

Hillcrest Adult Education (Summer 2024)
Faith in Action
Introduction to the Genesis Series

Objectives

1. Understand Genesis from the ancient Israelites' perspective.
2. Appropriate the counter-cultural message of Genesis.

Note to the Teachers

This part is intended to introduce the Genesis series. Since our audience knows the Genesis account very well, let's try to see it afresh from an ancient Israelite perspective. Then, try to replicate what Genesis did to its ancient audience. What follows is just one way to appropriate the message of Genesis. Based on what is provided below, you may come up with creative ways to approach Genesis afresh. You may use this introduction as the first lesson to introduce the series. Or you may skip it and start the series with Genesis 1-2. May the Spirit of God be with you as you prepare for the lessons and share them in your class.

Genesis begins with a creation account that is foundational to the Judeo-Christian faith. Surprisingly, however, this account ends at the end of the second chapter. As important as the account is, it does not seem to be what Genesis is primarily interested in. What, then, is its primary focus? What kind of work are we dealing with? What is its plot?¹ The plot of a story begins with a beginning that sets the stage by introducing the characters and crisis. Then, in the middle, the crisis builds up to the climax. Finally, an ending introduces a resolution. What does Genesis as a whole teach us? How does one section of Genesis lead logically into the next? How does each part contribute to the argument of the whole? Why is Genesis placed at the beginning of the Old Testament, and how does it fit into the whole of Scripture? Of course, these are all related questions that help us discern the message of Genesis.

The Plot of Genesis		
Genesis 1-2	Genesis 3-11	Genesis 12-50
Introduces the creation that is GOOD	A crisis is introduced: Sin	A (partial) resolution of the Crisis

One cannot overemphasize the importance of the book Genesis for God's people. It proclaims God's creation, the origin, the Fall and the salvation of the humankind, etc. Due to this importance, most of us are very familiar with the text of Genesis (at least some essential parts). Our familiarity with Genesis, unfortunately, does not guarantee interpretive integrity. In fact, it sometimes gets in the way of understanding Genesis afresh. What should we do then? How can we avoid imposing our own views on Genesis? **How can we still hear the word of God anew as we read Genesis again?** It is a challenging task, but **we will try our best to listen to Genesis**

¹ A plot is a "meaningful chain of interconnected events," and a conflict is almost always at the center of the plot and is resolved at the end. The resolution Genesis provides, however, is only "partial" because the grand plot of the Bible is the redemption of humankind, and Jesus Christ provides the "complete" resolution to the crisis of human predicament that started in Genesis. See Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 17-23.

afresh by comparing Genesis accounts to their counterparts in the ancient Near East (abbreviated as ANE hereafter) because Genesis is a text of its time. The first interpretive step we will take is to find out what Genesis might have meant to its original audience, i.e., ancient Israelites. This step will ensure that we understand Genesis correctly in its cultural context. Only then, we will wrestle with what it means for us today. In other words, we will contemplate how we can best apply the theological teachings of Genesis in our context. **In so doing we will see Genesis holistically by paying close attention to its plot** (i.e., how its story unfolds), place, and message because the whole is far more than the mere sum of its parts because the whole provides another dimension to its parts.

Why do we read Genesis? Some may say, “to understand our origins.” The English title Genesis comes from the Greek word that means “origins” since the book describes the origins of the universe, the earth, human beings and all animate and inanimate beings. Yet the primary purpose of Genesis is NOT creation or origins. Compared to its *Enuma Elish*, i.e., a Mesopotamian account of creation, it becomes apparent that Genesis primarily focuses on something else.² In *Enuma Elish*, a creation narrative does appear, but for the most part, *Enuma Elish* describes how gods and goddesses came to be and how they waged a great battle amongst them. Creation of humankind was just an afterthought in *Enuma Elish*, and humanity has a very insignificant role. Humans rarely appear in *Enuma Elish*. On the contrary, in Genesis, forty-eight out of fifty chapters (approximately 96% of the book!) are primarily concerned about what happens to humankind. Of course, YHWH is still the main character in Genesis, but Genesis deals with more anthropology than theology because much of the book focuses on the salvation of humankind!³ ANE and Greco-Roman myths and legends frequently speculate on what happens in the world of the divine. These literatures reveal that their divine beings show little interest in human affairs. The God of the Bible, however, is deeply interested in human affairs, as shown in God's interactions with humans in Genesis (See also Psalm 8:4).

In his book *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*, James Sanders asks a probing question: Why did tiny Israel survive when mighty empires in the ancient world did not?⁴ What was ancient Israel's dynamic identity source? It must have been, Sanders answers, something that can give life by providing national self-identity. Sanders proposes that this dynamic source of the national identity must have been indestructible, commonly available, highly adaptable and portable. He identifies this source as being none other than the Torah and the Bible. According to Sanders, the Torah answers questions like, “Who are we?” and “What are we to do?” As the first

² If you want to read the text of *Enuma Elish*, use this link - <http://public-library.uk/ebooks/32/54.pdf>

³ Jewish biblical scholars tend not to use the term “theology” in biblical studies. By its definition, theology is the “study of God,” and rabbis argue biblical studies are not the “study of God,” which comes across almost as blasphemy to them. They argue that is what pagans participate in. For example, Greco-Roman philosophers tried to “figure out” God, but rabbis object humans do not “study God” or “figure out God.” Of course, the Bible reveals who God is, but more importantly, the rabbis argue that the Bible primarily teaches who we are, that is, a divine perspective on human beings and what we ought to do. In that regard, the study of the Bible is more of anthropology than theology.

⁴ James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). He discusses the function of the Old Testament canon. He proposes that the OT canon gave Israel a national identity by answering the questions: Who are we, and what are we to do? For details, see the first chapter, “Adaptable for Life: The Nature and Function of Canon,” pp. 9-39.

book of the Torah, Genesis specifically forms a worldview and directs its readers' lives by answering these questions.

