

SALVATION HISTORY



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Nihil Obstat: André Villeneuve, S.T.B., M.A., Ph.D.
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NOTES



Chapter I

God's Design

UNDERSTANDING

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(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Much of this Bible study originates from "The Real Story" by Edward Sri and Curtis Martin. For more about these topics, please consider reading "The Real Story."

Don't be fooled. There's a lot more going on in the opening chapter of the Bible than you might expect. But to grasp its powerful meaning, you must be willing to see the story from the perspective of its original audience: the ancient Israelites.

The way ancient near eastern cultures like Israel told stories and passed on their history is very different from our own. They did not typically offer straightforward, chronological, "play-by-play" accounts as modern-day historians or newspaper reporters might do. Instead, the Biblical writers often organized material by themes and employed elaborate literary techniques that involved repetition, parallelism, allusion, and alliteration—artistry that readers today often miss.

This is certainly the case with the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1. The account of the six days of creation, the divine commands ("Let there be light!"), and God's rest on the seventh day was never intended to be read like a scientific textbook. Rather, the account uses figurative language and poetic devices to communicate its beautiful message about creation and God's plan for the human family. These

rich theological points in Genesis 1 are more deeply appreciated when we consider the way the six days of creation unfold in the narrative.

Numerous scholars have pointed out how there is a connection in the narrative between the first three days and the next three days of creation. On the first three days, God creates day and night (first day), sky and sea (second day), and land and vegetation (third day). Then on the fourth day, God creates the sun, moon, and stars to rule over the day and night, corresponding what He created on the first day. On the fifth day, God creates the birds to fill the sky and the fish to fill the sea, corresponding to the second. And on the sixth day, God creates the beasts to crawl on the earth, corresponding to the land created on the third day.

REALMS		RULERS
DAY 1: DAY & NIGHT	↔	DAY 4: SUN, MOON & STARS
DAY 2: SKY & SEA	↔	DAY 5: BIRDS & FISH
DAY 3: LAND & VEGETATION	↔	DAY 6: THE BEASTS

The author of Genesis 1 is clearly arranging a series of parallels between the first three days of creation and the last three days to reveal God as the divine architect, creating the universe with great order. He first creates three realms on days 1-3 (time, space, and life) and then he creates the rulers over those realms in days 4-6 (sun, moon, and stars over time; birds and fish filling sky and sea, and the beasts over the land). Finally, God creates man and woman as the crowning of His creation, making them in His image and likeness, and giving them the mission to rule over all creation: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Gn 1:26). All this is missed if we do not take into account the literary artistry of the biblical writers.

Much would also be missed if we fail to consider the historical context. Israel's creation account actually subverts the accounts of creation in other ancient near eastern cultures (see sidebar).

SIDEBAR

Other ancient near eastern cultures around Israel had their own stories about how the world came into existence and how human beings were created. But Israel's story stands out for its emphasis on monotheism—the belief in only one God.

The pagan nations around Israel believed in multiple deities, many of whom were associated with the things of this world. They worshipped the sun, moon and stars. The sea monsters were powerful deities. And other pagan gods were associated with the images of various animals.

For Genesis 1, therefore, to proclaim that Israel's God is the one true God who created the sun, moon, stars, sea creatures and all the animals would have been a counter-cultural and subversive message. Genesis would be highlighting how the very gods which the pagans worship are actually not deities at all, but merely creatures of the one true God!

Image Is Everything

The drama of Genesis 1 next moves from the cosmic perspective of God creating the sun, moon and stars all the way down to the climactic moment when God creates man:

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image after our likeness'" (Gn 1:26).

Christians often talk about how we are made in the "image of God." But what does this really *mean*?

While this concept has many layers of theological meaning (see CCC 356-357), what would have stood out to the ancient Israelites hearing the story of creation is that Adam has a relationship with God that is truly extraordinary. Nothing else in the visible world even comes close to the intimate communion God establishes with Adam and Eve.

In the Bible, being made in the *image* of someone else implies a father-and-son relationship. In fact, the next time this word is used in Genesis, it describes the relationship between Adam and his own son, Seth: Adam "became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his *image*, and named him Seth" (Gn 5:3, emphasis added).

If Seth is in the image of his father Adam, what would that tell us about Adam being made in the image of God? Adam is being revealed as God's son. Thus, the entire narrative of the Bible begins with an astonishing truth about our identity: We are not mere creatures of the Creator. We are not simply servants of an Almighty Deity. We are called to an intimate relationship with this infinite God as His children, made in His image.

The Fatherhood of God

This passage also gives us a glimpse of who *God* is. If Genesis 1 highlights how Adam was created as God's son, this would suggest that God is meant to be understood not just as Lord, but also as *Father*.

The rest of Genesis 1 and 2 goes on to show God's fatherly care for Adam. God provides Adam with a garden full of water to drink and fruits and vegetation to eat. He creates the animals and allows Adam to name them and care for them, showing Adam his mission to rule over and care for all of God's natural creation. He even provides Adam with a partner: his bride, Eve.

In the midst of the story, God gives Adam only one restrictive law—only one “Thou shall not...”: He says to Adam, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gn 2:16-17). This leads us to a crucial question for understanding the story of Adam—and the story of our own lives: Why does God give the law?

God does not give this law to Adam in order to control him and restrict his freedom. In fact, God's words underscore the broad liberty He was giving Adam to eat *freely* from *every* other tree in the garden. There is only one tree from which God does not want Adam to eat, the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Neither is the law given merely to test Adam's obedience. There is a much deeper purpose to the command. The text says God warns Adam about this one tree because He does not want Adam to be harmed: “*for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*” In other words, God gives this law to protect Adam from some danger that is symbolized by the tree of knowledge of good and evil (cf. CCC 396).¹ Here, we can begin to see how the moral law flows from God's love for us. As Pope John Paul II once explained: “God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love, proposes this good to man in the commandments.”²

¹ “The ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC 396).

² John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 35.

The Serpent's Strategy: Rules vs. Relationship

The law flows from the Father's heart. But the devil wants Adam and Eve (and all of us) to view God's law *apart* from His love—to see the command as a rule, not as an expression of his relationship with us.

Consider the serpent's first words to Eve: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any trees of the garden?’” (3:1). First, the serpent simply refers to the Lord as “God” (in Hebrew, the word is “*Elohim*”). This title is used in Genesis 1 to describe God as the Creator of the universe. The serpent's use of this title here is particularly striking because the rest of Genesis 2-3 characteristically refers to God as “the Lord God” (in Hebrew, “*Yahweh Elohim*”), which elsewhere in the Bible expresses God's intimacy with his people as Israel's covenant partner. In Genesis 2, it is the “Lord God” who creates man from the ground and breathes life into him, who creates the animals and allows Adam to name them, and who creates the woman from Adam's side. Indeed, the “Lord God” is a loving God, intimately involved in Adam and Eve's lives, providing for them as his children.

But the serpent will have none of this. He wants Eve to think of God as a remote deity, a distant creator—one who gives a burdensome law. It is as if the serpent is saying, “Did that distant Creator, that powerful law-giver, say, ‘You shall not eat of *any* trees of the garden?’” The serpent wants them to think of God as an oppressive law-giver whose rule limits their freedom.

The woman responds by mentioning that they may eat from other trees, but that if they eat from the tree in the midst of the garden they would die (3:2-3). To this, the serpent says: “*You will not die.* For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God*, knowing good and evil” (3:4).

Attack on God's Fatherhood

Feel the gravity of the serpent's words. In saying, "You will *not* die," the serpent is calling God a liar. According to the serpent, the tree is *not* harmful. It is actually something that will make them become like God. And God is so afraid of Adam and Eve eating from the tree and becoming like him that he makes up this law in order to keep them under his control.

Notice how the devil is not simply trying to get Adam and Eve to break a rule. Ultimately, he is trying to get them to break a relationship. The first sin involves questioning God's fatherly goodness. As the *Catechism* explains, "Man, tempted by the devil, *let his trust in his Creator die in his heart* and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and *lack of trust in his goodness*" (CCC 397).

In conclusion, the first temptation and every one since involves an attack on God's loving Fatherhood. In our own relativistic world today, many people adopt the serpent's view about God's moral law—they doubt that there really is a moral law that is given for our good. When a culture views religion as "just a bunch of rules" and morality as the Church "trying to tell others what to do with their lives," it no longer sees the moral law as coming from the heart of a loving Father who wants what is best for us. Like Adam and Eve, our modern world has not just abandoned moral truth. In doing so, it has bought into the serpent's lie about God Himself. When we reject God's moral law for our own preferences, we are ultimately rejecting the Father's loving care for us.

The 'First Gospel'

Through sin, Adam and Eve bring discord into the original harmony they had with God and find themselves in desperate need of being restored. Spiritually separated from God and having introduced death into the world, Adam and Eve now have a problem that they are incapable of solving on their own. Right at this desperate moment, God offers a message of hope.

After the Fall, God confronts the serpent, saying, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gn 3:15). These words represent the first time in the Bible when God's plan of salvation is prophetically foreshadowed. The imagery of the strife between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring depicts a long battle between those who follow the serpent's ways and those descendants of the woman who will follow God's ways. In the end, however, the woman is described as having an offspring who will defeat the devil. Since the use of the imagery of *crushing the head* in the Bible denotes a king defeating his enemies, this passage portrays the woman as having a royal offspring who will emerge to defeat the serpent.

Christians have called this passage the *Protoevangelium*, or the "first Gospel." According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, these words represent the first prophecy about the redemptive work of Christ. "Christian tradition sees in this passage an announcement of the 'New Adam' who, because he 'became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,' makes amends superabundantly for the disobedience of Adam. Furthermore, many...have seen the woman announced in the *Protoevangelium* as Mary, the mother of Christ, the 'new Eve'" (CCC 411).

The New Adam

But Genesis 3 not only provides a prophecy about Christ's victory over the devil; the narrative also foreshadows how Jesus will restore the sons of Adam to covenant with God.

Consider what happened after Adam was tested in the Garden of Eden and ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. As a result of the fall, Adam faces several curses. His work will not be as easy as it once was in the Garden of Eden. Now, he will have to “sweat” in his labors (Gn 3:19) while his crops bear “thorns and thistles” (Gn 3:18). Even the ground where he will work is cursed (Gn 3:17). The most severe of the curses, however, is that he will no longer live forever but return to the ground from which he was made. God says to Adam, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gn 3:19).

