

Doctrine of Human Behavior and Consequence

Lesson 4 – The Example of the Patriarchs

Genesis 15:6 – Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

We continue our exploration by examining the period from Genesis 4 through 50. This era unfolds in a world shaped by the fall, yet without the Mosaic Law to provide external restraint. God interacts directly with individuals through revelations, promises, and covenants.

These accounts offer case studies in human behavior and its outcomes, both natural and divine. We draw solely from the text, avoiding presumption where Scripture remains silent. Neither condemnation nor approval is added beyond what the narrative provides.

As observers, we note patterns of faith, rebellion, and their consequences, always grounding our insights in the biblical record. Romans 15:4 states, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

Recapping the Foundation

Lesson 2 outlined God's design for humanity as image-bearers, called to reflect His character in ruling creation. Lesson 3 detailed the Fall, introducing inherited sin and its penalties, such as death and toil. In this patriarchal age, we see these realities lived out. No codified law exists, but sin still reigns, and we will see how faith and behavior impact the lives of God's image-bearers. The focus remains on volition, choices toward faith or away from it, and how behaviors lead to consequences that reveal God's holiness and faithfulness.

Immediate Post-Fall: Peaks of Judgment in Human Behavior

The narrative highlights certain peaks where human behavior escalates to bring divine intervention. These center on three recurring aspects: idolatry, immorality, and violence.

Beginning with Cain in Genesis 4:3-16, we see the first murder. Cain brings an offering from the ground, while Abel offers the firstlings of his flock and their fat portions. The LORD regards Abel's but not Cain's. Cain becomes angry, and despite God's warning (If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it), he kills Abel. The consequence is a curse: the ground will no longer yield strength to Cain, making him a vagrant and wanderer. The Hebrew term for *sin* here, חַטָּאת (chatta'ah), depicts it as a lurking entity, emphasizing personal responsibility. Violence marks this act, leading to exile, though mercy mitigates total destruction.

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Next, the flood in Genesis 6-9 addresses widespread corruption. Genesis 6:5 records, "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Verse 11 adds, "Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence." Immorality and violence dominate, with no explicit mention of idolatry here, but it was probably present. God instructs Noah, a righteous man who walks with God, to build an ark. The flood destroys all but Noah's family and the animals.

The Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 shows unified rebellion. Humanity gathers to build a city and tower "whose top will reach into heaven," saying, "let us make for ourselves a name." This act defies God's command to fill the earth (Genesis 9:1), reflecting pride and potential idolatry in self-exaltation. God confuses their language, scattering them. The consequence disrupts unity, enforcing dispersion without direct violence or immorality cited, though the intent opposes divine order.

Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18-19 exemplify judgment on immorality and violence. Genesis 13:13 notes, "Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD." In Genesis 18:20, God says, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave." The attempted assault on the visitors (angels) in Genesis 19:4-11 reveals sexual immorality and violence. Fire and brimstone destroy the cities, with Lot rescued due to Abraham's intercession. Ezekiel 16:49-50 later adds pride, excess, and neglect of the poor, but the Genesis text focuses on the grave sin evident in the mob's actions.

These peaks demonstrate divine response to escalating behaviors, idolatry, immorality, and violence, serving as warnings in the narrative.

The Covenant Patriarchs: Faith and Corresponding Actions

In contrast, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob receive covenants through faith, with actions aligning with that faith, enhancing their legacy. The text credits righteousness to faith, while behaviors reflect or test it and are rewarded.

Abraham's call in Genesis 12:1-3 promises land, descendants, and blessing. He obeys by departing from Haran. Genesis 15:6 declares his belief in God's promise of offspring as righteousness. The Hebrew אָמַן (aman) shows that Abraham was convinced that God is faithful in His promises.

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Actions follow: he rescues Lot (Genesis 14), intercedes for Sodom (Genesis 18), and offers Isaac (Genesis 22), where God provides a substitute and reaffirms the covenant. Abraham's faith, shown in obedience, grants him a greater name as the father of nations.

Isaac receives the covenant reaffirmed (Genesis 26:2-5), citing Abraham's obedience. Isaac stays in the land as commanded, digs wells amid conflict, and makes peace with Abimelech (Genesis 26:12-33). Because of his faith, he was given prophecies and blessed Jacob and Esau. He understood that the promises of God are not influenced by the favoritism of a father for a son.

Jacob, renamed Israel, grasps the birthright and blessing through deception (Genesis 25:29-34, 27:1-40), leading to exile. He serves Laban, faces deceit in return (Genesis 29-31), and wrestles with God at Peniel (Genesis 32:24-32), emerging transformed. The covenant passes to him (Genesis 28:13-15, 35:9-12). His actions, flawed yet persistent in pursuit, align with faith in God's promises, building his name as Israel's progenitor.