Genesis never stands alone. It exists only as the first book of the Pentateuch or Torah. Jewish scholars call each of the Pentateuch as one-fifth of the book, Torah. As such, Genesis does not end with a period but ends with a comma, so to speak. Reading the book of Genesis, we see that it anticipates more stories because it functions as a prehistory that leads to the story of the Exodus and the rebellion in the wilderness. Without Genesis, we cannot fully understand the history of the ancient Israelites' redemption from beginning to end. However, Genesis only deals with the beginning of redemption as the entire Old Testament ends without a strong sense of closure on this topic of redemption. Still, it looks forward to the ultimate human redemption in Christ.

The creation account in Genesis is neither the only nor the oldest in the world. Israel was a latecomer in history. In his book *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Recorded History*, Samuel Kramer introduces the law codes and creation narratives centuries older than the biblical law codes. *Enuma Elish* and the *Atrahasis Epic*, for example, are older than Genesis by hundreds of years. The biblical creation account was written with full awareness of *Enuma Elish*, as they both share numerous similarities. When these ANE creation narratives were unearthed in the late nineteenth century, some scholars prematurely concluded that the Bible plagiarized the ANE literature.⁵ Yet the differences between the ANE and the biblical creation accounts make the biblical account more impressive and trustworthy. **In the ancient world, everybody believed that the creation of the world was the work of a divine being.** The question to ask was which God? *Enuma Elish*, for example, declares Babylon's supreme god, Marduk, created the world. **It was used in national cultic settings liturgically as founding statements for society, authorizing, legitimating, and ordering specific modes of social relationships and certain forms of social power. The creation account in Genesis was written to counter *Enuma Elish* and other ancient ideas legitimating the ANE worldview.** ANE gods were nature gods. As powerful as nature may be, Genesis teaches that humans are not to worship nature. Sun, moon, stars, sea, etc., are mere creations of Yahweh, the One and Only God of the universe! ANE people worshipped astral deities. Shamash, for example, was the Sun god in the ANE. In Genesis, of course, the Sun is demoted from being a divine being and does not even have a proper name. It is just the Sun. In that regard, Genesis is counter-cultural in many ways. The following lessons will show the counter-cultural aspect of Genesis time and time again.

Discussion

1. How is Genesis different from the ANE creation narratives and cultures?
2. Compared to ANE cultures, what does Genesis teach about God and humankind?

Practice

1. In light of what Genesis did in the ancient Israelite context, find a creative way to be counter-cultural in our world.
2. Read Genesis 1-2 along with Psalms 8 and 19 for next Sunday and meditate on them, thanking God for his creation.

⁵ Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 2ff. The Gilgamesh Epic portrays ANE gods as powerful, impetuous, and untrustworthy.

God in Creation: Who is God in The Creation Story? God as Creator and God as Sustainer (Genesis 1:1-2:3)

Lesson Objectives:

1. Recognize the difference between ANE gods and YHWH through the creation story.
2. Explore character traits of God found directly in the creation story.

Text: Genesis 1:1-2:3

Literary Context:

While Genesis 1-2:3 is one of the most popular stories recounted from the Bible, many details within the story bring nuance to the Bible as a whole and to who God is. To further discuss this, there is much to the background of the creation story. For one, there is much debate on how to read the creation story as fact or myth. Many modern readers believe Genesis should be read as a myth, but it is unclear if myth here means entirely fictitious or if there is another description. Jacobsen takes a middle-ground perspective, describing Genesis as mytho-historical, meaning myths told as history. The main reason why some debate the Genesis genre is its striking similarity with other ANE accounts of the beginning of the world. For instance, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Atrahasis epic, the Sumerian flood story, and the Sumerian king list all have a creation of humans from some God and a plan to destroy the population when it goes wrong. To conclude, Bruggeman explains that Genesis is written not as scientific fact or to prove the creation story historically accurate but as a poetic piece of literature to encourage Israelites during the exilic period that God was still very present and powerful.

While that is the typical thought process for modern readers, the Israelites would have a different thought process to the historical background of the creation story. Rogerson states, "For Israelites...the narratives of Genesis 1-11 were factually true, but Israelites did not expect to experience the things they describe...". The purpose of the Genesis account of the creation story was not to scientifically disprove other accounts but to reveal the theological purpose of creation from God to God's people. The main reinterpretation through the creation story is God as one supreme God instead of many gods with different power levels trying to solve their problems.

The creation story also focuses on humans and fertility. ANE gods created humans as slaves to do their work and became furious as they began to overpopulate the earth. God on the other hand created humans as the climax of the creation story, in God's image, as representatives for God on earth to have dominion over God's other creation, giving humans status and honor. Instead of humans having to make sacrifices and food for their gods, God provides humans with security and food, making God a provider for humans. God also commands humans to be fruitful and multiply, opposing the overpopulation narrative of ANE gods. Instead of sending a flood to eliminate all the noisy humans, God was concerned with humankind's sinfulness, causing concern from God. As a final reminder, God's care does not end at creation. The flowing story of God's Love and care for his creation does not end at the Sabbath, which many deists believe, but God has been continually in the story since the first day God created the heavens and earth.

Lessons from Genesis 1-2

1. In the Beginning: God Created (Gen. 1:1-3)

- a. The very first words of Genesis display God's power.
 1. The Hebrew word bara (meaning create) establishes that God created everything out of nothing, showing God's total control of all creation. The Hebrew term does not take an object or material for creation. In Enuma Elish, the Babylonian supreme god Marduk used the slain body of the deity Tiamat to create heaven and earth—he used one-half of her body to create heaven and the other half to create the world.
 2. God created absolutely everything, “the heavens and the earth.” All God had to do was speak, and the creation obeyed; there was no pleading, exerting, or hard labor, just a breath. In Enuma Elish, Marduk created heaven and earth after a fierce battle against goddess Tiamat and her army of divine beings.
- b. No other rival deity comes close to God's power and sovereignty.
 1. In the Ancient Near East, the gods would have had different levels of power and responsibility.
 2. The ANE gods cannot control their creation; God can (yet chooses still to give free will).
 3. ANE gods need humans to give them sacrifices for food, yet our God provides daily necessities for us.