All this sheds light on the climax of Christ's mission in His passion and death. As the New Adam, Jesus confronts the curses laid on Adam that have plagued the human family ever since the fall. Like Adam, Jesus, on the night before He died, enters a garden—the Garden of Gethsemane—where He is tested (Mt 26:36-46). There, He takes on Adam's sweat as He experiences "sweat-like drops of blood" falling from His face. On Good Friday, Jesus symbolically takes on the curse of Adam's thorns as He is handed over to the Roman soldiers, who place a crown of *thorns* on His head (Mt 27:29). Finally, Jesus even takes on the curse of Adam's death as He goes to a tree—the wood of the cross—and dies on Calvary. And, like Adam, Jesus is placed in the cursed ground where He is buried in a tomb. It is precisely from the darkness of that tomb in the cursed ground that Jesus, the Light of the World, rises victoriously from the dead on Easter Sunday to shine the light of salvation at the dawn of the new creation.³

³ Parts of this chapter were based on an article by Edward Sri "From the Father's Heart: God's Law and Our Happiness" *Lay Witness* May/June 2011, pp. 10-11.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 1:1-13, 14-15, 26-27; 2:16-7; 3:1-6, 15

Please read aloud: The Bible can be intimidating. After all, it is no ordinary book; it's more like a library. It consists of 73 books, written in different languages, by different authors, to diverse audiences at various periods of time. And while some people might be familiar with the major stories of the Bible—Moses and the Exodus, Noah and the flood, David and Goliath, Jesus and the cross—few understand how all these varied stories actually fit together.

In this Bible study, however, we will discover the “big picture” of the Bible—how the many smaller stories of Scripture fit into the overarching epic story of God's covenant family plan, centered on the person and mission of Jesus Christ. At every step of the way, we will see how God is preparing His people for the coming of Jesus Christ and the Church He established. In this way, the unity of God's plan as revealed in the Bible will shine out more clearly.

This first chapter of the study begins at the very beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis.

1. *Launching Question:* When you think about the first chapters of the Bible, the narrative of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis, what immediately comes to mind? Or what have you

heard other people say about this text?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: As we begin our study, we can't be fooled. We must recognize that there's a lot more going on in the opening chapter of the Bible than we might expect. But to grasp its powerful meaning, we must be willing to see the story from the perspective of its original audience: the ancient Israelites. The Biblical writers often organized material by themes and employed elaborate literary techniques that involved repetition, parallelism, allusion, and alliteration—artistry that readers today often miss. This is certainly the case with the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1. Let's investigate this further by looking at the first few chapters of the Bible.

Read Genesis 1:1-13

2. In these first three days, what does God create on each day?

Answer: On the first day, God creates the day and the night. On the second day, he creates the sky and the sea. On the third day, he creates Land and vegetation.

Note to the leader: Take out a piece of paper and write out the first three days of creation.

Day and Night

Sky and Sea

Land and Vegetation

Please read aloud: Now, let's look at the next three days of creation.

Read Genesis 1:14-24

3. The rich theological points in Genesis 1 are more deeply appreciated when we consider the way the six days of creation unfold in the narrative. Do see a connection between days 1-3 and days 4-6? How might these sets of days be related?

Answer: Numerous scholars have pointed out how there is a connection in the narrative between the first three days and the next three days of creation. The author of Genesis 1 is clearly arranging a series of parallels between the first three days of creation and the last three days to reveal God as the divine architect, creating the universe with great order. He first creates three realms on days 1-3 (time, space, and life) and then he creates the rulers over those realms in days 4-6 (sun, moon, and stars over time; birds and fish filling sky and sea, and the beasts over the land).

Note to the leader: Write the second three days of creation in parallel to the first three.

*Day and Night -> Sun , Moon , and Stars
Sky and Sea -> Birds and Fish
Land and Vegetation -> The Beasts*

SIDEBAR (OPTIONAL)

Please read aloud: We can see that the author of Genesis is showing us that God creates with great care and great order. But, much of the meaning of Genesis 1 is also missed if we fail to consider the historical context in which this account was written. Other ancient near eastern cultures around Israel had their own stories about how the world came into existence and how human beings were created. But Israel's story stands out for its emphasis on monotheism—the belief in only one God. The pagan nations around Israel believed in multiple deities, many of

whom were associated with the things of this world. They worshipped the sun, moon and stars. The sea monsters were powerful deities. And other pagan gods were associated with the images of various animals.

4. In light of this background about pagan gods, what do you think would stand out to an ancient reader? What is different about Israel's creation story? What is this story claiming when read against this ancient background?

Answer: For Genesis 1 to proclaim that Israel's God is the one true God who created the sun, moon, stars, sea creatures and all the animals would have been a counter-cultural and subversive message. Genesis would be highlighting how the very gods which the pagans worship are actually not deities at all, but merely creatures of the one true God!

Please read aloud: The drama of Genesis 1 next moves from the cosmic perspective of God creating the sun, moon and stars all the way down to the climactic moment when God creates man.

Read Genesis 1:26-27

5. What does this verse tell us about what humanity is made for? What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?
Allow the group to discuss. Don't tell them the full answer just yet.

Please read aloud: As in any piece of literature, when you come across a word or expression that you're not sure what it means, you consider the context, to see how it's used in other settings. This will be important for interpreting the Bible correctly, too. So, if we want to understand the meaning of being made in God's image and likeness, we should consider the next time the expression is used. The next

time the Bible uses the phrase “image and likeness” is Genesis 5:3. Let's see how the phrase is used there.

Read Genesis 5:3

6. What does this verse tell us about the phrase “image and likeness”? And what does this mean for us, when the Bible says that we are created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26)?

Answer: Adam has a son named Seth, and Seth is in the image and likeness of his father Adam. In Scripture, therefore, the idea of image and likeness points to sonship. When Scripture states that we are created in the image and likeness of God, it is telling us that we are God's children, his sons and daughters. Unlike anything else in all creation, God made us to share in his life, to live in friendship with him as his children.

7. If the phrase “image and likeness” reveals that we are God's children, then what does this same phrase tell us about God?

Answer: This passage also gives us a glimpse of who God is. If Genesis 1 highlights how Adam was created as God's son, this would suggest that God is meant to be understood not just as Lord, but also as Father.

Please read aloud: The rest of Genesis 1 and 2 goes on to show God's fatherly care for Adam. God provides Adam with a garden full of water to drink and fruits and vegetation to eat. He creates the animals and allows Adam to name them and care for them, showing Adam his mission to rule over and care for all of God's natural creation. He even provides Adam with a partner: his bride, Eve. In the midst of this, God gives Adam some specific instructions.

Read Genesis 2:16-17

8. Like a good Father, God is very generous with Adam. God's words underscore the broad liberty He was giving Adam to eat *freely* from *every* other tree in the garden. But, he also gives Adam a command, a “thou shalt not.” In light of what we have been reading about God's Fatherhood, why do you think God gives this command? Why would a good Father tell his children “no?”

Answer: The text says God warns Adam about this one tree because He does not want Adam to be harmed: “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Like a good Father, God gives this law to protect Adam from some danger that is symbolized by the tree of knowledge of good and evil (cf. CCC 396).¹ Here, we can begin to see how the moral law flows from God's love for us. God gives us laws because he loves us.

Please read aloud:

The law flows from the Father's heart. But the devil wants Adam and Eve (and all of us) to view God's law *apart* from His love—to see the command as a rule, not as an expression of his relationship with us. This leads us to the next part of our story.

Read Genesis 3:1-6

Please read aloud: To understand the subtleties of this passage, we need to look at the story in its original language, Hebrew. Genesis 2-3 characteristically refers to God as “the Lord God” (in Hebrew, “*Yahweh Elohim*”), which elsewhere in the Bible expresses God's intimacy with his people as Israel's covenant partner. Indeed, the “Lord God” is a loving God, intimately involved in Adam and Eve's lives, providing for them as his children.

¹ “The ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC 396).

The serpent will have none of this. In Genesis 3:1, the serpent simply refers to the Lord as “God” (in Hebrew, the word is “*Elohim*”). This title is used in Genesis 1 to describe God as the Creator of the universe. He wants Eve to think of God as a remote deity, a distant creator—one who gives a burdensome law.

The devil even goes so far as to directly contradict God, saying to Eve, “you will not die.” Feel the gravity of the serpent’s words. In saying, “You will *not* die,” the serpent is calling God a liar. According to the serpent, the tree is *not* harmful. It is actually something that will make them become like God. And God is so afraid of Adam and Eve eating from the tree and becoming like him that he makes up this law in order to keep them under his control.

9. Considering this background, what is the serpent trying to do? Who or what is he attacking? What is at the heart of this temptation?

Answer: Notice how the devil is not simply trying to get Adam and Eve to break a rule. Ultimately, he is trying to get them to break a relationship. The first sin involves questioning God’s fatherly goodness. As the Catechism explains, “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. This is what man’s first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness” (CCC 397). The first temptation and every one since involves an attack on God’s loving Fatherhood.

10. Do you see this same temptation in the lives of people today? How so?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: In our own relativistic world today, many people adopt the serpent’s view about God’s moral law—they doubt that there really is a moral law that is given for our good. When a culture views religion as “just a bunch of rules” and morality as the

Church “trying to tell others what to do with their lives,” it no longer sees the moral law as coming from the heart of a loving Father who wants what is best for us. Like Adam and Eve, our modern world has not just abandoned moral truth. In doing so, it has bought into the serpent’s lie about God Himself. When we reject God’s moral law for our own preferences, we are ultimately rejecting the Father’s loving care for us.

Please read aloud: But the story doesn’t end here. Through sin, Adam and Eve bring discord into the original harmony they had with God and find themselves in desperate need of being restored. Spiritually separated from God and having introduced death into the world, Adam and Eve now have a problem that they are incapable of solving on their own. Right at this desperate moment, God offers a message of hope.

Read Genesis 3:15

Please read aloud: These words represent the first time in the Bible when God’s plan of salvation is prophetically foreshadowed. The imagery of the strife between the serpent’s offspring and the woman’s offspring depicts a long battle between those who follow the serpent’s ways and those descendants of the woman who will follow God’s ways. In the end, however, the woman is described as having an offspring who will defeat the devil. Since the use of the imagery of *crushing the head* in the Bible denotes a king defeating his enemies, this passage portrays the woman as having a royal offspring who will emerge to defeat the serpent.

Christians have called this passage the *Protoevangelium*, or the “first Gospel.” According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, these words represent the first prophecy about the redemptive work of Christ:

"Christian tradition sees in this passage an announcement of the 'New Adam' who, because he 'became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,' makes amends superabundantly for the disobedience of Adam. Furthermore, many...have seen the woman announced in the *Protoevangelium* as Mary, the mother of Christ, the 'new Eve'" (CCC 411).

