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Genesis 12: Blessed to be Blessing

By Nathan Jewett

All of redemptive history comes into greater focus and clarity in Genesis 12. In these verses we see a glimpse of the plans laid before the foundations of the world—the hope for all humanity that will one day be fully realized in the man Jesus Christ.

From creation to fall, we have seen the beauty of God’s design and the wickedness of man’s rebellious heart. The threads of redemption take shape as the Lord himself now calls out to a man named Abram, bestowing upon him the promise of true blessing. This man had no business receiving the promise of God. Abram was most likely a pagan, perhaps even a moon worshipper from the land of Ur—hardly the guy we would choose to make into a great nation. Yet that’s exactly what happens in this story! The God of the universe meets a man just like everyone else and declares the fullness of divine blessing upon him.

However, the plan was not for Abram to merely be the recipient of God’s blessing, but to be the conduit by which this blessing is extended to “all the families of the earth” (v. 3). Abram was not simply going to be blessed—he was going to be blessed to be a blessing. It’s quite unlikely Abram understood the full ramifications of these words, for it would be another 2,000 years before the hope for all the families of the earth was purchased through Christ’s cross and empty tomb.

Now this man, Abram, could have responded in any number of ways to the preposterous claims of the voice in the sky. He could have clung to the comfort and familiarity of his home in Ur. He could have calculated the risk of following a random voice into an unknown land too great. Instead, we read that “Abram went, as the LORD had told him” (v. 4). Abram was certainly not a perfect man as we learn throughout the Genesis narrative, but one thing is abundantly clear time and time again: he was a man of faith.

Upon arriving in the land of Canaan, the LORD appeared to Abram once more and reaffirmed the promise: to the offspring of Abram would this land be given (v. 7). One can only imagine Abram had a million questions about how all these things would happen, but his response is not one of doubt and timidity—it is one of worship. Here, in this foreign land, he builds an altar to the LORD and pitches his tent, eagerly anticipating the fulfillment of this great promise.

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Discussion Questions

1. Read through the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3. What themes or words stand out? What were the implications of this call for Abram and his family?
2. What is the significance of “blessing” in the call of Abram? What type of blessing is promised in this text?
3. In what ways do we see the promise to Abram fulfilled throughout the OT?
4. In what ways do we see the promise to Abram fulfilled in Jesus?
5. How have you personally experienced this blessing in your own life?
6. What is the significance of God’s design that Abram would be blessed “so that [he] would be a blessing”? (v. 2) What are the implications of this principle (blessed to be a blessing) in light of the work of Christ? How might you be a blessing? What effect would this have on your family? Neighborhood? Workplace?
7. Abram was an imperfect man, but possessed faith in a great God. In what areas of your life do you lack faith in the character and promise of God? What specific steps of obedience is the Spirit leading you toward? How might you move forward in faith?

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Genesis 13-14: Lot and Melchizedek

By Nathan Jewett

There are several big stories in these two chapters. They cover Abram's repentance, Abram's generosity to Lot, Abram's rescue of Lot, and the mysterious Melchizedek.

Abram's Worship

Chapter 12 records that Abram asked Sarai to deceive Pharaoh by saying they were brother and sister without revealing they were husband and wife. Abram abdicated his role as protector and provider, handed her to the wolves after getting her to consent, and focused on his gain by marginalizing his wife. His abandonment of Sarai is no small sin. Every husband, or potential husband, should take note of the gross damage done to a wife because of the fear of man, or an unhealthy appetite for success. Chapter 13 begins with Abram's wise obedience to leave Egypt. Though wealthy, Abram took time to revisit an altar he built and "called upon the name of the Lord." Abram did not completely learn his lesson (see King Abimilech in Ch. 20), but God was certainly changing the heart of Abram.

Abram's Generosity

There's an old saying: familiarity breeds contempt. It also breeds envy and jealousy. Lot owed everything to his uncle Abram. It doesn't appear that Lot was grateful, and it is clear that he made unwise decisions. Something was changing in Abram. God had given all the land to him, yet Abram's encounters with God changed because his belief changed. This recent pagan (Abram) now believed God... at least partially. He was the patriarch and could have taken the perceived best for himself. It is evidence of God's transforming work that Abram offered the best to Lot. It shows that there was a changing of Abram's mind that believed he did not have to have the best things to be validated. God's promises and direction were enough.

Abram's Rescue Skills

Lot moved right in the middle of a rebellion among warring kingdoms. His family was taken captive along with the people and riches from Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses tells the Tolkien-ish story of Abram the warrior and his 318 men conquering a Middle-Earth-sounding Chedorlaomer. Like an army of Navy Seals, they descended upon the human traffickers in the middle of night. Abram's team defeated the enemy, freed the captives, and reclaimed the possessions.

The Mysterious Melchizedek

After defeating Chedorlaomer's troops, Abram was approached by the King of Sodom. He asked Abram to keep the possessions, but to free the people of Sodom. Abram freed the people and gave the possessions back, but not until he gave 10% of the booty to Melchizedek. Melchizedek was king

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of Salem, which was likely the beginnings of the city, Jerusalem. Some have posed that Melchizedek was not a real person, or that he was Jesus. Hebrews 7 mentions that he had no father or mother, which most likely meant that he was not listed in the OT genealogies. Hebrews 7 further states that Melchizedek resembled Jesus. That would mean that he was not Jesus, but rather a “type” or pointer finger toward Jesus. Melchizedek had the odd title of both king and priest of a city. This certainly points forward to the only human to have all three biblical leadership positions of Prophet, Priest, and King. See also Psalm 110.

Then there is a worship service that takes place between two men who have encountered God Almighty (God’s name here: El Elyon). Melchizedek points to God as the owner of all the heavens and earth, and the source of all that is good. Melchizedek then points to Abram as the receiver of the favor of God. These “ah-ha!” moments were preparing Abram for a heart change that would lead to a name change (Gen 17:1-8). As Abram recognized more that God was sovereign, and himself as the recipient of grace, he responded by giving with extreme generosity.