Discussion Questions:

- What evidence do we see in the first couple of verses in Genesis that show God is in control?
- Compared to the ANE creation narratives, what traits of YHWH stand out?

2. Divine Plan: God of Order (Gen. 1:4-25)

- a. God turned chaos into order. Compared to ANE gods, who had no control over their creation, God brings complete order to His creation.⁶
- b. In the Atrahasis Epic, the gods could not control the humans once they began to overpopulate. Supreme divine beings were annoyed by the human “overpopulation” and tried to control the human population by various means, such as fire, storm, flood, etc.
- c. “God separated the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1:4). God is creating divisions and order on earth to prepare for us, His good creation, and He knows what we need.
- d. The order of everything God created is very intentional and is to benefit His creation. For example, He first creates the sky, *then* the bird.

Discussion Questions:

- God created everything in steps. Why?
- If you were in the time of the Israelites, what would God making order out of chaos potentially mean for you?

3. Let Us Make Human in Our Image (Gen.1:26).

⁶ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and The Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of The Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 47.

1. We would not be alive if God did not have immense love and care for us and His creation.
2. In many stories about ANE gods, certain humans, such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, possessed superpowers and abilities like those of gods. In some traditions, these were kings and rulers. There was a blurred line between divine and human beings. In the Bible, while all humans possess divine images, no human being has divine powers, not even kings, that rival God's power. There is a clear distinction between divine and human in the Bible.
3. In ANE cultures, only kings possessed divine image. However, the Bible democratized it by declaring that **EVERYONE** is created in God's image. That was good news in ancient world!
4. The very act of creating man and woman shows us that God is relational. God purposefully created humans to be in a relationship with Him.
5. Compared to ANE gods, where the creation of humans was an afterthought and humans were slaves, God distinctly made humans the climax and focus of the creation story. God honors us and deems us worthy of attention. The Bible shows a much higher view of humanity than ANE cultures did.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean for us to be made in God's image?
- What are our duties as humans to God?
- Everyone is created in God's image. How does that impact our relationship to others?

4. God *Rested* on the Seventh Day.

- a. God "rested" after 6 days of creation. This is the climax of the creation narrative.
- b. God set us an example because we are made in God's image and should follow His suit.
- c. The Sabbath was made for man's benefit, not for God or man for Sabbath.
- d. Sabbath means to "cease." Scheduled ceasing will heal our soul and restores us.
- e. Sabbath is anti-imperial, undermining the ancient imperial system by not working on the Sabbath day. No other ancient culture had anything like the Sabbath.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean that God rested on the seventh day?
- Do you do any type of "ceasing"? If yes, what is it that you cease from? If not, would you consider starting?
- What does it mean that the Sabbath was made for human?

Final Thought

God's identity can become cloudy when we let the world determine who God is. But if we go back to the creation story and Genesis to process what God does for creation and us, we can see his true identity revealed to us and know that we are God's loved and intentional creation and God is powerful, caring, and loving.

Action Steps: Take a moment to pause and engage in this prayer about God’s creation.⁷

Dear God,

You are the fount of all blessings, source of all life,

and giver of all grace:

We thank You for the gift of life: for air, food, and water;

for the love of family and friends; for all the things without which we couldn’t continue to live.

We thank You for the mystery of creation: for the beauty that the eye can see,

for the marvels that the ear can hear,

for all the amazing mysteries that fill

the universe with wonder.

Help us to grow in knowledge and

appreciation of Your Creation,

To be good stewards of what You have given us, and to always remember that every good gift comes only from You.

We thank You for this day and for our life.

We thank You that You are our God, our Creator, and our Savior.

For these, and all blessings,

we give You thanks, eternal, loving God, through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

⁷ “Thanking God for His Creation,” C.S. Lewis Institute,
<https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/thanking-god-for-his-creation/>.

Genesis 3-11: Sin and God's Resolution

Lesson Objectives:

1. Identify the main stories found in Genesis 3-11, and how they function in the book.
2. Evaluate the theological lessons of the main stories found in Genesis 3-11.

Text: Genesis 3-11

Literary Context:

Lesson 3 focuses on the plot of Genesis. We may gain numerous insights from the book. But how do we know what is intended by the text and what is not? Also how do we know what is the primary concern of the text? One way to ensure its intended message and purpose is to read the text holistically. When read as a whole, like any other narrative Genesis reveals its plot, i.e., the storyline (see the introduction). Each narrative consists of three parts: Introduction, body and conclusion. In Genesis the first two chapters are assigned to introduce God's creation that was GOOD. The word "good" appears 7 times in the first chapter, which indicates the goodness of God's creation and God's complete satisfaction in all his creation. This introduction of the goodness of the creation, however, anticipates a problem. In Genesis 3-11, this problem is clearly revealed as four different narratives all share the same problem and pattern: sin, punishment, and grace. These chapters tell us that as sin grows stronger and more prevalent, the grace of God also abounds. Interestingly, Genesis 3-11 ends without a clear indication of God's grace – at least, it appears to be so. What then is God's ultimate solution to the growing power of sin? Genesis 12-50 provides the answer to that question, i.e., the election of Abraham. But before we discuss the solution, let's focus on the unfolding of the crisis in Genesis 3-11.

Narrative	Sin	Punishment	Grace
Garden (Gen 3)	Eating of the fruit	Expulsion	Clothes/no death
Cain & Abel (Gen 4)	Murder	Ostracism	Mark
Noah (Gen 6-10)	Pervasive evil	Flood	Ark
Babel (Gen 11)	Building of the tower	Dispersion	???