11. Why do you think the *Protoevangelium*, or the "first Gospel," appears at this point in the text?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: But Genesis 3 not only provides a prophecy about Christ's victory over the devil; the narrative also foreshadows how Jesus will restore the sons of Adam to covenant with God. Let's compare the curses Adam receives and what Jesus experiences in his passion.

Read Genesis 3:17-19

Please read aloud: Remember this passage. I am going to summarize a couple passages about Jesus. See if you can identify the connections between Adam and Jesus in these passages.

- In Matthew 26:36-46, before Jesus dies, he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane he is tested. In his agony, he sweats blood, but says to God "Thy will be done."
- In Acts 5:30, Peter states that Jesus died "on a tree."
- Matthew 27:29 tells us that a crown of thorns was put on Jesus' head.
- Jesus dies and rises from the dead.

12. What do these passages show us about Jesus in relation to Adam's curses? What similarities do you see?

Answer: As the New Adam, Jesus confronts the curses laid on Adam that have plagued the human family ever since the fall. Like Adam, Jesus, on the night before He died, enters a garden—the Garden of Gethsemane—where He is tested (Mt 26:36-46). There, He takes on Adam's sweat as He experiences "sweat-like drops of blood" falling from His face. On Good Friday, Jesus symbolically takes on the curse of Adam's thorns as He is handed over to the Roman soldiers, who place a crown of thorns on His head (Mt 27:29). Finally, Jesus even takes on the curse of Adam's death as He goes to a tree—the wood of the cross—and dies on Calvary. And, like Adam, Jesus is placed in the cursed ground where He is buried in a tomb. It is precisely from the darkness of that tomb in the cursed ground that Jesus, the Light of the World, rises victoriously from the dead on Easter Sunday to shine the light of salvation at the dawn of the new creation.²

13. As we come to the close of this chapter, what have you come to understand about God's plan and the story presented by the Scriptures? How do you think this chapter is going to help us understand the rest of the story of the Bible?

Allow the group to discuss.

² Parts of this chapter were based on an article by Edward Sri "From the Father's Heart: God's Law and Our Happiness" *Lay Witness* May/June 2011, pp. 10-11.



UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 40 - 50



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Our tour through the Bible now takes us into the Scripture's first two genealogies. Admittedly, for modern readers, a genealogy seems to be just a long list of names—probably not that important and certainly not that interesting. As Biblical scholar N. T. Wright put it, “Reading other people’s genealogies is about as exciting as watching other people’s holiday videos.”¹

But for the ancient Israelites, a genealogy was more than just a long list of names. Each name told a story and underscored key twists and turns in Israel’s history. The reader who skips the genealogies will often miss out on crucial points God wants to make in the overarching narrative of the Bible.

This is certainly the case with the Bible’s first two genealogies, which trace the descendants of Adam’s two sons, Cain and Seth. In Genesis 4:17-5:32, we see a stark contrast. These two genealogies illustrate two fundamentally different types of cultures: One is characterized by a pursuit of God (Seth’s righteous line), the other by a pursuit of one’s own selfish desires (Cain’s sinful line) (See Sidebar).

¹ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 23.

SIDEBAR - A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The first genealogy chronicles Cain’s descendants and illustrates how one man’s sin ripples through the generations (Gn 4:17-24). After murdering his brother Abel, Cain turns his back on God and breaks fellowship with his family (Gn 4:16). The account of Cain’s sin is immediately followed by a list of his descendants, in which we see men and women raising up children who do not know the Lord and whose decisions bear evidence of an ever-increasing breakdown in family life and morality. The genealogy shows how the descendants of Cain are known for polygamy, vengeance, violence and murder, and pride as they name a city after themselves (Gn 4:19-24).

Unlike Cain, however, Adam and Eve continue to seek the Lord. They are blessed with another son, Seth. As a family, they begin to “call upon the name of the Lord”—a Biblical phrase associated with worship (see Gn 12:8, 13:4, and 26:25; Ps. 80:18-19 and 105:1). In contrast with Cain’s descendants, who build up their own name, Seth’s family focuses on God’s name in worship. The birth of Seth heralds a second genealogy in Genesis 5. Here we see how this faithful son of Adam and Eve also fathers a family, but his descendants manifest notably different qualities from the disgraced offspring of Cain.

Notice the stark contrasts. Seth’s family worships the one true God (Gn 4:26), whereas Cain’s line has turned away from the Lord (Gn 4:16). Seth’s line lives in God’s blessing (Gn 5:2), whereas Cain’s family lives under a curse (Gn 4:11). Seth’s family calls on the name of the Lord and seeks to give glory to God (Gn 4:26), whereas Cain’s family seeks to give glory to its members, naming cities after its own children (Gn. 4:17). Seth’s family is characterized by the son in the seventh generation, Enoch, who “walked with God” (Gn 5:22-24); whereas

Cain's line is exemplified by the son of the sixth generation, Lamech, who lives a life of polygamy and violence (Gn 4:19-24).

Seth's line

- Lives in God's blessing (5:2)
- His family "calls upon the name of the Lord" and gives glory to God (4:17)
- Worships the one true God (4:26) and walks with God (5:22-24)

Cain's line

- Lives in God's curse (4:11)
- Breaks fellowship with his family and turns away from the Lord (4:16)
- Family characterized by acts of polygamy (4:19), vengeance (4:24), violence, murder (4:23), and pride as it names a city after itself (4:17)

Why the Flood? (Gn 6:1-5)

So, if there were at least one righteous group of people—the line of Seth—why did God send a flood that punished the *whole* human family?

Our first clue is found at the start of the Bible's account of the flood, which notes that "the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose" (Gn 6:1). Immediately after this, God indicates His displeasure and announces that He plans to punish the whole of humanity: "My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years" (Gn 6:3).

What led God to this conclusion? In order to answer this question, we must take a deeper look at the context and ask, "Who were the sons

of God? Who were the daughters of men? And why would God be opposed to their marrying?"

Whenever we encounter a statement in Scripture that appears unclear, the first place we should look for clarification is the immediate context. In the two chapters that immediately precede this scene, we learned of two genealogies that tell a story of two families with radically different values and lifestyles. Genesis 4 focuses on Cain's family, which is centered on man and has turned its back on God. Chapter five focuses on Seth's family, which calls on the Lord's name and walks with God. But in Genesis 6, "the sons of God" married "the daughters of men," and, as a result, God punished the human family with a flood (Gn 6:1-7).

In light of these two genealogies, Genesis 6:1 begins to make more sense. The "sons of God" would refer to the godly family of Seth, and the "daughters of men" would refer to the disgraced descendants of Cain.² The text thus seems to indicate that the sons of God in the Sethite line were attracted to ungodly women from the Cainite line and married them. As the one faithful line of Seth is undermined by the introduction of godless spouses, the covenant family is weakened and God is grieved. The whole earth now has become corrupt, and God sent the flood.

² Some have interpreted the "sons of God" as a reference to angelic beings who marry women, but this view seems unlikely. Apart from the fact that angels cannot reproduce like humans (as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas have noted), nowhere in Genesis is the notion of "sons of God" associated with angels, and nothing in the immediate context would point us in that direction.

That the "sons of God" should be understood as the faithful Sethite line is made clearer when we consider how Genesis itself links the notion of being a son of God with the genealogy of Adam and Seth. This is the only genealogy in the Old Testament that begins with a reference to God Himself: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God" (Gn 5:1). The genealogy then tells how Adam "became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth" (5:3) and then traces the descendants of Seth all the way down to Noah. The parallel between God's creating Adam in His image and likeness (1:26; 5:3) and Adam fathering Seth "after his image" and "in his own likeness" (5:3) underscores how God has a special father-son relationship with these faithful descendants of Adam and Seth. As Biblical scholar John Sailhamer put it, "The author has gone to great lengths to depict God's creation of humankind in terms of a patriarch establishing and overseeing a family.... Not only is Adam the father of Seth and Seth the father of Enosh and so on, but God is the father of them all." John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 117.

This intermarriage between the faithful and the unfaithful introduces an oft-repeated theme within the Scriptures: that when the hearts of God's people turn toward pagan women, they also turn to those women's pagan gods and immoral lifestyle (see Nm 25:1-3, 1 Kgs 11:1-8). This is the context for understanding the flood.

A New Creation

The presentation of the flood in Genesis 6-9 echoes the account of creation in Genesis 1. In establishing this parallel, the author of Genesis is trying to highlight the fact that sin is bringing about a *reversal* of creation. In other words, the beautiful order and harmony that God established in the world has been distorted because of sin. We see this borne out in the way the flood account begins by noting how "God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt" (Gn 6:12). This simple statement stands in dramatic contrast with what God saw at the climax the creation week in Genesis chapter 1: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gn 1:31). But now, sin has taken its toll, and God's good creation has been disfigured.

Similarly, notice what the Bible actually says about how the flood came about. Many of us may think of the flood as a rainstorm that lasted a long time, but the Scriptures present something far more catastrophic. At the beginning of creation, a watery chaos known as the *tehom* in Hebrew (the deep) covered the earth (Gn 1:2). God's spirit hovered over the waters, separating them to create the sky and the sea, and then taming them to bring forth the land that would serve as a suitable home for humanity.

In the flood, these separated waters come crashing back together, and the watery chaos is unleashed. "The fountains of the great deep [*tehom*] burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened"

(Gn 7:11). This was not simply a prolonged downpour; the language seems to indicate a deluge of water coming from every direction. The chaotic waters of the sea would be swelling over the land, while the waters of the sky would be collapsing upon them. In the flood, God's creation is devastated and all life is blotted out—except for the seed of a new creation, floating in the ark with Noah and his family.

Noah—One Righteous Man

What do we know about Noah? The Scriptures tell us that he is a tenth-generation descendant of Adam in the line of Seth. In contrast to the great wickedness that was all around him (Gn 6:5), Noah dares to live a different kind of life. He is "a righteous man" who was "blameless in his generation." He was a man who "walked with God" in the midst of a corrupt culture (Gn 6:9-10). Thus, Noah "found favor in God's eyes" (Gn 6:8)—an expression used to describe someone to whom much will be entrusted (see Gn 39:4). This certainly applies to Noah: Indeed, he is about to be entrusted with the future of the whole human family!