Finally, Melchizedek and Abram have a prophetic type of communion with bread and wine. This, and Melchizedek himself, point us to the Savior who was to come. Jesus would become the better Husband (of the Church), the better generous Giver, the better Rescuer, the better King, and the better Priest.

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Discussion Questions

1. How has fear of man, or an unhealthy appetite for success led you to compromise and sin? What keeps you from believing God's promises (the gospel) and repenting? What could it mean for you to call "upon the name of the Lord?"
2. What do you need to confess and repent of to your spouse, family member, or friend?
3. Do you believe that you must have certain things, or achieve certain objectives to be truly accepted by God? What do you think you need to DO or NOT DO to feel that you are doing well?
4. What are the functional saviors that you run to for acceptance? Money? Acclaim? Control? Sex? Healthy family? Position? What do these idols say about your belief in God and the gospel?
5. You do not need a human priest to connect to God, because Jesus is your High Priest. How could your attitude toward the hardships of life change because of this powerful truth?
6. How could greater belief in God's sovereignty (unparalleled rule and reign) lead you to greater generosity with your time, talent, and treasure?

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Genesis 15: Abrahamic Covenant

By Joel McCarty

Genesis 15 opens with God coming to Abram in a vision with another promise of great reward. God had already promised to make of Abram a great name and a great nation, and neither of these things could happen without an offspring. Naturally, Abram immediately responds with doubt, seeking to find for himself a substitute who could be his heir. Again, we see the bent of humanity is not to trust and obey, but rather to doubt and work in one's own power. God denies Abram's suggestion and again reiterates his promise, and the storyline of an offspring that would come against all odds continues. There was a small amount of faith on the part of Abram, but even more important than that was the object of his faith. He clearly had many doubts about how God would provide, but Abram would soon find out that God had meant every word he had spoken.

God declares another promise, this time of a dwelling place for His people, and Abram's doubt is again revealed. Instead of simply reiterating his promise with more words, God commands Abram to begin cutting animals in half and to drag the two pieces across from each other, creating a path of ground covered in blood. For many of us, this command seems obscure and strange, but Abram would have known exactly what he was doing: preparing a covenant-making ceremony. In this culture and context, when treaties were made between a servant and master, the servant would declare his part of the covenant while passing in between slain animals. He was in effect, saying, "If I fail to keep my end of the covenant, may it be done to me as was done to these animals."

The shock of this passage begins to take shape in verse 12. Instead of the servant, Abram, continuing to take part in this covenant ceremony, he falls into a deep sleep, and from this point on, he has no control over what he does or sees. God again states the promise of land and offspring, while foretelling the journey of exile and affliction that must be faced before the promise can be fulfilled. Once the time came for the servant to pass through the torn pieces of animal flesh, instead of Abram, we see a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch make its way through this path of blood-soaked land. This represents the person of God himself guaranteeing this covenant with his own life, the most valuable thing he could offer. God is showing both the conditional and unconditional nature of his promises with this amazing picture. Yes, for the promise to be fulfilled, the covenant must be kept perfectly, and yes, there are consequences to a broken covenant. But God himself, in Jesus, personally and perfectly, would keep the covenant and bear the consequences on our behalf. Years later, there would be a Lamb torn apart, because we have broken our part of the covenant. We have cheated on God, turned away to worship other idols, and in our stead, Jesus faces the wrath of sin through his suffering on a Roman cross. Jesus is the true Israel, the true offspring, the one exiled, afflicted, and cut off so that we might be brought into the dwelling place of God and humanity, the new Jerusalem. This is Yahweh, our covenant-keeping God.

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Discussion Questions

1. What is the storyline that we see continued in this narrative of God and Abram?
2. What was Abram's solution to the problem of a lack of offspring?
3. Are there areas in your life where you attempt to work out God's plan using your own methods instead of relying on His work and timing?
4. What was the shocking part about this covenant that was different from other covenants during this period?
5. What does this story reveal about God? What does this story reveal about us?
6. Are God's promises conditional or unconditional?
7. What might our church family look like if we were willing to be afflicted and cut off that we might bring the stranger into our midst?

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Genesis 16: Law vs. Promise

By Paul Whaley

The previous chapter of Genesis records the incredible promises of God to Abram in the form of a covenant (Gen 15:4-5, 18-21). One can only imagine the thoughts going through the minds of Abram and Sarai as they received these great promises, envisioning the offspring of their “very own son” becoming more numerous than the stars in the heavens. What hope and joy must have filled their hearts in that day!

Yet the timing of the Lord’s promise did not align with Abram and Sarai’s plans. Chapter 16 begins with an indicative statement: “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children” (v. 1). They had received the promise from God, but the fulfillment of that promise now seemed to be in question. Sarai goes so far as to claim the LORD had “prevented” her from bearing a child. Instead of trusting in God to fulfill his promise to them, they did what humans always do: they tried to fix it themselves.

Sarai goes to Abram, her husband, and suggests he takes her servant, Hagar, as a wife so they may obtain children through her. Now, at first glance, we may be appalled by this request (or is it a command?) from Sarai to give her servant to her husband, and rightly so. However, this custom was not entirely uncommon in ancient Eastern cultures, especially when producing offspring was so critical to survival in a difficult world. It would be easy to stop at this point in the story and get wrapped up in the moral and ethical implications of this polygamous relationship. It was wrong without a doubt as Scripture makes abundantly clear. But the greatest wrong in this passage is not Abram taking another wife, but Abram and Sarai failing to trust in the LORD’s ability to fulfill his promise.

This passage isn’t ultimately about how many wives one man should have (the answer is one though) or the validity of ancient Eastern customs. Abram did what many, maybe even most, men would have done in his situation. The question is not about what is permissible here, but rather about where Abram would place his trust. Would he trust in the promise and power of God despite the present circumstances? Or would he place his trust in the strength and wisdom of his own plans?

Unfortunately, Abram and Sarai chose the latter. Abram takes Hagar as his wife and she conceives. Even though Sarai’s plan technically succeeded, the result is not at all what she had hoped for. In anger, Sarai drives Hagar away from their camp and leaves her, and the son in her womb, to die in the wilderness. Yet even there the LORD sees Hagar and meets her in the midst of her despair. The “God of seeing” (Gen 16:13) delivers her from despair.