The Structure of Genesis 3-11

Genesis 3-11 includes numerous genealogies (5:1-32; 9:18-10:32; 11:10-32). These genealogies speed up the storyline to get to the point. For example, the story of the Tower of Babel ends without a resolution, i.e., God's grace. Genesis 11:10-32 fast forwards the story to the election of Abraham, which is God's (partial) resolution to the problem of sin.

At first glance, Genesis 3-11 seems to contain several interesting but unrelated stories. This section, however, is carefully structured with a single theme: the growing power of SIN. It ends with the question, "If sin is so powerful, what must be done?"

Genesis 3-11 introduces a crisis brought to the ideal state of the created world portrayed in Genesis 1-2. As important as the topic of creation, it is not the primary theme of Genesis, as is apparent in the fact that Genesis does not dwell on it. Instead, it quickly moves on to the perennial human need for redemption because foundational to a biblical worldview is a set of

existential questions: “Who are we?” “What are we to do?” “What’s wrong?” and “What is the solution?” Genesis answers these questions of human identity and thereby corrects the misguided worldview of the ancient Near Eastern world (and also the humanistic worldview of today) and shapes the lives of its readers, both past and present, because these stories are more about the present than they are about the past. As such, Genesis identifies who we are and defines what we are to do.

The first story in Genesis 3-11 introduces changes to the ideal state of the creation described in Genesis 1-2. A crisis of the growing power of sin takes place! Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, and God punished them by casting them out of the Garden of Eden. Yet they experienced God's grace because God provided them with clothing to cover their naked bodies, and they did not experience immediate death. The story of Cain and Abel shares the same pattern of sin (murder), punishment (ostracism), and grace (the mark). The crisis is continued and even intensified. Yet, it remains at an individual level. This crisis changes in the story of Noah as it shows that sin is no longer just an individual problem but that of the whole society as indicated by "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). Thus the divine punishment comes in the form of the great flood. Yet God's grace is manifested in sparing of righteous Noah, his family and all kinds of animals. The power of sin intensifies even further and reaches its crescendo as people at Babel try once more to become autonomous. God's punishment for this bold, futile rebellion was to scatter them by confusing their language. As the common pattern of sin-judgment-grace indicates, one may anticipate God's grace at the end of the story of Babel. Surprisingly, what comes next is a genealogy (11:10-26) to speed up to the point, i.e., the account of Abraham, whose election was a divine means of resolution. In Genesis 3-11, sin completely reversed God's creative work in Genesis 1-2. Yet the rest of Genesis (12-50) shows how God prepared a resolution to restore the creation through the election of Abraham.

What does the story of the Tower of Babel say about the nature of sin? After the Flood, people said to each other, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we *make a name for ourselves* and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (11:4). What does “make a name of ourselves” mean? In the ancient world, the name represented the very essence of being. What is wrong with that idea? Before we make a quick conclusion to define what the phrase means, it is interesting to notice what God said to Abraham when He called him. God said to Abraham, “I will make your name great” (12:2). At Babel, people tried to make a name for themselves whatever that may have been, but one of the reasons for God’s election of Abraham was to make Abraham’s name great! That is an irony. God is aware of the human desire to be “somebody,” but when that is carried autonomously, that is sin. But God guides his followers to be “somebody” if they remain faithful. That is what the rest of Genesis 12-50 focuses on to show how God elects a common person, Abraham, and transforms him to be “the Father of faith” and thereby begins to solve the perennial human problem of sin.

Genesis 1-2 introduces the ideal world God created with its characteristic word “good” repeated 6 times in this short section. Then a crisis begins in Genesis 3 that reaches its climax in Genesis 11: Sin enters the perfect world alienating humans from God, and it spreads like a wildfire growing more prominent and serious as more stories are introduced. At first, it was Adam and Eve’s eating of the fruit, but in the story of Cain and Abel, sin manifests itself in a

more severe form of fratricide. Then sin no longer stays at an individual level but escalates to be a societal problem as the inclinations of humans were always evil at the time of Noah. At the Tower of Babel, sin appears even bolder as people try to be autonomous by building a city that will reach heaven. The plot of Genesis comes quickly to the resolution part in Genesis 12, employing a genealogy, which speeds up the story to get to the point of God's election of Abraham (Genesis 11:10-32). God chooses Abraham to be a source of blessing for humankind (Genesis 12:1-3). In other words, God's election of Abraham is presented as the divine means to solve the human dilemma of sin set out in Genesis 3-11: "I have chosen him so that he may direct his descendants and his household after him to the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Genesis 18:19). Like Noah before him Abraham is a second Adam figure with whom God starts anew the vision for humanity set out in Genesis 1-2.

Discussion Questions

- How does Genesis 3-11 continue the storyline that started in Genesis 1-2?
- How many stories are there in Genesis 3-11?
- Since the four narratives have the same format (sin-punishment-grace), can we think of this section as one story of sin told in four different ways?

Lessons from Genesis 3-11

1. Growing Power of Sin

- a. Genesis 3-11 contains 4 accounts of sin and God's punishment and redemption, and 5 genealogies connect the accounts together and speed up the story. Each account basically teaches the same truth about the essence of sin and God's redemptive acts.
- b. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve sin and thereby violate a vertical relationship: communion with God.
- c. In Genesis 4-11 people violate a horizontal relationship.
- d. Sin evolves in Genesis 3-11.
 - i. Individual sin (Adam and Eve; Cain) to societal sin in the latter chapters.
 - ii. Noah's generation – "The Lord saw how great human's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5).
 - iii. The Tower of Babel account shows human arrogance that challenges God, which evokes God's harsh response.
- e. Humans are all under the power of sin (Rom 3:9, 23).

Discussion Questions (Teachers, you may ask these questions before talking about the first lesson point, the growing power of sin, since our audience is very familiar with these accounts)

- What is the essence of sin?
- Each of the four narratives (Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel) introduces sin. How does sin progress as the stories unfold?
- How does sin in Genesis 3 differ from sin in Genesis 4-11?