In many ways, the flood narrative presents a kind of re-creation, with language that reflects images from the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. We see this, for example, with the recurrence of the number seven. Just as God created the world and rested on the seventh day (Gn 2:4), so the new creation with Noah and the flood highlights the number seven several times. The story mentions *seven* pairs of clean animals in the ark (Gn 7:2); *seven* pairs of birds in the ark (Gn 7:3); *seven* days before God sends the rain upon the earth (Gn 7:4); *seven* days before Noah sends out the dove (Gn 8:10); and then *seven* more days before he sends out the dove again (Gn 8:12). Finally, the text points out how the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat in the *seventh* month—reminiscent of how God rested on the seventh day of creation (Gn 8:4).

All these occurrences of the number seven in this short account highlight how the flood is not only bringing punishment upon the earth but also bringing about new life, a new hope, and a new creation through a new covenant.³

So if there's a renewed creation with the flood, what would Noah's role be in this new world? Noah is like a new Adam, the new head of the human family. Once again, notice the parallels in the Biblical text: Just as Adam is blessed by God, so Noah is blessed by God. Just as Adam was called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 1:28), so Noah is called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 9:1). And both Adam and Noah were tillers of the soil and given dominion over all the animals (Gn 1:28, 2:15; 9:2, 20).

It is inspiring to see what God can do with one righteous man who dares to go against the grain of a corrupt society and live truly for Him. Noah "found favor" in God's eyes, and God used him to renew all of creation.

Noah's Family Breakdown

Noah's story doesn't end there, though. The Bible reminds us that even righteous men like Noah always need to be on guard, careful not to fall into sin. Though Noah was a heroic man, he too stumbled, and his sin had dramatic consequences for the entire human family.

We saw how Noah is established as the new Adam—a tiller of the soil, a covenant mediator of God's blessing, commissioned to be fruitful and multiply, and the father of the renewed human family after the flood. But not all the parallels with Adam are desirable. Just as the

beginning of humanity was marred by Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, so the beginning of this new human family is tainted by Noah's sin in the vineyard.

And note the similarities: As a tiller of the soil, Adam sinned in a garden by taking the fruit of the tree, and his shame was exposed in nakedness. Similarly, Genesis 9 shows that Noah was a tiller of the soil who sinned in the vineyard by taking too much fruit of the vine, and his shame is also exposed in nakedness (Gn 9:20-23).

The account of Noah's fall in Genesis 9 is shocking not only because of its disheartening report of Noah's sin, but also because of the surprising punishment given to Noah's grandson, Canaan. Consider the account:

Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said 'Cursed be Canaan....' (Gn 9:20-24)

What just happened here? Noah got drunk and his son Ham looked upon his nakedness, so when Noah woke up he cursed Canaan, his own grandson! What is the meaning of this strange story?

³ The Hebrew word for "seven" (*sheba*) is significant because it is also a verb meaning "to swear a covenant oath"—or literally, "to seven oneself." The number seven in the Bible, therefore, serves as a sign for covenant. Both in the creation account and here in the flood narrative, we see the number seven appear prominently, pointing to how God is covenanting himself to humanity and creation.

Cursing Canaan?

First, in order to understand Noah's anger, we need to consider what it means that Ham "looked upon the nakedness of his father." When the Bible deals with delicate sexual matters, it frequently uses guarded language. For example, when the Scriptures tell us about Adam and Eve having marital relations, the text tells us that "Adam knew his wife...and she bore a son" (Gn 4:24). The meaning of this idiom is obvious for the mature reader but remains veiled to the young and innocent.

Meanwhile, the scene depicted in Genesis 9 employs similarly veiled language, but to talk about something unnatural and heinous. When Genesis 9:22 says that Ham "looked upon the nakedness of his father," this is no mere indiscretion, like seeing his father bathing. That wouldn't merit Ham's being cursed, much less Ham's son Canaan.

As the context of this passage doesn't reveal much about its possible meaning, we turn to another approach for interpreting difficult texts: looking at the broader Biblical context. In order to understand the meaning of this expression, we should investigate how "looking upon the nakedness" of one's father is used elsewhere in the Bible. And when we do so, we discover that the idiom denotes something quite appalling. In Leviticus 20:11, this expression is used to describe the condemned act of maternal incest: "The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness."

Sexual Sin and Political Power

But why would Ham want to commit incest with his mother? And why would he choose this particular moment of his father's vulnerability, when Noah was intoxicated? This might have been a sin of passion,

but it was almost certainly an act of rebellion against the authority of his father and his oldest brother, Shem.

Let's consider the historical context. We've already seen how, after the flood, God gave Noah the mission of ruling over the entire world. In the time of the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, this authority would be passed on to his eldest son, Shem. Ham is Noah's youngest son and would not be the successor—unless he were to usurp that power through deceit and violence.

As strange as it may seem to the modern reader, this idea of seizing authority by having sexual relations with the ruler's wife is not unprecedented in the ancient world. When foreign invaders toppled other kingdoms, they typically took the previous king's wives for their own, showing that they had authority over everything the king had once possessed. We see this also in the history of Israel, when King David's son Absalom tries to usurp the throne from his father. After Absalom takes over the capital city of Jerusalem, one of his first acts is to take David's concubines and have sexual relations with them in public (see 2 Sm 16:21-22).

The explanation of incest also makes sense of Noah's response. Ham's son Canaan is cursed by Noah—not for anything he had done, but for his father's action. The context would indicate that Canaan—who was the fruit of this incestuous, rebellious union—would suffer the effects of his father's sin, just as Cain's children bore the effects of the curse laid on Cain when he rejected God.

Noah's sin has consequences. His drunkenness opened the door for Ham to make his move, and Noah's family is left in shambles. Noah's descendants were destined to represent a renewed human family united in the blessing of God's covenant. But the narrative of Noah

and the flood ends in tragedy, with his own son Ham rebelling and Ham's descendants being cursed.

After the flood, the human family is given a new land, a renewed creation, a fresh start. We might expect that, with all these changes, men and women would flourish. But the Biblical narrative reveals that the problems facing humanity run much deeper. Noah and his children still struggle with sin and suffer the division and unhappiness that flow from not living in accord with God's plan.

We, too, might sometimes think that all we need is a fresh start—a new city, a new job, some new clothes, maybe some new friends—to get our lives on track and find happiness. But the Scriptures teach that no mere cosmetic change will satisfy our deepest desires. Our problems are not just outside of us; they are most fundamentally rooted within us: our weaknesses, fears, insecurities and sins. Like Noah and his children, we need more than a new environment or a new situation; we need God and His healing power to transform us, so that we can begin to walk in his ways. Only then will we experience the joy and fulfillment in life for which God made us.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 4:17-24; 4:26-5:32; 6:1-3, 8-10, 11-13; 7:11-12; 9:20-27; Leviticus 20:11

1. *Launching Question:* What do you know about your family history, your heritage and how does this impact you and your family today?
Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Our story this week, contrasts two different family lines. It does so, however, in a subtle way through what are called genealogies. Admittedly, for modern readers, a genealogy seems to be just a long list of names—probably not that important and certainly not that interesting. But for the ancient Israelites, a genealogy was more than just a long list of names. Each name told a story and underscored key twists and turns in Israel's history. The reader who skips the genealogies will often miss out on crucial points God wants to make in the overarching narrative of the Bible.

This is certainly the case with the Bible's first two genealogies, which trace the descendants of Adam's two sons, Cain and Seth. In Genesis 4:17-26, we see a stark contrast. These two genealogies illustrate two fundamentally different types of cultures: One is characterized by a pursuit of God (Seth's righteous line), the other by a pursuit of one's own selfish desires (Cain's sinful line).

SIDEBAR – A TALE OF TWO CITIES (OPTIONAL)

Let's look at Cain's line first. As you may remember, Cain is one of the sons of Adam who kills his brother Able.

Read Genesis 4:17-24

2. As you read the genealogy of Cain, what stands out to you about his descendants? How do they act?

Answer: Cain's descendants illustrate how one man's sin ripples through the generations (Gn 4:17-24). After murdering his brother Abel, Cain turns his back on God and breaks fellowship with his family (Gn 4:16). The account of Cain's sin is immediately followed by a list of his descendants, in which we see men and women raising up children who do not know the Lord and whose decisions bear evidence of an ever-increasing breakdown in family life and morality. The genealogy shows how the descendants of Cain are known for polygamy, vengeance, violence and murder, and pride as they name a city after themselves (Gn 4:19-24).

Please read aloud: Now, let's look at Seth's line.

(Go to Genesis 4:26 – 5:32. You may read all of this section, OR you can read the following three key verses: 4:26, 5:24, and 5:29.)

3. What is different about Seth's line compared to Cain's?

Answer: As a family, they begin to "call upon the name of the Lord"—a Biblical phrase associated with worship (Gn 4:26). In contrast with Cain's descendants, who build up their own name, Seth's family focuses on God's name in worship. Seth's descendant Enoch "walks with God" (5:24). Here we see how this faithful son of Adam and Eve also fathers a family, but his descendants manifest notably different qualities from the disgraced offspring of Cain.

4. How have you experienced these two cultures in your own life, either personally or in others? In what ways have you witnessed the pursuit of God, and in what ways have you witnessed selfishness?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: With these two opposing lines in the backdrop, we now turn to the next part of the story: the flood. As you may know, in the time of Noah, Seth's descendant, God sends a flood to destroy the entire earth. But this leads to a question. If there were at least one righteous group of people—the line of Seth—why did God send a flood that punished the *whole* human family?

Our first clue comes in Genesis 6:1-3.

Read Genesis 6:1-3

5. So what do the “sons of heaven” do? And how does God respond?

Answer: “The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose” (Gn 6:1). Immediately after this, God indicates His displeasure and announces that He plans to punish the whole of humanity: “My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” (Gn 6:3).

6. This seems like a pretty harsh punishment for getting married. What do you think led God to this conclusion?

Allow the group to discuss. Don't reveal the answer just yet.

Please read aloud: In order to answer this question, we must take a deeper look at the context and ask, “Who were the sons of God? Who were the daughters of men? And why would God be opposed to their marrying?”

Whenever we encounter a statement in Scripture that appears unclear, the first place we should look for clarification is the immediate context. In the two chapters that immediately precede this scene, we learned of two genealogies that tell a story of two families with radically different values and lifestyles. Genesis 4 focuses on Cain's family, which is centered on man and has turned its back on God. Chapter five focuses on Seth's family, which calls on the Lord's name and walks with God.

In light of these two genealogies, Genesis 6:1 begins to make more sense. The “sons of God” would refer to the godly family of Seth, and the “daughters of men” would refer to the disgraced descendants of Cain.¹ The text thus seems to indicate that the sons of God in the Sethite line were attracted to ungodly women from the Cainite line and married them.