Despite Abram and Sarai’s best efforts to force the promise of the LORD in their own timing, they fail. But God is faithful to fulfill all he said he would do. Eventually an offspring is born to Sarai, and the promise lives on. Thousands of years later, the true Offspring of the promise enters the world—the one through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Though the descendants of Abram were indeed many, even he could not have fathomed the multitude of offspring that would one day be grafted into the family of God through Christ Jesus. In this story, we are reminded of the power of God to accomplish his purposes, even and especially when we do not understand his timing.

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Discussion Questions

1. Look over the previous chapter (Gen 15) and summarize the promises of God to Abram. How do you think Abram and Sarai must have felt anticipating these things?
2. What prompted Sarai to make this request of her husband in vv. 1-2?
3. In what ways do you struggle to trust in the timing or faithfulness of God in your life? Are there any specific examples of this?
4. Even when Sarai gets what she wanted, she isn't satisfied. How does this relate to sin? How have you seen this present in your own life?
5. Hagar calls the LORD "a God of seeing" (v. 13). What does this reveal about the character of God? How should this affect the way you endure challenging circumstances in life?
6. Abram and Sarai believed the lie that God was unable to fulfill his promise to them. How can you protect yourself from believing this lie today? What role should your community play in fighting to believe the truth about God's character and purpose in your life?
7. God blesses Ishmael and promises to make his offspring numerous also, despite the origins of his birth. What does this reveal about God's ability to work through our sin and disobedience? How does this propel us toward even greater obedience?

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Genesis 17: The Sign of the Covenant

By David Thew

Sometimes God backs you into the corner to show that you cannot accomplish what only he can do. This is a blessing, not a curse.

The Conversion of Abraham

We do not know exactly when Abraham's heart was changed and he became a true believer in God. However, there are indications that this is it. In Gen 12, God called Abram. In Gen 13, Abram called upon the name of God. In Gen 14, Abram has a Priest-King declare the sovereignty of God, and that Abram was loved and favored by God. In Gen 15, God professes his covenant with all the future people of God. Years pass, and Abram tries to produce an heir on his own. His efforts toward God's promises yielded broken relationships with his wife, Hagar, Ismael, and ultimately, with Jews and Arabs. Years into the shame of performance-based-salvation, God comes to Abram with a boatload of grace.

God declares another of His names, El Shaddai/God Almighty (cue the older Amy Grant fans, humming the song "El Shaddai"). When we hit the brick wall of self-assertion, God affirms that he is all powerful. God declared what he would do, what Abram must do, and empowered Abram to do it. Abram's response? He "fell on his face." This is the correct response when God commands submission and holiness. Abram's heart is truly changed. God certifies this conversion by giving Abram and Sarai, new names: Abraham and Sarah.

The God of "I Will"

When God declares something, it is as good as done. In verses 1-8, there are eight times that God declares that he will be the sole actor in the salvation of Abraham and the people of God. The theological term for this is monergism. While synergy is the cooperative action of two or more people, monergism is when one person/agent does all the work.

God said, "I have made you the father of multitudes." God declared it. God ultimately did it. From God's perspective at that moment, it was a done deal. That is true of all God's promises that we know, and even the ones we do not know about. God has a mission to make enemies into family. God will absolutely accomplish his pursuits. In Abraham's case, it was not about what he would do to receive the covenant, but what God did, and what Abraham was empowered to do in response. This is why the word "gospel" means good news. It is not about what a potential Christian must accomplish to pay for their sins and have a relationship with God. It is an announcement about what Christ already did to pay for our sins and grant us a relationship with God.

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Circumcision

God introduces a sign to Abraham. The sign did not ratify the covenant. It did not accomplish it. It proclaimed it. Think of a ring on a married man. It was a reminder of covenant. In this case, it reminded the Jews that God made a covenant and would keep his covenant. Circumcision did not save a single person. Otherwise, there would only male believers. Each person must have a circumcision of the heart (See Deut 30:6, Gal 3-4). As Galatians 6:15 says, “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

What About Ishmael?

Was Ishmael outside of God’s plan? No. He was raised by Abraham to believe in God. Ishmael ultimately rejected God on his own accord. The promise was not about who doesn’t get in, but about how the Savior would arrive on planet earth. God had it worked out. He did not need Abraham’s help. Through it all, God still promised to take care of Ishmael and bless him. Perplexing as it is, this is an example of God’s common grace. He shows care to all people.

The Greater Isaac

Ishmael represented Abram and Sarai’s attempt to fulfill God’s promises themselves. It is ironic that God would have them name the promised child “laughter.” God was not mocking them. Rather, I believe that God is pointing out how effortlessly he fulfills his promise in his timing. Just as God told Abraham that “He WILL” make a people for Himself, God DID bring the greater Isaac, Jesus, to be the real Savior for our world.

The Nations

God loves the diverse people of planet earth. He told Abraham that the nations would become sons and daughters through him—ultimately, through Christ. We are part of the nations of Abraham’s blessing

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Discussion Questions

1. Abraham was around 99 years old when he was converted. If it was not too late for him, it is not too late for your family, friends, and neighbors. Who have you given up on for conversion? How do you need to change your prayer habits for them?
2. Christians have new hearts, and new names. Our name is no longer, “Sinner,” but “Saint.” Do you believe this? Does the way you think about yourself equate to your old or new name?
3. What would change if you really believed that El Shaddai/God Almighty would keep the following promise? Philippians 1:6 (ESV) 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.
4. Romans 8:28-30 reveals God’s declaration of our past, present, and future salvation. For Christians, our sanctification (present and future) and glorification (future) are just as much a done deal to God as our justification (past). How could your life be strengthened by believing the promise that God will never let you go?
5. Romans 8:31 says, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” How could your joy and peace be increased in you believed this promise?
6. (For unbelieving friends) If the gospel is not about what you must do, but about what Christ did for you, what is keeping you from repenting of your sins, and believing in this gospel/great news?
7. God loves the nations. Do you believe this? Do you have compassion for the masses of people who have never heard of Jesus? What may need to change in you or your family’s culture to insert information about the nations, and God’s love for them? What do you need to change this week?