2. Growing Power of Grace

- a. As humans, we cannot solve the perennial problem of sin by ourselves.

- b. God intervenes, for He is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love” (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 86:15, etc). First, God punishes the sinner(s) to help him understand the seriousness of sin. Then, God provides grace at the end of each story in Genesis 3-11.
- c. “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Rom 5:20).
- d. “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (Rom 4:7).
- e. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

Discussion Questions

- What constitutes sin in ANE religions?
 - a. Sin was considered an offense against the gods, disrupting the order and harmony of the cosmos.
 - b. A breach of social norms was sinful in ANE.
- How is the ANE understanding of sin different from what the Bible teaches?
 - a. In the Bible it was seen as a violation of God’s commandment (Rom 5:4).
 - b. It was both a moral failing and a breach of God’s covenant/law.

3. Genesis 3-11 Anticipates God’s Election of Abraham as a Partial Solution to Sin.

- a. Genesis 3-11 is only a part of the larger story, and as such, it ends without a resolution.
 - i. Genesis 3-11 ends with Shem’s genealogy that ends with Terah.
 - ii. The effect of this ending is: If sin is such a big problem, what must be done?
- b. Genesis 12-50 provides God’s solution to the human predicament.
 - i. God’s election of Abraham and transformation of him to be “the father of faith” is the solution.
 - ii. “I have chosen him [Abraham] in order that he may direct his descendants and household to the way of the Lord, by doing what is right and just” (Gen 18:19).
 - iii. All peoples on earth will be blessed through Abraham (Gen 12:3).
- c. As Christians, we preach Christ as God’s ultimate solution to the human problem of sin. As such, God’s election of Abraham was a *partial* solution to the perennial problem of sin.

Discussion Questions

- Why didn’t God choose Enoch, who walked with God seemed blameless, instead of Abraham?

Action Step

1. Give thanks to God for his grace and steadfast love and care.
2. Forgive others just as God forgives us in Christ.

Faith in Action: Seeing the Patriarchs in 2024

Genesis 12-25: The Abraham Cycle

Lesson Objectives

1. Understand Abraham as the “partial solution” to the sin problem presented in Gen 1-11.
2. Contextualize faith as a matter of human interaction with God.
3. Identify forms of security in our lives, and how God may be calling us to prioritize him over comfort.

Biblical Text: Genesis 12-25

Key Verses:

- a. “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the Way of the LORD by doing what is right and just” (Gen 18:19).
- b. “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen 18:14).

Biblical Context

Despite making humans in His own image and likeness, they were unable to maintain the goodness of YHWH’s creation. Genesis 1-2 presents an ideal of creation; the first humans lived in the Garden of Eden, where they were abundantly provided with land, food, and fellowship. They were told to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ and grow humanity in order to live in harmony with YHWH. However, this consummate vision came to ruin by the eventual problem of sin in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord by consuming the Forbidden Fruit. This alienated humans from YHWH, and they were removed from the Garden of Eden into a harsher, fallen world.

Adam and Eve’s sin presents a pattern that continues from Genesis 3-11, forging a human origin story of failure despite YHWH’s efforts to exalt and bless them. The primal divine intentions for humanity are lost on the generations that follow, forcing the Lord’s hand to flood the earth as a literal restart for His creation.⁸

It isn’t until the Abraham Cycle that we see God’s ideal resurrected (partially) in the form of the election and transformation of the patriarchs.

Lessons from Abraham: Putting Ourselves in Abraham’s Shoes

1. **YHWH is faithful and willing to work with our imperfection so that we may return to the ideal of His creation.**
 - a. God promised Abraham land, countless descendants, blessings, and a blessing of nations (Gen 12:2). The covenant God promises to Abraham is almost the same as what is described as plentiful in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The new covenant with Abraham is a resurrection of YHWH’s ideal that existed in the Garden.

⁸ Wenham, Gordon J. *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch*. Vol. 1. Downers Grove: IVP, 2003, 27.

- b. Abraham and Sarah are elected as a *partial* solution to the problem of sin. While God’s promises to them are abundant, the imperfection of Abraham delays their fulfillment and does not witness their full actualization in his lifetime.
- c. God is humble enough to speak to, teach, and anoint Abraham as the epitome of faith despite his flaws, referring to him as “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8). This highlights YHWH’s faithfulness, setting Him entirely apart from ANE religions that did not have faithful gods.
- d. Abraham’s story is the first acknowledgement of God’s intention to overcome the Sin problem entirely and manifest the ideal of His creation once again. Humanity’s self-destructiveness delays the actualization of His plans, but God is more powerful than our disobedience and overcomes all.

Discussion Questions

- How does God’s personal, faithful relationship with such a flawed “Father of Faith” mold your perspective on your own relationship with Christ?
- Oftentimes, we look at “sinning less” as a metric for faith, but C.S. Lewis says, “very often what God first helps us towards is not a virtue itself, but the power of always trying again.”⁹ How do you find yourself feeling when you reflect on your failures of faith?

2. Obedience to God often means abandoning all forms of comfort.

- a. God’s initial call to Abram is to leave his home, family, and life to step into something completely unknown (Gen 12:1).
- b. “[Abraham] shows how much of a scandal faith is. Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that is easily accommodated to everything else. Embrace of this radical gospel requires shattering and discontinuity.”¹⁰
- c. Despite YHWH’s covenant with Abraham, not all that was promised to him was fulfilled during his lifetime. This fulfillment – the hope of his actions “leading to something” – itself is a form of comfort he had to forego.¹¹

Discussion Questions

- How would you have felt in Abraham’s position when he is called in Genesis 12? Do you think God would call us to such drastic change now?
- What forms of comfort are holding you back in your life right now? What does seeking discomfort for God’s kingdom look like in our lives in Abilene?