7. How do you think the Cainite spouses influenced the Sethite line? How does this background help us understand why God sent a flood over the whole world?

Answer: The Cainite spouses led the Sethites away from faithfulness to God and into selfish pursuits. As the one faithful line of Seth is undermined by the introduction of godless spouses, the covenant family is weakened and God is grieved. The whole earth now has become corrupt, and, therefore, God sent the flood.

Please read aloud: This leads us to the story of the flood. Let's keep reading.

¹ Some have interpreted the “sons of God” as a reference to angelic beings who marry women, but this view seems unlikely. Apart from the fact that angels cannot reproduce like humans (as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas have noted), nowhere in Genesis is the notion of “sons of God” associated with angels, and nothing in the immediate context would point us in that direction.

That the “sons of God” should be understood as the faithful Sethite line is made clearer when we consider how Genesis itself links the notion of being a son of God with the genealogy of Adam and Seth. This is the only genealogy in the Old Testament that begins with a reference to God Himself: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God” (Gn 5:1). The genealogy then tells how Adam “became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth” (5:3) and then traces the descendants of Seth all the way down to Noah. The parallel between God's creating Adam in His image and likeness (1:26; 5:3) and Adam fathering Seth “after his image” and “in his own likeness” (5:3) underscores how God has a special father-son relationship with these faithful descendants of Adam and Seth. As Biblical scholar John Sailhamer put it, “The author has gone to great lengths to depict God's creation of humankind in terms of a patriarch establishing and overseeing a family.... Not only is Adam the father of Seth and Seth the father of Enosh and so on, but God is the father of them all.” John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 117.

Read Genesis 6:11-13

8. Think back to the beginning of the book of Genesis (see Genesis 1:31). How does this compare to what God said when he created the world?

Answer: This simple statement stands in dramatic contrast with what God saw at the climax the creation week in Genesis chapter 1: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gn 1:31). But now, sin has taken its toll, and God's good creation has been disfigured. It is the exactly the opposite of how things were in the beginning.

Please read aloud: Many of you have likely already heard some parts of the story of Noah and the Ark, so we aren't going to focus our attention on the whole story. But, I want us to notice what the Bible actually says about how the flood came about. Many of us may think of the flood as a rainstorm that lasted a long time, but the Scriptures present something far more catastrophic.

Read Genesis 7:11-12

9. Besides just rain, how else is the earth covered with water?

Answer: Scripture says that the fountains of the great deep were opened. This indicates a deluge of water coming from every direction. The chaotic waters of the sea would be swelling over the land, while the waters of the sky would be collapsing upon them.

Please read aloud: Now, let's compare this to the beginning of creation. In Genesis 1:2, the Bible states that a watery chaos known as the *tehom* in Hebrew (the deep) covered the earth. This is the same word used in the passage we just read. But in the creation account, God's spirit hovered over the waters, separating them to create the sky and

the sea, and then taming them to bring forth the land that would serve as a suitable home for humanity.

10. Knowing this background, what is the Bible trying to teach us about the flood? Is it merely a means of destruction or is it pointing to something deeper?

Answer: In the flood, the waters that were separated at creation come crashing back together, and the watery chaos is unleashed. "The fountains of the great deep [tehom] burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened" (Gn 7:11). In the flood, God's creation is devastated and all life is blotted out. In establishing this parallel, the author of Genesis is trying to highlight the fact that sin is bringing about a reversal of creation. In other words, the beautiful order and harmony that God established in the world has been distorted because of sin.

Please read aloud: Because of sin, the work of God in creation is now being reversed. But like we saw with Adam and Eve, the story doesn't end there. Let's look back a little bit, and examine Noah, and discover how God plans to bring about a new creation after this catastrophic event.

Read Genesis 6:8-10

11. What do we know about Noah from these passages?

Answer: In contrast to the great wickedness that was all around him (Gn 6:5), Noah dares to live a different kind of life. He is "a righteous man" who was "blameless in his generation." He was a man who "walked with God" in the midst of a corrupt culture (Gn 6:9-10). Thus, Noah "found favor in God's eyes" (Gn 6:8).

Please read aloud: The expression “found favor in God’s eyes” is used to describe someone to whom much will be entrusted (see Gn 39:4). This certainly applies to Noah: Indeed, he is about to be entrusted with the future of the whole human family!

Let’s examine an important detail to help us understand Noah’s role. If you look at Genesis chapters 7 & 8 you’ll notice something striking about the numbers used in the narrative: the number seven appears at least four times.

12. Where have we already heard about the number seven in the story of the Bible? And how does that help us understand the meaning of this story? How might the two be connected?

Answer: In many ways, the flood narrative presents a kind of re-creation, with language that reflects images from the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. Just as God created the world and rested on the seventh day (Gn 2:4), so the new creation with Noah and the flood highlights the number seven several times — reminiscent of how God rested on the seventh day of creation (Gn 8:4). All these occurrences of the number seven in this short account highlight how the flood is not only bringing punishment upon the earth but also bringing about new life, a new hope, and a new creation through a new covenant.²

13. So if there’s a renewed creation with the flood, what would Noah’s role be in this new world? Who would he be like from the first creation?

Answer: Noah is like a new Adam, the new head of the human family.

² The Hebrew word for “seven” (*sheba*) is significant because it is also a verb meaning “to swear a covenant oath”—or literally, “to seven oneself.” The number seven in the Bible, therefore, serves as a sign for covenant. Both in the creation account and here in the flood narrative, we see the number seven appear prominently, pointing to how God is covenanting himself to humanity and creation.

Please read aloud: Once again, notice the parallels in the Biblical text: Just as Adam is blessed by God, so Noah is blessed by God. Just as Adam was called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 1:28), so Noah is called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 9:1). And both Adam and Noah were tillers of the soil and given dominion over all the animals (Gn 1:28, 2:15; 9:2, 20).

The parallels don’t end there, however, and not all the parallels with Adam are desirable. Just as the beginning of humanity was marred by Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden, so the beginning of this new human family will be tainted by Noah’s sin.

Read Genesis 9:20-27

Please read aloud: The account of Noah’s fall in Genesis 9 is shocking not only because of its disheartening report of Noah’s sin, but also because of the surprising punishment given to Noah’s grandson, Canaan.

14. What just happened here? Noah got drunk and his son Ham looked upon his nakedness, so when Noah woke up he cursed Canaan, his own grandson! What is the meaning of this strange story?

Allow the group to discuss. Note: Don’t reveal the answer yet.

Please read aloud: First, in order to understand Noah’s anger, we need to consider what it means that Ham “looked upon the nakedness of his father.” When the Bible deals with delicate sexual matters, it frequently uses guarded language. To understand the meaning of this phrase, let’s look at how “looking upon the nakedness” of one’s father is used elsewhere in the Bible.

Note to the leader: the RSV translation will be the most helpful here.

Read Leviticus 20:11

15. In light of this passage, what did Ham do?

Answer: Ham slept with his mother while Noah was drunk.

Please read aloud: But why would Ham want to commit incest with his mother? This might have been a sin of passion, but it was almost certainly an act of rebellion against the authority of his father and his oldest brother, Shem.

Let's consider the historical context. We've already seen how, after the flood, God gave Noah the mission of ruling over the entire world. In the time of the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, this authority would be passed on to his eldest son, Shem. Ham is Noah's youngest son and would not be the successor—unless he were to usurp that power through deceit and violence.

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³ We see this also in the history of Israel, when King David's son Absalom tries to usurp the throne from his father. After Absalom takes over the capital city of Jerusalem, one of his first acts is to take David's concubines and have sexual relations with them in public (see 2 Sm 16:21-22).

Noah's sin has consequences. His drunkenness opened the door for Ham to make his move, and Noah's family is left in shambles. Noah's descendants were destined to represent a renewed human family united in the blessing of God's covenant. But the narrative of Noah and the flood ends in tragedy, with his own son Ham rebelling and Ham's descendants being cursed.

After the flood, the human family is given a new land, a renewed creation, a fresh start. We might expect that, with all these changes, men and women would flourish. But the Biblical narrative reveals that the problems facing humanity run much deeper. Noah and his children still struggle with sin and suffer the division and unhappiness that flow from not living in accord with God's plan.

16. Do you ever feel like you need a fresh start? Maybe a new job, a new city, new clothes, or even new friends? What does this story teach us about needing a fresh start, and how might it not be the solution that we really need? And what is it that we really need?

Answer: We, too, might sometimes think that all we need is a fresh start to get our lives on track and find happiness. But the Scriptures teach that no mere cosmetic change will satisfy our deepest desires. Our problems are not just outside of us; they are most fundamentally rooted within us: our weaknesses, fears, insecurities and sins. Like Noah and his children, we need more than a new environment or a new situation; we need God and His healing power to transform us, so that we can begin to walk in his ways. Only then will we experience the joy and fulfillment in life for which God made us.

NOTES



Chapter III

Three Promises that Changed the World

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Bible next introduces a man who will eventually become one of the most important figures in salvation history: Abram, who will come to be known as Abraham. So critical is Abram's role in salvation history that the New Testament calls him "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11). As we watch God lead this good man to total trust and heroic faithfulness, we will learn what it really means to walk with God and entrust our entire lives to His plan.

SIDEBAR - ALL IN THE FAMILY

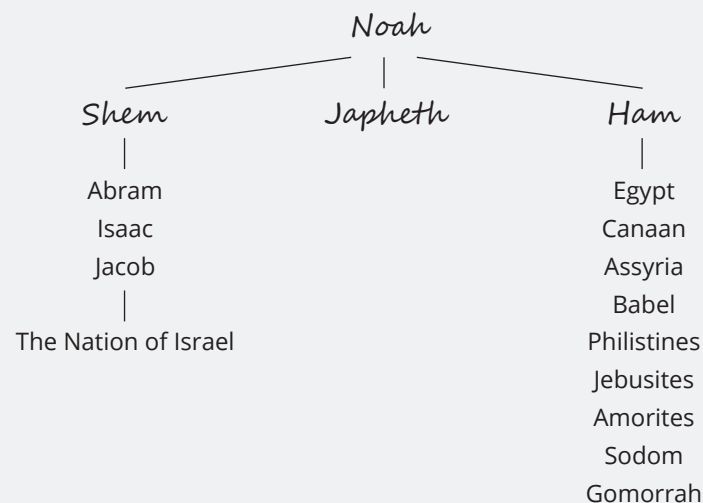
In setting up the story of Abram, Genesis chapter 10 gives us the most extensive genealogy in the Bible so far: a long list of seventy names. Commonly known as the "Table of Nations," this genealogy traces the descendants of Noah through his three sons: Japheth, Ham, and Shem. It serves as one of the most foundational passages in the Bible for understanding the rest of salvation history. Many of the nations that will come from these seventy descendants will play an important role in the drama that unfolds in the rest of Scripture.