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Genesis 18-19: Judgment on Sodom

By Chris Rosema

Quite possibly the most notorious cities in all human history, and certainly in biblical history, are put in the spotlight in Genesis 18-19: Sodom and Gomorrah. After the Lord visits Abraham where he gives him the blessed news that Abraham's wife, Sarah, will be given the son of the promise, he sends his two angels to investigate the fateful cities. Before the angels go down, however, Abraham pleads with the Lord to save the cities, likely out of concern for his nephew Lot but also for the welfare of the entire cities in general. God, in his lavish mercy, promises to spare the cities if even only ten righteous people reside in them.

The rest of the narrative makes clear this is not the case, as Lot himself was the only one to display righteous behavior among all the men of the city, and even some of his actions are questionable. Nonetheless, the Lord graciously spares Lot and his family for Abraham's sake (vs 29) from the destruction which he rains down on the cities. But during the event, Lot's wife was also killed for looking back at the city in direct disobedience to God.

We learn back in Genesis 13 that Lot specifically chose to live in Sodom because it was part of the lush Jordan valley. Lot and his wife likely prospered there, and established their home and raised their family within the city. Even in the midst of the cultural debauchery, they had much to lose from a worldly perspective. And for Lot's wife, she could not easily give this up. In contrast to Abraham who willingly left everything in Ur to follow God in faith, Lot's wife trusted in the comforts of her past rather than on God.

The shameful act of the men in the city of Sodom desiring to conduct homosexual rape on the angelic visitors is deplorable and appalling, so much so that the term 'sodomy', synonymous with homosexual relations, has been part of the English vernacular for the better part of the last millennium. While it is unlikely that this one sin was the sole cause of the cities' destruction, Jude 7 makes it clear that it indeed was a clear element of their overall moral depravity. Just as Romans 1 points to homosexual relations as a natural consequence of humanity's idolatry and suppression of the truth, the men of Sodom's unnatural desires were indicative of their depraved lifestyles.

The story of Sodom's destruction mirrors that of the days of Noah, except in this case God limits the destruction to mere cities instead of the entire earth. In both instances the wicked are destroyed while the righteous remnant is saved. While this narrative is in some ways shocking and disturbing, it is important for us to realize God was just in administering his wrath upon Sodom and Gomorrah. And apart from the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, he would be just to do the same to us. Our culture tends to take God's love and mercy for granted, expecting him to lavish it upon everyone. But

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the fact is, the default position for everyone is God's wrath due to our total depravity (Eph 2:1-3). It is only when we fully grasp this truth that God's grace and mercy truly becomes amazing, leading us to praise. Instead of arrogantly judging the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, each and every one of us needs to come to the realization that "there, but by the grace of God, I go."

Discussion Questions

1. When reading the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative, do you find yourself focusing on the wrath of God or the mercy of God? How come?
2. In the book of Jonah, we read of how God showed mercy on the city of Nineveh, which was likely just as depraved as Sodom and Gomorrah if not more so. Why do you think God responded in one instance with just wrath and in the other instance with divine mercy? Reflect on the merits of your own salvation as you consider this.
3. Genesis 19:29 makes clear that Lot was saved because of his connection to and advocacy from the man of God, Abraham. How does this parallel our own salvation?
4. In 1 John 2:15-17 we are given a similar exhortation to that which Lot's wife ignored. What measures are you taking in your life to prevent yourself from making the same grave sin?
5. We read in Genesis 18 that Abraham interceded before God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. Do you find yourself regularly pleading before God on behalf of our culture? If not, why?
6. Jude 7 states that Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example to us believers. Specifically, what can we learn from this narrative and why do you think God felt it important enough to place in His holy Word?

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Genesis 20: Abraham and Abimelech

By Joey Thompson

The story of Abraham's sojourn in Gerar, recorded in Genesis 20, may seem out of place at best or unnecessary at worst nestled in just before the monumental announcement of the conception and birth of Isaac in chapter 21. This had been the main plot of the Genesis narrative since chapter 12 when the promise was first proclaimed. This suspenseful buildup in the oral tradition would have kept the listener anxiously anticipating the fulfillment of the promise. But, the listener would have to sit through the story of Abraham's sojourn in Gerar with his "sister" before reaching the climax. We may learn a great deal about God's persistent promises despite our sin, if we don't overlook but rather spend the time asking the Spirit to guide our study of this brief and somewhat controversial story of Abraham lying about his "sister" in Gerar.

Following the strategy they had developed together at the very beginning of their journeys (Gen 12:11ff, 20:13), Abraham and Sarah lied about their relationship, again. Even though Abraham had been chastised by Pharaoh once already (Gen 12:18f), he determined to commit the very same sin (Gen 20:2). Of course, this is a part of the entrapment of sin; once committed, it seems easier and easier to fall into the same sin repetitively. Abraham seems unaware of the risk his sin poses to the integrity of the fulfillment of the promises of God. Even if the argument can be made that, since Sarah is beyond childbearing age, her role within Abimelech's harem was to care for and prepare the younger ladies, Abraham's fatherhood of the promised and impending pregnancy could very well be brought into question.

Despite the risks posed by Abraham's sin, God preserves both Sarah's integrity and the integrity of the promise by warning Abimelech in a dream (Gen 20:3-7). The structure of the dream sequence illustrates its importance to the main narrative as it would have aided the memory of the storyteller within the oral tradition. The tight, parallel structure insured this section was told exactly the same way every time.

When confronted by Abimelech (Gen 20:8ff), as he was earlier by Pharaoh, Abraham tried to justify his sin (Gen 20:11ff). First, he assumes that there would be no fear of God in these people. Having just experienced the manner in which sojourners were treated in Sodom (Gen 19), Abraham's fear is understandable. Next, he adds to his justification by implying that telling a half-truth, "she's my sister," while withholding the important half, "she's my wife," isn't really lying at all. This is another part of the entrapment of sin, especially of habitual sin; it seems less and less sinful the more regularly the sin is committed.