3. The path to becoming a Faithful follower of Christ is *Not Linear!*

a. Abraham’s acts of faith:

- a. Left homeland based on the Lord’s command (Gen 12:1-9).
- b. Allows Lot to choose land first, revealing trust in YHWH by submitting to others (Gen 13:1-18).

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (United Kingdom: Tyndale House Publishers, 1952), 101.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation. Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

¹¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Commentary*. 3 vols. Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984-1986).

- c. Accepts YHWH's reassurance and believes in the covenant they make, obeying His commands (Gen 15:1-21).
 - d. Willing to *sacrifice his own son* out of obedience to YHWH (Gen 22:1-19).
- b. Abraham's acts of unfaith:**
- a. Lies about his wife being his sister, showing lack in trust that God will protect her (Gen 12:10-20).
 - b. Sleeps with Hagar, disbelieving that God will help Sarah to conceive (Gen 16:1-16).
 - c. Lies about his wife being his sister *again!* (Gen 20:1-18).
 - d. Despite Abraham's acts of unfaith, YHWH keeps the covenant with him. This illustrates God's promises as one-sided. Despite Abraham's failures to earn YHWH's favor, he still gives it. God's maintenance of His promises in our lives helps us to learn to trust Him through trial, tribulation, and our eventual success. Through God's patience and steadfast faithfulness, Abraham reaches the point where he has enough faith to sacrifice what is most important to him, his son.
- c. Living in faith today does not guarantee you will live in faith tomorrow. Many of Abraham's most significant moments of control are followed by his biggest failures, where he exhibited lack of trust in God.¹²
 - d. Abraham's pinnacle expression of faith was when he proved willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, a test of faith orchestrated by God.¹³ In his obedience, he proved worthy as the "father of faith," and God reaffirmed his promise to Abraham by providing a ram in Isaac's place. In the same way, God reaffirms His faithfulness to us by blessing our lives because of our faithfulness.

Discussion Questions

- Even though sin creates a barrier between us and God, it can be a mere bump in the road depending on how we respond to it. What are some ways that we can ensure accountability and improvement following a lapse in faith?
- It is common to look at the Binding of Isaac as God "testing" Abraham; however, scholars have rejected this idea based on God's omniscience and Him already knowing Abraham's heart.¹⁴ Why do you believe God orchestrated such a trial of Abraham's obedience?

Reflection on Our Practices

1. Find a quiet space, focus your mind, and perform a prayer of examen. Ask God to give you wisdom on what is holding your faith back.
2. Write down 3 ways that we can obey God this week where we usually make excuses. Put this notecard on your computer screen or post it somewhere in your home.

¹² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*. 2 vols. NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 1995).

¹³ R. W. L. Moberly, *Genesis 12-50*. Old Testament Guides. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*. JPS Torah Commentary (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

Faith in Action

Genesis 25-35: The Life of Jacob

Lesson Objectives:

1. Reflect on and gain a greater understanding of God's ability to work in and through very imperfect people in keeping the covenants that He makes with His people.
2. Witness God's transformational power in Jacob's life and seek to be transformed by God in our own lives.

Text:

1. Genesis 25-35
2. Specific Points of Interest: Genesis 27:1-30 and Genesis 32:22-30

Meaning of the Text/Lecture:

The focus of this curriculum is the life of Jacob who is one of the patriarchs of the Israelites featured in Genesis. He is the third patriarch in the story of the birth of God's people, coming after his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham, with whom God first made a covenant in Genesis 12. One of the first things we read about Jacob doesn't paint him in a very good light. We see an instance where Jacob is cooking a stew, and his brother Esau comes in from the wilderness so overwhelmed by hunger that he is convinced that he will die without some of Jacob's stew. Jacob sees an opportunity to take advantage of his brother's desperate situation, and he convinces Esau to sell the birthright to him in exchange for some stew (Gen 25:29-34). This story is the first taste we get of Jacob's character and it's not a very impressive first impression.

The events that follow in Jacob's life further illustrate Jacob as a liar and a cheat who is not afraid to take advantage of others to get ahead. Later on, Jacob's father, Isaac, is old and near death, and he decides that it is time to give his oldest son Esau his blessing. However, while Esau is out preparing food from wild game, Jacob, under the influence of his mother, tricks his father into giving him the blessing instead of Esau by convincing his father that he is Esau. He does this by preparing goat meat for Isaac to eat and by covering himself in goatskins so that Isaac, in his extreme weakness, would mistake Jacob for Esau and give Jacob the blessing (Gen 27:1-30). It's important to pause here and make two very important notes about this story. The first is that we must gain an understanding of exactly what a blessing meant to people living in the time that this story takes place. The blessing from a father to his child, although not a gift of physical riches or wealth, was considered to have a significant and noticeable positive impact on the future and the destiny of whoever received it.¹⁵ It is hard for us to understand how highly people from this time period regarded a blessing, but it's important for us to try so that we can truly understand the gravity of Jacob's theft. Secondly, we must note that somehow Isaac was so weak that he mistook goat meat for wild game, goat hair for the hair of his son, and he was unable to distinguish between the voices of his sons. This leads to the conclusion that Isaac was significantly impaired when Jacob stole the blessing. This is important because Jacob stoops very low by taking advantage of his own father while he is in an insanely weak state.¹⁶ To make

¹⁵ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 554.

¹⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1982), 111.

matters worse, in the Pentateuch there is strong concern on God's end for the weak, poor, and vulnerable.¹⁷ Already Jacob has a track record of taking advantage of weak and vulnerable people, and in doing so he takes advantage of a group that God has special care for. This fact, combined with the importance of the blessing, makes what Jacob does in this story super messed up, for lack of a better term.