Let's take a closer look at two important themes found in this genealogy. Ancient Israelites would have been horrified by many of the names and locations in the segment of Noah's genealogy that lists the descendants of his rebellious son Ham (Gn 10:6-20). While Abram and the nation of Israel were descendants of Noah's faithful first-born son, Shem, the names listed as the descendants of Ham represented some of Israel's most hated enemies.

Imagine how an ancient Israelite would have felt reading Genesis 10:6, which describes Ham as having two sons named Egypt and Canaan. The first son is the patriarch of a nation that would one day enslave Israel for 400 years; the latter fathers a nation that would come to oppose Israel with all its might when the Israelites return to the Promised Land.

Moreover, Genesis 10:10-11 associates Babel and Assyria with the line of Ham. Assyria vanquished ten of the twelve tribes of Israel and sent them into exile in 722 B.C., while Babel later became the home of the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem and carried off the remaining two tribes into slavery in 586 B.C. The genealogy goes on to list other Israelite enemies that flow from Ham's line, including the Philistines (Gn 10:14), the Jebusites and Amorites (Gn 10:16), and Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 10:19).

This would have been a difficult genealogy for the ancient Israelites to read, with so many of their enemies gathered into this one, long family tree.



The genealogy, however, serves a second purpose, as it points to an even deeper truth. Long before these warring nations were *enemies*, they were actually *relatives*. So the genealogy would remind readers that these foreign adversaries were not just foes of Israel, but also brothers and sisters—distant cousins in the broken family of Noah. Genesis 10 thus might have challenged the Israelites to view these nations not with vengeance and violence, but ultimately with love and mercy and a desire for healing and restoration in the divided family of man.

Tower of Babel

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 immediately precedes the account of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11. This tragic story serves as a prime example of the rebellion and division of the human family. Here we see an early city being built “in the land of Shinar” (Gn 11:2)—an ominous note, since this region was last mentioned as being occupied by the rebellious descendants of Ham (Gn 10:10).

Now, worse things are about to happen here. In Genesis 11:4, the people of Babel say, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” Their desire to build a city in order to make a name for themselves is reminiscent of the way Cain’s descendants built a city in order to glorify their own name, as we saw earlier in Genesis 4:17.

The passage takes on an even more ominous meaning when we understand that the Hebrew word for “name” is *shem*—the name of Noah’s first-born son and heir. As the eldest son of Noah, Shem would have been given the role as head patriarch of the covenantal family when his father died. But now, the descendants of Ham in Babel seek to make a name, a “shem,” for themselves. This does not mean that they are striving for fame. Rather, they are rejecting the blessed line of Shem and wanting to set up a ruler for themselves. We have already seen in the previous chapter that Ham himself tried to overthrow Shem when he “looked upon his father’s nakedness.” Now Ham’s descendants continue their father’s rebellion as they reject God and the blessed line of Shem, striving to make a name, a “shem,” for themselves.

What’s more, the people in Babel put themselves in the place of God, using God-like language reminiscent of Genesis 1:26 where God said, “Let us make man in our image after our own likeness.” Three times the people in Babel say, “*Let us* make bricks.... *Let us* build a city.... *Let us*...make a name for ourselves” (Gn 11:3-4, emphasis added). They desire to build a rebellious, secular civilization united around their own name and the tower they are building. They are truly building “the city of man.” But God comes back with a final “let us” as he confuses their language and scatters the people: “Come, *let us* go down and confuse their language, that they may not understand each other’s speech” (Gn 11:7).

Genesis 10 and 11 clearly underscore the division of the human family the results from breaking covenant with God. But during the rebellion of Ham’s descendants, at least some in the godly line of Shem continue to follow the Lord all the way down to the tenth generation, in which we meet a man named Abram, who is dwelling in “Ur of the Chaldeans.”

Three Promises that Changed the World

Here, salvation history takes a dramatic step forward as God calls this man to follow Him in faith. “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gn 12:1).

God desires to reunite all the nations into one covenant family through Abram and his descendants, which He will accomplish in three stages, summed up in the three promises. These three promises provide an outline for the rest of salvation history, a table of contents for the rest of the Bible: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gn 12:2-3).

These three promises not only have great meaning for Abram; they prophetically point toward the most significant turning points in all of human history:

- 1. First, God promises that Abram will become a *great nation*.
- 2. Second, God says he will make Abram’s *name* great.
- 3. And finally, God foretells how the *entire* human family will be blessed through Abram.

Let’s take a closer look at these three promises, and we will see how Genesis 12 is God’s answer to the problem of humanity’s division in Genesis 10 and 11.

The Three Promises to Abram

Promise:		Fulfilled by:
Great Nation	↔	Moses
Great Name	↔	David
World-wide Blessing	↔	Jesus

The promise that Abram will become a *great nation* points to the Exodus story, where his descendants, the Israelites, will be delivered out of slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of the book of Exodus, Israel had become a great and numerous people, but without a land of their own. It is only when Moses leads the Israelites to freedom and to the Promised Land that they can finally rule themselves and become a great nation, thus fulfilling this first promise made to Abram.

The second promise about God giving Abram a *great name* will be fulfilled in King David’s dynasty, when the universal importance of the kingdom of Israel will be established for the ages. In the Scriptures, this “great name” is royal language referring both to personal fame and to possessing a name that endures through the centuries, because it is associated with a lasting dynasty (see Ps 72:17). To reign as king in Jerusalem, one had to be a descendant of David and possess David’s royal family *name*. This point is reinforced when God first established David as king and said to him, “I will make for you a great *name*” (2 Sm 7:9)—thus showing how David’s dynasty is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram to make his family’s “name great” (Gn 12:2).

The third and final promise is that of a *worldwide blessing*, in which “all the families of the earth” will be blessed through Abram’s descendants. In other words, God will use Abram’s family as His instrument for bringing blessing to all the nations on earth. This promise will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who, while living in the Promised Land as a royal descendant of David, will become the savior of the world, reuniting the scattered and divided families of the earth back into the one universal covenant family of God.

A great nation. A royal dynasty. And becoming the instrument for bringing God’s blessing to the whole world. That’s a lot to be promised in one short conversation with the Lord!

But Abram must go on a long journey if his family is to receive these great blessings. And the journey is not merely a physical one. True, Abram will need to leave his home in Mesopotamia and travel to an unfamiliar land in Canaan. But the more challenging journey Abram needs to make will take place deep inside him—a *spiritual* journey of walking ever more closely with the Lord.

Put yourself in Abram’s sandals. He is asked by God to leave his land and his extended family to go to a far away, unfamiliar place. What’s more, this new country would not be expected to be a warm and welcoming one for Abram, since it is a land inhabited by the Canaanites—descendants of Ham and rivals to Abram’s great ancestor Shem (Gn 12:5, 10:6).

Nevertheless, Abram takes this big leap of faith, trusting in God’s plan for him. At the age of 75, he uproots his family, travels to this new land and worships God there, building altars for the Lord and calling on God’s name (Gn 12:4-9).

But this is just the first step of Abram’s walk with the Lord. All throughout his life, Abram will be invited by God to take increasingly larger steps of faith. Through various trials and ordeals, Abram will learn to surrender more of his life to the Lord and to trust ever more in God’s care for his life.

We see those tests beginning as soon as he arrives in Canaan. Let’s consider some of the trials that Abram faced in his early days in the land and observe how these ordeals challenge Abram to trust in the Lord like never before.

After arriving in this land, Abram faces his first unexpected ordeal. A great famine breaks out, and he has to put his family through another major relocation, this time to Egypt—where another rival descendant of Ham dwells (see Gn 12:10, 10:6).

Imagine the soul-searching Abram must have done. Back in the land of Ur, he convinced his family that God has called him to move to a foreign country where he will be blessed. And yet, upon their arrival, they experience famine, not blessing. His family may have been tempted to question the authenticity of Abram’s calling, or to question the goodness or the power of God. Abram himself may have begun to wonder why things didn’t turn out the way he had expected.

But the famine is only the beginning of Abram’s troubles. He faces a second and more personal trial after he arrives in Egypt, when Pharaoh finds Abram’s wife, Sarai, attractive and desires her for himself. This not only poses a problem for Abram’s marriage but puts his own life at risk: He is worried that Pharaoh will have Abram killed and take Sarai for himself (Gn 12:12).

In fear for his life, Abram does not disclose the truth to Pharaoh about his marriage; instead, he tells Pharaoh that Sarai is his sister

(a partial truth, since Sarai is Abram's half-sister; see Gn 20:12). As a result, Pharaoh looks favorably upon Abram and showers him with many gifts, including sheep, oxen, asses, donkeys, and male and female servants (Gn 12:16)—all for the sake of Sarai. These worldly gifts appear to be a great boon for Abram at first—but as we will see later in the narrative, they prove to be a snare, for among these gifts given to Abram is a woman named Hagar, an Egyptian servant with whom Abram will commit adultery (Gn 16).

Abram also experiences several other trials, including division within his family, a dispute about his land, his nephew Lot getting into trouble, and Abram going to battle with five other kings. (For more on these, see *The Real Story* pp. 41-43.) Faithfulness was not easy for Abram. Feel the weight of all that has happened to Abram since he first trusted God and left his home. His obedience to God seems to have landed him in one trial after another. Abram may be considered a living example of what the great sixteenth-century mystic St. Teresa of Avila meant when she said, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few of them!"

Count the Stars

In Genesis 15, Abram finally expresses his frustration for the first time. The Lord appears to him and offers a reward: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gn 15:1). An offer that would make any one of us thrilled actually leaves Abram confounded. He is rich with wealth, livestock, and possessions, and yet his material prosperity only underscores the one problem that has haunted him for years: He is advanced in age and continues to be childless. God's offer to reward Abram only highlights more acutely how he has no one in the next generation with whom to share these blessings. Abram sadly responds, "O Lord God, what will thou give me, for I continue

childless" (Gn 15:2). He must have had in mind the first promise God made to him many years ago: that his descendants would become a great nation (Gn 12:2). At this stage in his life, however, Abram must have wondered whether that promise would ever be fulfilled. How would his family become a great nation if he didn't have a single descendant to become his heir?