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Graciously, God protected the innocence of Sarah by preventing Abimelech from sinning (Gen 20:6), and to make things publicly clear, Abimelech announces his own and Sarah's innocence (Gen 20:14ff). Thus, the integrity of Abraham's fatherhood of the promised child, whose conception and birth is finally announced in the following chapter, is protected.

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Discussion Questions

1. Read through the story of Abraham in Gerar detailing his dealings with Abimelech. What's the significance of this brief, yet controversial, story within the larger Promise Narrative of Genesis?
2. Abraham felt a particular risk while sojourning, and he developed a strategy with Sarah to help mitigate that risk. (Look back to Gen 12:11ff.) What risk did Abraham mitigate by the half-truth he was telling, and was that a real risk (consider 2 Samuel 11:14f, 26f)?
3. What risk(s) to the promise did Abraham introduce by giving Sarah, through whom the promised seed was to come, to Abimelech?
4. Culturally, there was good reason for Abraham to fear for his life. Abraham's motivation of self-preservation could be understood as his attempt to preserve the promise. After all, if he were to be killed, the promise could not be fulfilled through him, since the promised son had not yet come through Sarah. However, how could faith in the promise itself have mitigated his fear?
5. Describe a time in your own life, when your attempt to accomplish the purpose of God was used as justification for a "little white lie" or "minor" sin. How could you have trusted the promises of God and avoided the sin?
6. Honestly evaluate some of your life tendencies. Are there habitual sins present that have become easier to fall into and feel less like sin than they once did? How are you justifying that sin rather than trusting Christ's provision?
7. How was the promise to Abraham preserved despite the risks introduced by Abraham's half-truth?
8. Read 2 Corinthians 1:20. All the promises of God find their yes in Christ! Take some time to write out a description of the joy you experience knowing that the promises of God are not resting on your shoulders but are accomplished and guaranteed in Christ.

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Genesis 21: Isaac and Ishmael

By Brandi Whaley

Genesis 21 begins with the birth of Isaac. The promised child through whom God would bless the world was finally given to Abraham when he was 100 years old. It goes on to tell of how 16-year-old Ishmael was seen by Sarah mocking his approximately 3-year-old half-brother. This upsets Sarah to the point she demands that Abraham send Ishmael and his mother away. The text is clear that this brings Abraham great angst, but because the Lord commands him to honor Sarah's request and reiterates that his line will come through Isaac, Abraham complies. The next morning, he puts Hagar and Ishmael on a donkey and sends them into the wilderness with just some bread and a skin of water.

This is a tough story for me to swallow. If I am honest, my knee jerk reaction is to point out injustice. It had been Sarah's request and Abraham's submission to it that led to the slave girl Hagar giving birth to Ishmael. My flesh wants to see them as victims, and it seems very cold to me when the Lord sends this teenage boy and his mother into exile, ultimately as a result of the sin of Sarah and Abraham. What my flesh doesn't want to own is the sin of Ishmael. It doesn't want to acknowledge the fact that this 16-year-old boy was one who felt the need to torment a toddler. My flesh doesn't want to see the conflict that this child and his mother brought into Abraham's home even before he was born. My flesh doesn't want to own this part of the story because my flesh identifies with them.

However, when it's all said and done, this story is just one of many that reveals when we take what we believe is God's plan and attempt to execute it ourselves, things always end badly. What's done in the flesh can never come close to what is done by the Spirit. Abraham and Sarah's sin of failing to trust the Lord, as well as Hagar and Ishmael's sin of attempting to take a position that didn't belong to them led to frustration, disunity in their home, and ultimately their own pain and suffering on all fronts. This culminated in Abraham having to let his son go. My sin and the sin of others today still leads to the same frustration and pain.

In Chapter 21 we see the Lord coming to the rescue of Abraham's son who cried out to him from a place of pain in the wilderness. We now know that another Son in pain who cried out to his Father became our Rescue. The only place to land is the cross and the One who suffered once and for all so we can be set free from the cycle of sin and its consequences. Our only sufficient response is to run to Jesus.

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Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 21:1-21. Where in this passage do you see the faithfulness of God? Where in this passage do you find the grace and mercy of God? What other attributes of God do you find in this passage?
2. Why do you believe Sarah responded the way she did to Ishmael's laughing? (Genesis 16) What might have been the Lord's reason for affirming her request to Abraham? (v. 9)
3. Our sin is never exclusive to only us. It is far reaching—always affecting others. Where are you continuing in sin? In what ways are you trying to justify yourself through your own actions?
4. What might I need to repent of? Where my sin is affecting others?
5. How can your community help you fight against sin in your own life?

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Genesis 22: Sacrifice

By Brandi Whaley

While Genesis 22 is one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture, there is no doubt it might be one of the most disturbing as well. Abraham and Sarah have experienced the fulfillment of one of God's earliest promises: the miraculous birth of their son Isaac. Even though Abraham and Sarah were very old, new life had been given to them with a future promise that this child would be of ultimate global and historical significance.

And yet, here in chapter 22 we see the words "God tested Abraham" (Gen 22:1). God asked Abraham to take his only son and offer him as a burnt offering. God asked Abraham for the ultimate sacrifice.

The magnitude of this request rips us apart. We are undone. And not only are we undone with the request, we are undone with Abraham's response. Verse 3 tells us that he rose early the very next day. After God commands this of him, Abraham almost immediately sets off on a three-day journey in blind obedience. Or was it blind obedience?

Over the last ten chapters of Genesis, we have walked with Abraham as the Lord has called him, made promises, and proved himself over and over. We must hold tight, as Abraham did, to the proven faithfulness of the God who has made this request. We must trust in the goodness, and grace, and mercy of the God who has given this command. We must remind ourselves it was the all-wise, almighty, all-powerful Creator of the universe who asked this of Abraham. Verse 5 reveals Abraham certainly had great faith in the One who asked for his son. He told the men he was traveling with, "I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." When Isaac asked him where was the lamb for sacrifice, Abraham responded, "God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gen 22:8).