Jacob's lack of good character and his unethical behavior continue in later chapters. A chapter later, Jacob asserts that the Lord will be his God only if the Lord does a bunch of stuff for Jacob including clothing him, feeding him, and protecting him (Gen 28:20-22). From a 21st century Christian perspective, it feels very wrong for a human to be putting stipulations on God. A few chapters after that, Jacob makes a fool out of his own uncle Laban by tricking Laban into giving Jacob all of the best of the flock while Laban is left with all of the weak livestock (Gen 30:25-43). It's important to note that the original Israelite audience probably would have been impressed and maybe even proud of Jacob's actions because it meant that their patriarch was smart and cunning.¹⁸

However, despite all of these times, when Jacob cheats, lies, misleads, or tries to assert authority over God, God still blesses Jacob and keeps the covenant that He made with Jacob's fathers. For instance, God reaffirms the covenant that He originally made with Abraham to Jacob (Gen 28:13-15) and He blesses Jacob while he is living with Laban so that Jacob is able to have substantial wealth when he leaves Laban (Gen 30:27-30). Herein lies the first point I want to make about Jacob's life. Through Jacob, God shows an ability to work in and through imperfect and even highly unethical people. Jacob's actions paint a poor picture of his character, but God not only doesn't abandon His covenant with Jacob, but He goes as far as to reaffirm it and bless Jacob even in the midst of Jacob's schemes. This doesn't mean we should strive to follow in Jacob's footsteps with his poor decision-making, but it does mean that we should take great hope in God's ability to work through His people even when they are imperfect.

Now that we've spent an extensive amount of time talking about Jacob's ethical and moral shortcomings, it's time to spend some time talking about a much more encouraging part of Jacob's life and that is the transformation of his character. This part of his story begins in Genesis 32. In this chapter, Jacob finds out that the next morning he is going to encounter his brother Esau for the first time since stealing Esau's blessing. At this moment, Jacob is fully convinced that Esau is going to kill him and his family. Because of this, for the first time in Jacob's story he is forced to take a posture of humility, whether he likes it or not.¹⁹ Jacob is used to being the one who takes advantage of others. However, now the tables have turned. Jacob can't run from his past any longer. On the day before Jacob is going to face his brother, he lifts up a prayer to God in which he admits that throughout his life he has been undeserving of God's faithfulness and kindness, and he pleads to God to save him and his family from Esau (Gen 32:9-12). It's the first time that Jacob prays to God in a way that you would expect or hope to see from

¹⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 201.

¹⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 45.

¹⁹ Rory J. Balfour, "'Heavy is the Head': Election, Grace, and Humility in the Climax of the Jacob-Esau Cycle (Genesis 32-33)" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 16 (2022), 32.

one of the patriarchs of God's people. This forced humility is important because it prepares Jacob for the transformation that is about to happen in his life.

That night, Jacob sends all of his family and his servants ahead of him and he is left alone on the other side of a stream. It is at this moment that Jacob gets engaged in a wrestling match with some unnamed figure. He and this figure battle it out all night. The exact identity of this figure is unknown, but it seems as though this ambiguity is purposeful.²⁰ However, once the figure leaves Jacob, he says “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (Gen 32:30). There are two important things to note about this encounter. The first is that at the conclusion of this encounter the figure gives Jacob a new name. The figure says that Jacob will no longer be called Jacob but instead he will be called Israel because of the fact that he has struggled with God and humans but has overcome (Gen 32:28). This name change is important because when a Hebrew name is changed in the Bible it almost always signifies a change of character.²¹ The fact that Jacob has a new name after this encounter is sending us, as readers, a signal that he will no longer be the same person that he was before. The second important thing to note is that in this encounter, Jacob ends up standing very near to God. The idea of standing near to God is one of the most important things to Israelites and Jews throughout the history of Judaism. It has been the belief of Jews that one of our primary goals should be to stand near to God so that we can know Him better and be changed by Him.²² Jacob’s encounter of standing near to God certainly would have caused some major transformation in his life and this plays out in the remaining chapters about Jacob.

This transformation of Jacob’s character is seen in two main places. The first is in his encounter with Esau the next morning. For the first time, we see Jacob interacting with someone while holding a posture of humility. He refers to Esau as lord and he presents Esau with many gifts (Gen 33:8-11). The way he treats Esau exhibits much greater spiritual maturity from what we have seen from him up to this point, and it would not have happened had God not done real transforming work in his life the night before.²³ The second place where Jacob’s transformation is most evident is when he returns to Bethel. There he builds an altar to God. This is the first time that he does this, and it signifies that Jacob now fully recognizes the Lord as his God and he acknowledges how God has answered him and been with him wherever he’s gone. God responds to this recommitment by reaffirming His covenant with Jacob and his fathers (Gen 35:2-15). These two instances make it clear that Jacob’s encounter with the figure that he wrestled with has left him a changed man. True transformation has taken place. Jacob is by no means perfect from that point on, but gone are the days of cheating, lying, and taking advantage of the weak. It’s a beautiful example for us today as we seek transformation in our own lives to have deliverance from the sins we struggle with. It begs the question: if God could transform the likes of Jacob, how much more transformation can He work in our lives if we seek to stand near to Him?

²⁰ John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, New International Biblical Commentary 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 283.

²¹ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 285.

²² James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 683.

²³ June Frances Dickie, “Psychological Forces and Spiritual Encounters: The Bruising and Breakthrough of Jacob,” *OTE* 35 (2022): 189.

Lessons From Jacob's Life

1. God works through Jacob, renews His covenant with Jacob, and blesses Jacob despite Jacob's imperfections and unethical behavior.

1. Jacob takes advantage of his brother, tricks his heavily impaired father, stealing his brother's blessing, puts stipulations on God, and cheats his own uncle.
2. God renews his covenant with Jacob anyways and blesses him greatly in a way that causes him to become very wealthy.

Discussion Questions

- Which of Jacob's unethical acts that we have discussed sticks out to you the most?
- What are some things we learn about God's character based on the way that he treats Jacob, especially when God renews the covenant with Jacob after he steals the blessing from Esau?
- What can we learn from the example of Jacob in terms of encouragement as we deal with our own sin struggles?