Walk by Faith, Not by Sight

God next does something that will challenge Abram to view the difficulties in his life from a more spiritual perspective, and to trust that God is faithful and truly with him in the midst of his trials. Most of all, Abram needs to trust that God will be faithful to his promise, even if he cannot see from his human perspective how it will all work out. It took great faith for Abram to leave his homeland for the land of Canaan, but God wants to form Abram into a man of even greater faith.

God calls Abram outside of his tent and says, "Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be" (Gn 15:5). This moment has a profound impact on Abram's faith. The Bible says, Abram "believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gn 15:6).

Why this sudden transformation in faith? Why did Abram's attitude abruptly change from doubt and discouragement to strong belief in God's promise that he will have a son? The Bible gives one small detail in this account that sheds immense light on the nature of Abram's newfound faith. The narrative tells us that, some-time after Abram counted the stars in the sky, "the sun was going down" (Gn 15:12). Remember that God told Abram to "number the stars if you are able to number them" (Gn 15:5)—but notice, God asked him to do this

before the sun was set. In other words, God asked Abram to count the stars in broad daylight.

This radically changes our perception of this scene. At first glance, many readers might envision Abram walking out into a clear desert night with millions of stars in the sky and that, while viewing these countless stars, he comes to believe that God will number his descendants in a similar way. But this one small detail about the sun set coming after Abram was sent out of his tent to count the stars means that Abram actually walked outside in the middle of the day, when he could not see anything but the sun!

From this perspective, Abram's extraordinary faith becomes much more apparent. God was asking Abram to have faith in what he could not see. Abram knows the stars are there in the sky, even though he cannot see them, and now he realizes that God is calling him to have similar faith in His promise that he would have many descendants—even though he cannot yet see a single son. As St. Paul says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

This is a pivotal moment in Abram's walk with the Lord. But God has a lot more work to do with Abram. As we will see in the next chapter, Abram will be challenged to entrust his entire life to the Lord—holding nothing back, not even the beloved son whom God would give him. And through this final call to total self-giving, Abram will be molded into the man who will become the premier model of faith in the entire Old Testament.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 12:1-4, 12:10-20, 15:1-6, 15:12

Please read aloud: The Bible next introduces a man who will eventually become one of the most important figures in salvation history: Abram, who will come to be known as Abraham. So critical is Abram's role in salvation history that the New Testament calls him "the father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11). As we watch God lead this good man to total trust and heroic faithfulness, we will learn what it really means to walk with God and entrust our entire lives to His plan. Here, salvation history takes a dramatic step forward as God calls this man to follow Him in faith.

Read Genesis 12:1-4

1. What three things does God promise to Abram?

Answer: First, God promises that Abram will become a great nation. Second, God says he will make Abram's name great. And finally, God foretells how the entire human family will be blessed through Abram.

Please read aloud: God desires to reunite all the nations into one covenant family through Abram and his descendants, which He will accomplish in three stages, summed up in the three promises. These three promises provide an outline for the rest of salvation history, a table of contents for the rest of the Bible:

Note to the Leader: On a piece of paper write out the three promises to Abram:

Nation

Name

Worldwide Blessing

Now let's consider how each of these promises is fulfilled in the history of God's people.

2. First, the promise of a nation. Let's think ahead to other stories in the Bible. For God's people to become a nation, they must have a land to call their own. Does anyone know when this happens in the Bible? When do God's people receive land?

Answer: The promise that Abram will become a great nation points to the Exodus story, where his descendants, the Israelites, will be delivered out of slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of the book of Exodus, Israel had become a great and numerous people, but without a land of their own. It is only when Moses leads the Israelites to freedom and to the Promised Land that they can finally rule themselves and become a great nation, thus fulfilling this first promise made to Abram.

Note to the leader: Write Moses on the chart:

Nation

-> Moses

Name

Worldwide Blessing

3. Now, the second promise: In the Scriptures, this "great name" is royal language referring both to personal fame and to possessing a name that endures through the centuries, because it is

associated with a lasting dynasty. Where do we see royalty, that is kingship or dynasty, introduced in the Bible?

Answer: The second promise about God giving Abram a great name will be fulfilled in King David's dynasty, when the universal importance of the kingdom of Israel will be established for the ages. To reign as king in Jerusalem, one had to be a descendant of David and possess David's royal family name. This point is reinforced when God first established David as king and said to him, "I will make for you a great name" (2 Sm 7:9)—thus showing how David's dynasty is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abram to make his family's "name great" (Gn 12:2).

Note to the leader: Write David on the chart:

Nation	-> Moses
Name	-> David
Worldwide Blessing	

4. The third and final promise is that of a *worldwide blessing*, in which "all the families of the earth" will be blessed through Abram's descendants. In other words, God will use Abram's family as His instrument for bringing blessing to all the nations on earth. How is this promise fulfilled in Scripture?

Answer: This promise will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who, while living in the Promised Land as a royal descendant of David, will become the savior of the world, reuniting the scattered and divided families of the earth back into the one universal covenant family of God.

Note to the leader: Write Jesus on the chart:

Nation	-> Moses
Name	-> David
Worldwide Blessing	-> Jesus

Please read aloud: A great nation. A royal dynasty. And becoming the instrument for bringing God's blessing to the whole world. That's a lot to be promised in one short conversation with the Lord!

But Abram must go on a long journey if his family is to receive these great blessings. And the journey is not merely a physical one. True, Abram will need to leave his home in Mesopotamia and travel to an unfamiliar land in Canaan. But the more challenging journey Abram needs to make will take place deep inside him—a *spiritual* journey of walking ever more closely with the Lord.

5. Put yourself in Abram's sandals. He is asked by God to leave his land and his extended family to go to a far away, unfamiliar place. At the age of 75, he uproots his family, travels to this new land and worships God there, building altars for the Lord and calling on God's name (Gn 12:4-9). What do you think this must have been like for Abram? And why was he willing to make this kind of change?

Allow the group to discuss. Emphasize Abram's faith. See also CCC 145: "The Letter to the Hebrews, in its great eulogy of the faith of Israel's ancestors, lays special emphasis on Abram's (Abraham's) faith: 'By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.'"

Please read aloud: But this is just the first step of Abram's walk with the Lord. All throughout his life, Abram will be invited by God to take increasingly larger steps of faith. Through various trials and ordeals, Abram will learn to surrender more of his life to the Lord and to trust ever more in God's care for his life.

We see those tests beginning as soon as he arrives in Canaan. Let's consider some of the trials that Abram faced in his early days in the land and observe how these ordeals challenge Abram to trust in the Lord like never before.

Read Genesis 12:10-20

6. What is the first thing that Abram and his family experience as they set out to the land that God promised? And what effect might this have had on Abram's faith?

Answer: After arriving in this land, Abram faces his first unexpected ordeal. A great famine breaks out, and he has to put his family through another major relocation, this time to Egypt (see Gn 12:10). Imagine the soul searching Abram must have done. Back in the land of Ur, he convinced his family that God has called him to move to a foreign country where he will be blessed. And yet, upon their arrival, they experience famine, not blessing. His family may have been tempted to question the authenticity of Abram's calling, or to question the goodness or the power of God. Abram himself may have begun to wonder why things didn't turn out the way he had expected.

Please read aloud: But the famine is only the beginning of Abram's troubles. He faces a second and more personal trial after he arrives in Egypt, when Pharaoh finds Abram's wife, Sarai, attractive and desires her for himself. This not only poses a problem for Abram's marriage but puts his own life at risk: He is worried that Pharaoh will have Abram killed and take Sarai for himself (Gn 12:12).

7. What does Abram do in this situation?

Answer: In fear for his life, Abram does not disclose the truth to Pharaoh about his marriage; instead, he tells Pharaoh that Sarai is his sister (a partial truth, since Sarai is Abram's half-sister; see Gn 20:12).

8. At first, how does this lie work out for Abram?

Answer: As a result, Pharaoh looks favorably upon Abram and showers him with many gifts, including sheep, oxen, asses, donkeys, and male and female servants (Gn 12:16)—all for the sake of Sarai.

9. Eventually, Pharaoh finds out about Abram's lie and sends him on his way. However, Abram keeps the gifts he received from Pharaoh. It appears that the lie has paid off. Is this what the Bible is trying to tell us? If Abram lied, why isn't he being punished? Why does God allow him to actually benefit from his lie?

Allow the group to discuss. Share the following answer only after your discussion.

Answer: The Bible is often subtle in explaining the consequences of a certain story. These worldly gifts appear to be a great boon for Abram at first—but as we will see later in the narrative, they prove to be a snare, for among these gifts given to Abram is woman named Hagar, an Egyptian servant with whom Abram will commit adultery (Gn 16).

Please read aloud: We aren't going to get into all the trials that Abram experiences, but it's important to note that many trials befall him. Abram experiences trial within his own family in a conflict with his nephew Lot, as well as a "World War I" when five kings attack him in battle. (For more on these, see The Real Story pp. 41-43.)

10. What does this teach us about following God? Why does God allow us to experience these kinds of trials?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let's continue the story of Abram:

Read Genesis 15:1-6

11. So, Abram, finally expresses his frustration for the first time. What is he concerned about? What do you think is on Abram's mind?

Answer: He must have had in mind the first promise God made to him many years ago: that his descendants would become a great nation (Gn 12:2). At this stage in his life, however, Abram must have wondered whether that promise would ever be fulfilled. How would his family become a great nation if he didn't have a single descendant to become his heir?

12. What does God tell Abram to do in the passage? And how does Abram respond?

Answer: God calls Abram outside of his tent and says, "Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be" (Gn 15:5). This moment has a profound impact on Abram's faith. The Bible says, Abram "believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gn 15:6).

13. But why is this such an important moment? Why this sudden transformation in faith? Why did Abram's attitude abruptly change from doubt and discouragement to strong belief in God's promise that he will have a son?

Allow the group to discuss. Note to the leader: Don't reveal the answer just yet.

Please read aloud: The Bible gives one small detail in this account that sheds immense light on the nature of Abram's newfound faith.

Read Genesis 15:12

14. How does this passage change the way we view God's interaction with Abram? What time of day was it when Abram went outside to look at the stars?

Answer: God asked him to do this before the sun was set. In other words, God asked Abram to count the stars in broad daylight.

Please read aloud: This radically changes our perception of this scene. This one small detail about the sunset coming after Abram was sent out of his tent to count the stars means that Abram actually walked outside in the middle of the day, when he could not see anything but the sun!