And indeed, he did. After lovingly staying Abraham's hand and affirming his faith, the Lord provided a ram in the thicket. In doing so, he introduced to Creation the concept of substitutionary atonement. And to Isaac, God gave the gift of a first-hand experience of his love and mercy.

Genesis 22 is a beautiful picture of what all believers are called to. Like Abraham, we are called to trust the Lord with what matters most to us. We are called to rest in his faithfulness and his grace. Like Isaac, we are called to trust him and offer every part of ourselves as a living sacrifice. Like Isaac, we have been redeemed for his purposes, and are now to live our lives as an offering consecrated to God. It is when we embrace this reality that we experience the blessed life given to all who submit to him in faith.

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Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 22: 1-19. Discuss the attributes of God you find in this passage.
2. What thoughts and emotions do vs. 1 and 2 evoke in you? What thoughts and emotions does Abraham's response in v. 3 evoke in you?
3. Read 1 Peter 1:6-7. Why might the Lord test his children?
4. Read Hebrews 11:17-19 and discuss Abraham's response to the Lord's testing.
5. When in the past has the Lord asked something difficult of you? How has he proven Himself faithful? What is he asking of you now? How will you respond?
6. Compare and discuss Genesis 22 with what you know of the Gospel narrative.
7. Read Romans 12:1-2. Like Isaac, we have been redeemed for His purposes and are now to live our lives as living sacrifices. What might living as an offering consecrated to God look like in your direct context?

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Genesis 23-24: Rebekah

By Karen Burke

At the age of 127, Sarah was dead. Abraham and Isaac were bereft and missing the single most important woman in their lives. Yet, Genesis 23:9 reminds us of Abraham's continued obedience to God's instructions given nearly 60 years prior – to move to the land that had been promised. By purchasing a burial cave for himself and future generations he demonstrated his commitment to not return home but to continue trusting.

God had promised that Abraham would be given land and become the father of many nations. At this point in the narrative, not only had Sarah died, but Isaac was the only child of promise. He was almost 40 years old and not even married. Abraham, fully cognizant of God's faithfulness, sent his most trusted servant in search of a wife for his son. Numerous times during this chapter, there is acknowledgement of God's plan for Abraham and his descendants and that nothing short of following and obeying were to be considered.

Abraham set the example for faithfulness in verse 7. The servant followed the example when he arrived at the well in the town where Abraham's brother had settled. The servant's first words were a prayer to "the LORD" seeking a very specific answer. (note: The capitalization indicates this is the sacred name of God – Yahweh.) The servant wanted to be led to THE woman God intended. When the prayer was clearly answered through Rebekah, the servant bowed low and worshipped the LORD. (Vs. 26-27.)

The narrative goes on to tell more details about Rebekah's family and the agreement that was reached. Laban, Rebekah's brother, negotiated the marriage terms. (Remember his name because you will see it again!) Those details are important, but the most important theme to surface is God being a Promise Keeping God. Many, many years before, God made a promise to Abraham and though time appeared to be the enemy, God seemed to not be involved, and hope may have been elusive, this story serves as a reminder that God is always faithful and Abraham believed him. (Romans 4:18-21)

Rebekah courageously left the comforts of home and went to the Promised Land to take her place in God's story. She had no way of knowing what awaited her but she went anyway. She rested in knowing that God knew. God used her to heal Isaac's broken heart and she eventually became mother to the next generation of the covenant.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why was Abraham adamantly opposed to Isaac marrying a Canaanite woman? Read Exodus 23:23-33 – focusing especially on verse 33.
2. Twice this passage describes the servant's response to God's answer to his prayers. Look at the following verses and note what was prayed, how it was answered and how the servant responded: Genesis 24:12-27, 49-52.
3. When you pray do you pray specifically? What is your response when God answers?
4. In what way does the blessing given to Rebekah upon her departure (Genesis 24:59-60) fold perfectly in to God's promise to Abraham? (Read back over Genesis 12:1-3 if needed.)
5. Rebekah's unwavering obedience and courage is a lesson to us all. What might God be calling you to that requires obedience and courage? Have you already stepped out in faith, or is something keeping you from taking your place in God's story?
6. Take some time to note evidences of Rebekah's obedience and faithfulness. You might want to refer back to them in the coming weeks as the story unfolds.

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Genesis 25: Esau and Jacob

By Chris Rosema

God's promise of blessing to Abraham has now reached the third generation. In the previous chapters, we've learned about Abraham's struggles with faith in God's promise due to the barrenness of his wife. But God proved faithful and gave them Isaac despite Sarah's old age. Similarly, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, also struggled with infertility. But God once again proves faithful and blesses them with a pregnancy. This is no ordinary pregnancy, however, as Rebekah has twins that fight each other even within the womb. God makes clear to Rebekah the boys will form two nations that will be in strife with each other. This is similar to Isaac and Ishmael in that the line of God's promise will only extend through one of them. However, this situation is less cut and dry as the boys are twins in this case. Who will receive the blessing? God clarifies this as well by stating the older will serve the younger.

With respect to the culture at that time, this made no sense. It was the firstborn son who received the birthright, which meant he assumed all the authority, rights, privileges and responsibilities of his father. It was the firstborn son who was seen as the new leader of the family and tribe after the father passed on. From a human perspective, the situation could not have been more clear: Esau was born first, and thus Esau would carry on the lineage of God's promise. And yet God, in his divine sovereignty, elected Jacob to be the promise bearer, not Esau.

How could this be? Did God in his infinite knowledge look into the future to see that Jacob would be the better of the two boys, that he would be more worthy than his brother to carry the mantle of God's promise? Romans 9:10-13 paints a different picture:

...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

As the boys grow older, we read of a situation that highlights their struggle. Esau comes in from a hunt famished only to see a delicious stew that his brother has prepared. Jacob offers the stew to Esau in exchange for the birthright. Esau would have understood the significance of his birthright for he would have been told it by his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac all growing up. This was no ordinary birthright we're talking about here as it would result in the literal savior of the world! And yet Esau, in his foolish haste, agrees to the deal. Thus, the passage states, Esau despised his birthright.