The Sons of Israel: Contrasts in Behavior

Joseph's story in Genesis 37 through 50 provides a clear picture of human behavior in the face of adversity, rooted in integrity and volition based on the character and truth of God. We see him as a young man favored by his father, Jacob, which sparks jealousy among his brothers. But the text focuses more on Joseph's choices and how they play out over time. Let's look at his behavior step by step, drawing directly from the narrative.

Joseph starts out sharing his dreams with his family, dreams that suggest his future prominence (Genesis 37:5-11). While this might seem naive, the text does not criticize it; it simply records the family's reaction. His brothers hate him more for it, but Joseph remains obedient to his father, going out to check on them despite the tension (Genesis 37:12-17). When they plot against him, selling him into slavery, Joseph ends up in Egypt, serving in Potiphar's house.

Here, Joseph's integrity shines. Genesis 39:2-6 tells us the LORD is with Joseph, making him successful. He manages Potiphar's household faithfully, and everything prospers under his care. The natural consequence of this good behavior is trust and promotion; Potiphar puts him in charge of everything, seeing that God blesses whatever Joseph touches. Even when Potiphar's wife tempts him to adultery, Joseph refuses, saying, "How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" He chooses righteousness, fleeing the situation.

Things go wrong anyway. Falsely accused, he lands in prison (Genesis 39:20). Yet even there, his integrity leads to natural benefits: the chief jailer favors him, putting him in charge

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of other prisoners (Genesis 39:21-23). The LORD is with him again, granting success. Joseph interprets dreams for Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker accurately, showing wisdom and reliance on God (Genesis 40:8, where he says interpretations belong to God). Forgotten for two years, he eventually interprets Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41:14-36), crediting God fully: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (Genesis 41:16).

Due to this integrity and God-given insight, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to second-in-command (Genesis 41:39-44). The text ties this blessing directly to Joseph's character and God's intervention: Pharaoh recognizes that the Spirit of God is in him (Genesis 41:38). Over the seven years of plenty and famine, Joseph's wise administration saves Egypt and the surrounding regions. Even when his brothers come begging for food, Joseph tests them but ultimately reveals himself with forgiveness: "Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5). His behavior reflects a heart that sees God's sovereignty, turning personal wrongs into broader good. The natural outcomes (prosperity in hardship) stem from his faithfulness, but the text emphasizes God's role in intervening and blessing.

Now, contrast this with the ten older brothers (excluding Benjamin, who is younger and not involved in the plot). Their behavior revolves around jealousy, hatred, and deceit, leading to different consequences. From the start, Genesis 37:4 says they "could not speak to him on friendly terms" because of Jacob's favoritism and Joseph's coat. When he shares his dreams, their hatred grows (Genesis 37:5, 8, 11).

This escalates to violence. Seeing Joseph approach in the fields, they conspire to kill him: "Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit" (Genesis 37:20). Reuben intervenes to save him, suggesting they throw him in a pit instead, but Judah proposes selling him to Ishmaelite traders for profit (Genesis 37:26-28). They dip his coat in goat's blood to deceive Jacob, claiming a wild beast killed him (Genesis 37:31-33). This act of betrayal and lying marks their behavior: selfish, cruel, and dishonest.

The natural consequences unfold over the years. First, there's an emotional toll: they live with the lie, watching Jacob grieve deeply (Genesis 37:34-35). During the famine, they must go to Egypt for grain, unknowingly bowing before Joseph, fulfilling his dreams (Genesis 42:6). Joseph tests them harshly, accusing them of spying and imprisoning Simeon (Genesis 42:9-24). Their guilt surfaces: "Then they said to one another, 'Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us'" (Genesis 42:21). Reuben reminds them of his warning, highlighting their shared responsibility.

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More details emerge in their interactions. When Joseph demands that Benjamin come, they face Jacob's reluctance, and Judah steps up, pledging his own life as surety (Genesis 43:8-10). This shows some growth, but it's born from desperation. In the silver cup test (Genesis 44), the brothers return together instead of abandoning Benjamin, with Judah offering himself in his place (Genesis 44:18-34). Their earlier malice has led to humiliation and fear—bowing before the brother they wronged, enduring tests that expose their hearts.

Yet the text shows God's mercy even here. Through Joseph's forgiveness, the family reconciles (Genesis 45:1-15). After Jacob's death, the brothers fear retaliation and beg for mercy, fabricating a message from Jacob (Genesis 50:15-17)—another deceit, revealing lingering distrust. Joseph weeps and reassures them: "But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive'" (Genesis 50:19-20). Their behavior brought personal guilt and hardship, but God's intervention turned it toward preservation. Unlike Joseph's consistent integrity, which brings steady blessing amid trials, the brothers' actions yield regret and dependency, though redemption comes through confession and family unity.

Conclusion

This era contrasts peaks of judgment (in response to idolatry, immorality, or violence) with lives marked by faith and aligning actions. From Cain to Joseph, behaviors yield consequences; some of them are natural, others are divine blessings or curses that advance God's plan. As we proceed to Lesson 5, the Law, these accounts help us understand, highlighting volition's role in a fallen world.