2. God's transformative work is on full display in Jacob's life through Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok and the events of Jacob's life that follow.

1. Jacob has a supernatural encounter at the Jabbok on the night before he sees his brother Esau for the first time since stealing Esau's blessing.
2. After this encounter, we see a noticeable change in Jacob's behavior, first in the way that Jacob interacts with his brother and then again when Jacob builds an altar to God for the first time.

Discussion Questions

- What sort of encouragement does Jacob's transformation provide for you?
- When have you witnessed God do transformative work in your life or the lives of others? What did that process look like?
- How can we stand near to God so that he can transform us?

Action Steps

1. Identify a time when God worked through you despite your shortcomings. Spend time in prayer thanking God for it.
2. Pursue Godly transformation in one aspect/sin struggle in your life by assuming a posture of humility before God in action and in prayer to stand near to God.

Faith in Action
God Blesses the Unchosen
Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21

Lesson Objectives

1. Pay attention to the less-told stories in Genesis and see the world from God's perspective, whose desire is to save all people (1 Tim 2:4).
2. Discover that God blesses not only the chosen but also unchosen and ponder on its implication for us today.

Texts: Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21

Literary Context:

Genesis 1-11 deals with the entire humanity, and the scope of the rest of the book narrows, focusing on the chosen. In Genesis 12, God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him to transform the world – “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just” (Gen 18:19). We know the end of the story that Abraham became “the father of faith” so that Jews, Christians, and even Muslims all trace their lineage back to Abraham. For the most part, Genesis 12-50 focuses on Abraham and his descendants' faith journeys, showing God's faithfulness in working through the imperfect family to achieve his salvific plan. While this is the central part of the narratives in Genesis, and that God blesses the chosen is unquestionable. However, Genesis also shows God's concern and care for the rest of the world, his creation, which we can call the “unchosen” as opposed to the “chosen.”

Genesis contains ten sets of *toledot* formulae describing generations of family stories. The Hebrew term *toledot* means “generations” in English. Each formula begins with “these are the generations of” and structures the book of Genesis in the following ways:

1. Heaven and Earth (2:4-4:26)
2. Adam (5:1-6:8)
3. Noah (6:9-9:28)
4. Noah's sons (10:1-11:9)
5. Shem (11:10-26)
6. Terah (11:27-25:11)
7. Ishmael (25:12-18)
8. Isaac (25:19-35:29)
9. Esau (36:1-43)
10. Jacob (37:2-50:27)

God's care and concern for the unchosen becomes apparent in the *toledot* formulae because they include Ishmael and Esau's accounts. After Genesis 12, the book of Genesis could have focused on the chosen family and excluded other stories, especially the whole chapter length of Esau's genealogy. But that is not the case. **Genesis 25:12-18 and 36:1-43 indicate that the descendants of Ishmael and Esau are acknowledged as parallel societies to Israel, deserving and receiving God's blessings.** God's care, concern, and blessings for the unchosen become

apparent even before these chapters. While there was conflict between Sarah and Hagar, there was no conflict between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites in the Old Testament. Now let's focus on our main text Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21.

Lessons from the Text:

1. **God sometimes surprises us by doing unexpected things for what we may identify as “peripheral” characters.**
 - a. Hagar was a multifaceted character. Once an obedient surrogate slave, her demeanor changed drastically when she became pregnant – “she looked Sarah with contempt” (16:4).
 - b. Apparently, Hagar and Ishmael are not the main characters in Genesis. They are **NOT chosen!**
 - c. Ishmael and Hagar are regarded as an “**obstacle personified**,”²⁴ and their departure from Abraham's house in Genesis 21:1-21 as a “**strange theme in sacred history**.”²⁵
 - d. When oppressed by Sarah, Hagar fled from her (Gen 16:5-6), met God in the wilderness (Gen 16:7), and even received a promise there about her son Ishmael (Gen 16:10-12).
 - e. **Like Abraham and Sarah, Hagar received a divine promise of numerous descendants** – “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.” (16:10).
 - f. **Hagar, not Sarah, became the only individual to name God in the OT** – “God who sees me” (16:7).
 - g. Ishmael means “God hears” (16:11), indicating that God is not distant but rather intimately involved in all people's lives, even those marginalized and oppressed.

Discussion Questions:

- How has God surprised you or somebody you know?
 - Hagar the Egyptian slave, not Sarah, was the first person who named God in the Bible. What do you make of that?
 - God hears laments of oppressed people whether or not they are chosen? What does that imply?
 - What does this passage teach us?
2. **God hears the cry of and cares for the afflicted regardless of their chosen status.**
 - a. When expelled to the wilderness, Hagar and Ishmael cried, and God heard their crying (21:14-17).
 - b. God told Hagar to comfort Ishmael and assured her again that God would make a great nation from his descendants (21:18).
 - c. Genesis 21:8-21 ends with an affirmation that **God was with Ishmael** as he grew up even though Ishmael was unchosen (21:20).

²⁴ Dixon Sutherland, “The Organization of the Abraham Promise Narrative,” *ZAW* 95 (1983), 339-340.

²⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*. OTL (London: SCM, 1972), 234-235.

- d. Like a mother cannot forget her baby, God cares for his creation, even the unchosen (Isa 49:15).

Discussion Questions:

- How would you explain God's special concern for Ishmael?
 - **God does not commit himself exclusively to his chosen people!**
 - **God's care and concern are not limited to the chosen.**
 - **These texts counteract a narrow, nationalistic understanding of the election.**
- Who would be Ishmael of our time?
- What do you think the statement "God was with Ishmael" means? What does that show about God?

Action Steps:

- Who would be Ishmael of our time?
- Let's not act like Sarah did but treat Ishmael of our time with respect and love.
- Examine your heart to see if there is any narrow understanding of the election.

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