In the two sections of the passage covered above, we see the marriage of God's sovereignty with human responsibility. Many Christians over the ages have struggled with the concept of God's sovereignty, believing that it undermines human responsibility. But the fact is that the Bible affirms them both.

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In an act of divine sovereignty that is difficult for our human minds to grasp, God chose Jacob and rejected Esau even before they were born. And yet Esau, of his own volition, squandered his birthright to his brother.

Discussion Questions

1. Starting with the call of Abraham, there is a pattern throughout redemptive history that God chooses to bless the undeserving to accomplish His purposes. How is this evident in the story of Jacob and Esau?
2. The two nations that descend from Jacob and Esau, which God refers to in Genesis 25:23, are Israel and Edom, respectively. In the context of redemptive history, what is meant from Malachi 1:2,3 where God states that He loved Jacob and hated Esau?
3. Hebrews 12:16 connects Esau's squandering of his birthright to the sin of sexual immorality. How are these two sins similar?
4. Read all of Romans 9. Take some time meditating on the deep and difficult truths the apostle Paul lays out in this chapter. How should this passage lead us to humility? How should this passage lead us to worship (Rom. 11:33-36)?
5. Why did God choose Jacob? Why did God choose to save you?
6. The term sovereignty means that God is in total control of His entire universe and that there is nothing that happens outside of his will or purview. How does this biblical doctrine practically relate to:
 - How you view suffering (Rom. 8:28)?
 - How you view anxiety (Matt. 6:25-34)?
 - How you view government (Rom. 13:1-7)?
 - How you view evangelism (Acts 18:9,10)?
 - How you view your own salvation (Eph. 2:1-10; Rom. 8:29-39)?

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Genesis 26: Isaac and Abimelech

By Joey Thompson

Of the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Isaac has the smallest canonical footprint. Genesis 26 is the only complete chapter dedicated to him as the main character. In the previous chapter, we learn that Abraham had more sons than just Ishmael and Isaac. The primary purpose of the comparatively brief treatment of Isaac's role within the larger Promise Narrative is simply to establish Isaac as the proper heir of the Promises made to Abraham. The Genesis author makes this abundantly clear by drawing multiple parallels between father and son in a single chapter. So much so, some commentators have called Isaac "Abraham, Jr."

To setup the parallels, the Genesis author, first, provides one difference. During the famine of Abraham's day, the Lord called him to sojourn in Egypt (Gen. 12:10), but despite a famine in Isaac's day, the Lord told him specifically not to go into Egypt but rather to remain and sojourn in Gerar (Gen. 26:1ff). The rest of Gen. 26 can be understood to be Abraham's story in miniature.

Promise / Event	Isaac's Story	Abraham's Story
Called to "the land that I will show you."	Gen. 26:2	Gen. 12:1
Promised to be blessed.	Gen. 26:3	Gen. 12:2
Promised that his descendants will receive this land.	Gen. 26:3	Gen. 12:7
Promised that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars.	Gen. 26:4	Gen. 15:5
Settled in Gerar	Gen. 26:6	Gen. 20:1
Lied to Abimelech by calling his wife his sister.	Gen. 26:7	Gen. 20:2
Dug wells in the land that were seized by the Philistines.	Gen 26:15, 18-22	Gen. 21:25
Lived at Beersheba.	Gen 26:23, 25	Gen. 22:19
Made an oath with Abimelech at Beersheba.	Gen. 26:26-31	Gen. 21:22-32

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Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 26 taking notice of the parallels to Abraham's story. Why was it important that the Genesis author draw out these similarities?
2. When God directs his people (Gen. 26:2f), he provides for them as they obediently follow. How does God confirm His call for Isaac to remain in Gerar despite the famine?
3. God had promised Isaac multitudes of descendants (Gen. 26:4). How does Isaac reveal a lack of faith in that promise in his dealings with Abimelech? Where might have Isaac learned that strategy (cf. Gen 20)?
4. Though the Genesis author establishes Isaac as the clear heir through the parallels to Abraham's story, we may also learn the manner in which we influence others by acknowledging that Abraham's ways were passed down to his son and heir. In Chapter 20, we learned that habitual sin becomes easier to commit, easier to justify, and seems less like sin more and more. Now, we see that the habitual sin of one is easily passed down to those we influence, especially our children. Briefly examine those you influence, maybe your children; what sin do you see in them they may have learned from you?
5. Thankfully, by God's good grace, sin is not the only thing we pass along to others. All the blessings and promises of God were passed from Abraham to Isaac as well. What specific things are you doing to insure you are actively passing along your faith to those you influence, like your children?
6. Read Galatians 3:8. Paul clearly ties Gen. 12:3 and thereby Gen. 26:4 directly to the Gospel. Describe the sense of hope and joy it gives you knowing that, despite Abraham's and Isaac's shortcomings, God still accomplished his purpose of salvation for peoples of every tribe and every nation through the promised seed who came as their descendant.

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Genesis 27: Jacob Steals the Blessing

By Jane Conrad

God made a promise to Abraham. He repeated his promise to Abraham's son, Isaac. And it was God's plan to pass his blessing forward to Jacob (Gen 28). Rebekah had a hint of this when God told her that the older in her womb would serve the younger (Gen 25:23).

It's likely Isaac was aware of God's intention, and he himself, the second-born of Abraham, had also been set apart by God for the blessing. But Isaac lost perspective in the imminence of his own death and his "love" for "delicious food". Isaac, like his son Esau, followed his stomach more than his heart. Esau had already sold his birthright to Jacob for a serving of stew, saying, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" (Gen 25:32).

So, when Isaac called Esau to bless him, was he favoring his son Esau because he was a "man's man"? Did he feel his words (that I may...bless you before the Lord) would satisfy God, though he acted against God's purposes to bless Jacob instead? Certainly he did not support Esau's appetite for foreign women, for "they made life bitter for (him) and Rebekah" (Gen 26:34-35).

When Rebekah overheard that Isaac intended to bless Esau, she forced Jacob to choose between the lesser obedience to her and the greater obedience to God by participating in the deception of Isaac. Twice she told Jacob to obey her voice. Did she not believe that God could bring about his plan for Jacob without her help?

