in order to care for His people.

So Jesus asked how we could have such little faith, thinking we need possessions or securing basics like food to define and sustain our lives. What if, worst-case scenario, we starved to death? It wouldn't be pleasant, and we would struggle to find any good in it. But God knows what is best. In wealth or poverty, God is working out a plan for your good and His glory (Rom. 8:28).

VERSES 31-32 / Jesus continued with another illustration-within-an-illustration, pointing out that **“the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things.”** Of course, we know Gentiles are part of God's plan to redeem all of humanity through Christ, so He's not making them out as the bad guys in a universal sense. Rather, “Gentiles” refers to those who do not seek God's kingdom, for Gentiles were typically viewed as pagans who were separate from the Israelites—God's people. Jesus was telling His disciples, then, that unbelievers worry about these things, but God's people should not.

VERSES 33-34 / To drive His point home, Jesus defined the difference between true faith and those with “little faith.” The birds and flowers are not the pinnacle of God's creation, yet He cares for them. They do not worry because they know they will be sustained. The Gentiles who are far from God do worry because they don't trust God. But God's people don't operate this way.

Unlike birds, flowers, and the pagan Gentiles, God's people can **“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”** This is not to say that we just pray and let food fall like manna from heaven. It doesn't mean that we all should be homeless and starving in order to follow Christ. Instead, Jesus is setting up a heart posture. Whether you have much or you have little, the command is the same for God's people: Do not let the worries of life consume you. Don't worship possessions. Don't pine over what you will wear or even what you will eat. No, seek God's kingdom. Rest in God's providential love and grace, and He will give you what you need.

In wealth or poverty, health or suffering, happiness or pain, there is a sovereign God with whom there are no mistakes or accidents. Jesus here commands us to have the faith to trust God's power and goodness. God's people are called to a different outlook on the fallen world around us, one that is shaped by God's kingdom and not our own little kingdoms.

MY RESPONSE

Because Jesus is at the center of creation, all that we do is done for Him and His glory as we live with complete dependence and trust in His faithful provision.

HEAD:

God is sovereign and He is good. As the Creator, He stands outside of creation and rules all things within creation. Nothing happens outside of His rule, there are no accidents, and He is never distant from us. Jesus is God, and therefore, He reigns and rules. He was not created but is the Creator. Because of this, He is worthy of worship and owed our trust and obedience. By the Spirit, we are united with Christ and able to follow Him by grace through faith.

How does God's sovereignty shape your understanding of God's providence?

HEART:

Understanding God's sovereignty and providence affects us in two ways. First, it reminds us that even our trials and suffering are not accidental or arbitrary. God hates sin, and He promises one day to make all things new. In the meantime, He uses suffering and trials for our good and His glory. Through suffering, we learn to depend on Him more deeply. Second, it reminds us that we are needy sinners with a loving God. Though He could have wiped out creation the moment Adam and Eve sinned, He instead drew near to us, most clearly in the sending of the Son. By His Spirit we are able to face temptations and trials with hope and joy and we are able to worship God for His goodness to us even in our sin.

How will you strive for peace in temptations and trials knowing God is providentially working for your good?

HANDS:

We are prone to desire control over our lives. We want to be comfortable as much as it depends on us. We live with closed hands and closed doors because that feels safer. Even in evangelism—a good thing!—we are intimidated by sharing the gospel because we feel the pressure to say the right things. The truth is God's providence takes the pressure off of us in all of these situations. We are not guaranteed safety or comfort, but God promises to care for us. We are not promised riches, only that God will give us our daily bread. We are not called to save anyone, only to be faithful to point to the One who saves, and God has promised to provide the words we need (Luke 12:11-12). God is powerful and good, and we can trust Him in every area of our lives to work through us as we seek to be faithful to Him.

What are some ways you will live out God's call to be a good steward and neighbor in light of God's providence?

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Just as he gave existence to that which did not exist, so he gave new creation to that which did exist."²

—Gregory of Nazianzus
(c. 329-390)

POINT 1: THE LORD'S HAND HOLDS TOGETHER ALL OF CREATION (COL. 1:15-17).

+ COMMENTARY

“The image of God, referred to in the creation account of Gen. 1, is the Son, eternally and as he becomes flesh and the glory of God is beheld. The language Paul uses here, rich in Old Testament background, ‘firstborn of creation,’ does not refer to the first distinctive thing in a series of like things. It refers to the status the Son has vis-à-vis God himself. The firstborn is heir of all things of the Father. He is the image, he is the firstborn of creation, that is, creation is the work of the image alongside God himself.”³

+ COMMENTARY

“Paul begins his Christology in verses 15-16 by identifying Christ as ‘the image of the invisible God’ (v. 15) ... ‘No one has ever seen God,’ writes John, but ‘the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known’ (John 1:18). Here, Paul makes the same point by declaring that the Son has perfectly reflected the Father from eternity and now perfectly reveals the invisible God in the incarnate Christ. Only a divine Son can be this image ... Paul confirms that even now, Christ is the Lord of cosmic preservation and providence: ‘and in him all things hold together’ (v. 17).”⁴

POINT 3: THE LORD'S HAND PROVIDES WHAT WE NEED (MATT. 6:25-34).

+ COMMENTARY

“Our final good is therefore the kingdom of God and his justice. We ought to seek this good and fix our aim upon it. Let us perform all our actions for the sake of it. Yet, since we are waging war in this life in order to be able to reach that kingdom and since this life cannot be maintained unless those necessities are supplied, he says, ‘These things shall be given you besides, but seek you first the kingdom of God and his justice.’”⁵

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SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

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