Jacob's first response exposed his greater fear of a man rather than God: He said, "Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself" (Gen 27:12). Jacob pursued the deception and went to his father dressed in skins to feel like Esau. In the English proverb that says one lie begets another, Jacob even dared to say that God had given him the ability to get the meat quickly (Gen 27:20).

Ultimately Jacob was "called according to God's purposes" (Rom 8:28). Though he came by the blessing from his father in an ungodly fashion and paid a high price in his life as a consequence, God had ordained Jacob for the firstborn blessing "...in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls..." (Rom 9). Isaac asked a question of Jacob that would take Jacob some years to answer, "Who are you, my son?" In the end, the lying, scheming Jacob would become Israel, the father of a nation into which the Messiah would come.

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When Esau learned that Jacob had deceived his father and received the firstborn blessing, it did not take long for Esau to become enraged and bitter to the point of revenge. Rebekah and Jacob would already begin paying the high cost for their sin: Jacob was warned to flee, and Rebekah would never see her son again.

Discussion Questions

1. Go back read Genesis 25:19-28 again. What is the significance of the LORD's words in v. 23?
2. What motivated Rebekah to encourage Jacob to deceive his father? How does this relate to the prophecy in Gen 25?
3. What other examples of this type of action have you seen so far in Genesis? Why is it so hard for men and women to trust in the LORD's timing in fulfilling his promises?
4. Blessing the younger son above the older son was completely against the cultural expectations in the ancient East. Why would God choose to fulfil his promise in this way?
5. When in your life has God called you to trust him even when it didn't "make sense" according to the culture and circumstances of the time? Is there any specific steps of obedience he's leading you in right now that fit this description?
6. Once again in the Genesis narrative, we see God working through the sin and disobedience of his people. How does God's sovereignty, even in the midst of sin, give you hope?
7. How does community protect us from turning to our own plans for accomplishing God's purpose in our lives? What are the dangers of trying to do this on our own?

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Genesis 28: Jacob's Dream

By Jane Conrad

Rebekah said to Isaac, “I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?” (Gen 27:46). Esau’s Hittite wives made things difficult for Isaac and Rebekah. Rebekah was not about to endure the same from Jacob’s marriage, and so chapter 28 begins with Isaac’s direction that Jacob should escape to uncle Laban’s and marry one of his daughters. Going there would also get him away from his enraged brother, Esau. Isaac fulfilled the wishes of his wife, Rebekah, by instructing Jacob not to take a Canaanite wife. Later in the law of God given to Moses, God would make it clear that he did not want his people to take foreign wives.

Though Isaac was initially tricked into giving Jacob the blessing of Abraham in Genesis 27, he repeats it in chapter 28 as if to reiterate the genuineness of it, and perhaps confess that he understands God’s intent that Jacob should have the firstborn blessing. With this, he sends Jacob away.

The attention Jacob received from his father, Isaac, did not go unnoticed by Esau: he saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob...again. He saw that Isaac sent Jacob away to Paddan-aram so as not to marry a Canaanite. And he saw that Jacob obeyed. Not unlike the elder brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), Esau could not help but notice the grace of his father toward Jacob, even after Jacob’s deceit. Certainly Esau took stock of his own displeasing behavior in the eyes of his father—that of marrying Canaanite wives—when he decided to go to uncle Ishmael’s for his next wife!

On his approximately 450-mile journey to Laban’s, about 50 miles or two days’ journey from his start in Beersheba, Jacob stopped to sleep. He dreamed of a ladder to heaven on which angels ascended and descended. Jesus borrowed this same picture when he challenged Nathanael’s faith in him. God desired to dwell among men, and he gave Jacob a glimpse of Jesus’ purpose that would be worked out through Jacob’s lineage.

God himself repeated his blessing to Jacob. There can be no doubt that God was speaking directly to Jacob: he refers to 1) the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac, and 2) the land on which you lie. God spoke of the throng of Jacob’s descendants and reminded him that all peoples would be blessed through him. One of the ramifications of the blessing promise was that through Jesus, all people would enjoy access to God. In his dream, Jacob had drawn near to God—a picture of the blessing God would bring on Jacob’s family and all people through Christ.

God further assured Jacob that he would be with him, keep him, bring him back, and not leave him until all the promises were fulfilled. This would be a significant pledge for Jacob to cling to in the

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uncertain and difficult years ahead. The Lord spoke to Jacob again at other critical times in his life to uphold these promises.

In response to God's promise and blessing, Jacob is afraid and says, "How awesome is this place!" (Gen 28:17). An encounter with God rightly prompts fear and awe, and is part of acceptable worship. Jacob built a memorial and changed the name of that place from Luz (meaning Deceit) to Bethel (meaning House of God)—a very real indicator of the transformation in Jacob himself. He vowed that if God kept his promise to bring him back safely to his father's house, God would be his God, and he would give God a tenth. Before God gave the law, as in Jacob's case, the tenth or tithe was considered a gesture of gratitude for victory or blessing. But when God gave the law later through Moses, he required a tenth as an offering of the first and best of everyone's income.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the significance of Jacob not taking a wife from the Canaanite women? How was this related to the promise and covenant?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the words the LORD speaks to Jacob in vv. 13-15 and the promises he made to Isaac and Abraham? What aspects of the covenant have been repeated most?
3. Given the pattern of God's chosen people failing to trust in God's ability to accomplish his purposes, what is significant about the language of the promise in this text? What did God require of Jacob according to this dream? What did he ask of him?
4. Jacob responds with a vow in vv. 20-22. Was this an act of obedience? What prompted this response from Jacob? What does it reveal about his faith?
5. Read John 1:43-51. Why did Jesus refer to this dream of Jacob's as he spoke to Nathanael? How does the coming of Jesus provide greater fulfillment to the promise spoken to Jacob?
6. Do these promises to Jacob still apply to us today? Why or why not?
7. What do we learn about generosity and worship from Jacob in this text? What next steps of obedience do you need to take to grow in generosity and worship?