From this perspective, Abram's extraordinary faith becomes much more apparent. God was asking Abram to have faith in what he could not see. Abram knows the stars are there in the sky, even though he cannot see them, and now he realizes that God is calling him to have similar faith in His promise that he would have many descendants—even though he cannot yet see a single son.

15. What does this story teach about faith? How does Abram teach us to "walk by faith, not by sight" as St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:7?

Allow the group to discuss. Please see CCC 143-165 for more on the topic of faith.

Please read aloud: We will continue Abram's story in the next chapter.

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Chapter IV

The Father of Faith

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Page 76 - 85

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 86 - 94

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

We have seen Abram's great faith; now we must look at his great sin, as well as its long-term effects. For many modern readers of the Old Testament, the patriarchs and other heroes in the Bible appear to break the moral code without any reprimand from God. That seems to be the case with Abram in Genesis 16. Abram has intimate relations with a woman named Hagar, who is not his wife, and yet he seemingly goes unpunished.

While Abram came to believe that God would give him a child (Gn 15:6), he still doubts that this promised child will come through his own marriage. After many years of marriage and no children, Abram's wife Sarai appears to be too old to conceive. Even she admits this and says to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go into my maid; it may be that I shall take children by her" (Gn 16:2). Abram heeds Sarai's advice and has relations with Hagar, her Egyptian maid, and Hagar conceives a son named Ishmael.

This is a clear act of adultery, and yet Abram's sin seems to be unnoticed by God. However, a closer reading of the Biblical narrative reveals God's fatherly discipline. The son conceived from this extramarital affair becomes a point of contention in Abram's family, causing discord between Hagar and Sarai (Gn 16 and 21). The rest of Biblical history shows how this marital infidelity sows seeds of

division throughout the generations, all the way up to the present day. Ishmael, the son of Hagar through Abram's act of adultery, is considered a founding father of the Arabs; while Isaac, the son of God's promise eventually born to Sarai, will become the father of all the Israelites.

For thousands of years, these descendants of Isaac and Ishmael—the Jews and Arabs—have been in perpetual conflict. For the ancient Israelites, this account of Abram and Hagar would have been a painful reminder of the tragic consequences of Abram's marital infidelity.

Getting Away with Adultery?

Moreover, the Biblical narrative highlights God's displeasure with Abram's adultery. Up until this time, God has been actively involved in Abram's life (Gn 12-15), but after Abram's liaison with Hagar, the Bible records no discourse between God and Abram for thirteen long years. Then, when God finally speaks to Abram, the Lord's first words challenge him to live by a high moral standard: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless" (Gn 17:1). Abram's virtue must be on par with his heroic ancestors Enoch and Noah, who "walked with God" and were "blameless" (Gn 5:22; 6:9).

Abram is ninety-nine years old when God appears to him in this scene (Gn 17:1). In awe and reverence before the presence of the Almighty God, Abram "fell on his face" in worship, humbly lying prostrate (Gn 17:3). God assures Abram that His covenant is still with him and that he will really become the father of a multitude of nations. To underscore this promise, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which literally means "the father of a multitude" (Gn 17:4-5). The Lord goes on to tell Abraham that he will be the father of great kings who will play an important role in God's covenant plan: "I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant

between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant” (Gn 17:6-7).

At this moment, Abraham must be thinking that his many descendants will come through Ishmael, but much to Abraham’s surprise, God says these promises of kings and nations will be bestowed on a child given to Sarai. First, God changes Sarai’s name to “Sarah,” which means “princess,” highlighting her association with the future kingdom promised to Abraham’s heirs. God then emphasizes how the covenantal promise will be carried out not through his adulterous relationship with Hagar, but through Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

I will bless *her*, and moreover I will give you a son by *her*; I will bless *her*; and *she* shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come forth by *her*. (Gn 17:16, emphasis added)

This pronouncement is abruptly interrupted by Abraham, who once again “fell on his face” (Gn 17:17), but this time he is not doing so out of worship: He is falling on his face in laughter! If Abraham doubted his wife could conceive a child thirteen years earlier, when he committed adultery with Hagar, the prospect of a ninety-year-old Sarah bearing a child now seems ridiculous to him. He says to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gn 17:17). He then proposes to God that Ishmael be his heir: “Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight!” (Gn 17: 18).

But God is not laughing. The Lord reminds Abraham that He always intended the promised child to come from his marriage, not from adultery: “No, but Sarah *your wife* shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him” (Gn 17:19, emphasis added). God will bless Ishmael, too, but the covenant and the promise of future kings will remain with Isaac (Gn 17:20-21).

There is great irony in the name God instructs Abraham to give to this child: Isaac in Hebrew literally means “he laughs.” Every time Abraham calls his son, he will be reminded of how he laughed incredulously when God said Sarah would conceive. Though Abraham initially laughed at God’s promise, in the end, God will get the last laugh.

Circumcision

In this scene, God also gives Abraham a new covenantal sign: circumcision. God instructs Abraham, “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gn 17:11).

Many modern readers think of circumcision in the Bible as simply an ancient religious ritual, but it was more than that. It was a sign of the “everlasting covenant” God made with Abraham that day (Gn 17:13). As Israel’s history unfolds, it will serve as an important sign marking out the descendants of Abraham who are in covenant with God.

This particular sign probably also served as a painful reminder of Abraham’s lack of trust in God’s promise and his sin with Hagar that followed. In Genesis 16, Abraham committed adultery with Hagar; in the very next chapter, he is commanded by God to be blameless and to be circumcised. Think about what this would mean for Abraham: Here he is, a ninety-nine-year-old man, being told to cut off the flesh of his foreskin. Abraham might have been wondering, “Why can’t I receive a rainbow for a sign, Lord...like Noah?” For Abraham, circumcision probably would have felt, at least on some level, like a punishment—and the punishment fits the crime.

This ritual might also be seen as another test of Abraham’s faith: On the heels of the fresh wound of circumcision, this elderly man

and his barren wife are to have a son within a year? From a natural perspective, Abraham and Sarah have never before been *less* capable of fulfilling their call to become parents. The story reminds us that with God, nothing is impossible. Abraham is being called to trust in God's ability to overcome any obstacle.

The Final Test

Even after God finally gives Sarah a child named Isaac (Gn 21:1-3), Abraham must face the climactic test of his faith. God says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gn 22:2).

This request is almost incomprehensible. Imagine a man now in his second century who has waited his entire life for his wife to bear him a son. He probably loved nothing on this earth more than Isaac—and yet the Lord comes to Abraham and tells him he must be willing to give up even this, his very own son.

Nevertheless, Abraham obeys the Lord. He arose the next morning, cut wood for the sacrifice, saddled his donkey and traveled with his son to Moriah just as God commanded. Once they get there, they ascend the mountain with Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his shoulders. At the top of the mountain, Abraham prepares the altar, binds Isaac and lays his son on the altar of wood. This most weighty sacrifice is ready to begin.

Just at that moment, an angel from heaven intervenes, saying, "Abraham, Abraham!...Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me" (Gn 22:10-12).

Here we finally see Abraham's faith perfected. Throughout his life, Abraham has been willing to follow God, but not totally. Afraid of putting his life completely in God's hands, Abraham doubted God's promises (Gn 15:2-3) and pursued his own plans rather than God's ways (16:2-4). But here, finally, Abraham puts everything on the altar, holding nothing back—not even his beloved son—from God. He trusts in the Lord, who promised him, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gn 21:12), even though he has no idea *how* God will keep His promise if Isaac is sacrificed. Abraham has come to trust that God *will* do so somehow, even if that meant He would have to raise Isaac from the dead (see Heb 11:16-19).

The account ends with God making an amazing covenant oath to Abraham, swearing to bless all the nations through his family: "and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves" (Gn 22:18). Abraham's family will become the instrument God uses to reunite in God's blessing the entire divided and rebellious human family. In fact, this covenant oath relates to the third of the three promises God made to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12:3: the promise for the worldwide blessing ("and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" Gn 12:3).

The Faith of Isaac

Many commentators on this passage focus on the faith of Abraham, but not as many consider the tremendous faith Isaac must have had. Imagine what Isaac was going through when he saw his own father tie him up, lay him on the altar and pull out a knife to slay him!

One interesting aspect of this account is that Isaac may have been in his teens at this time. He certainly was old enough to carry the wood up the mountain and to understand the intricacies for the kind of sacrifice being offered (Gn 22:7). If he could do that, he probably

was wise and strong enough to run away when he saw what was happening or resist his elderly father who was over one hundred years at the time. This perspective would shed light on what a number of ancient Jewish rabbis and early Christians just assumed: that Isaac was a voluntary victim who willingly submitted to be sacrificed. In this view, Isaac freely chose to obey God's command even if that meant his own death. What amazing faith Isaac must have had!

But as heroic as Abraham or Isaac's faith might have been, this passage is more than a story of heroic obedience. It also foreshadows how God will bring his saving plan for all humanity to completion. The particulars of this story prefigure what will happen in this same place some two thousand years later when Jesus Christ dies on the cross. Consider how the following details from this scene relate to Christ's own sacrifice on the Calvary: the mountain, the beloved son, the donkey, the sacrificial wood and the voluntary sacrifice.

The location of Abraham's sacrifice—*Mount Moriah*—is significant because it was a sacred place that later came to be associated with Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 3:1; Ps 76:1-3). Just as Abraham went to offer his *only beloved son*, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, so did God the Father offer his only beloved Son on Calvary, which came to be known as one of the hills of Moriah.

Similarly, just as Isaac traveled up to Moriah on a *donkey*, so did Jesus ride a donkey up to Jerusalem a few days before he died. Like Isaac who *shouldered the wood for the sacrifice* up the mountain, Jesus also carried the sacrificial wood—the wood of the cross—up to Calvary on Good Friday. Finally, Jesus willingly stretched out his hands, laid his body on the wood and allowed himself to be bound to the cross and offered in sacrifice—harkening back to Isaac's *offering of himself* on that same mountain.

Here we see how in the Bible, God uses more than words to communicate his plan of salvation. God doesn't just tell Abraham that the whole world will be blessed through him; He *shows* Abraham—and us—how He will do it. In this way, the suspenseful event of Abraham's sacrifice of his only beloved son on Mount Moriah serves as a ritually enacted statement about how God will bring his plan of salvation to completion through the sacrifice of His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, on the mountain in Jerusalem on Good Friday.

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Genesis 16:1-4, 17:1-21, Genesis 22:1-18,
Hebrews 11:17-19*

1. Launching Question: Have you ever made great progress in something, thinking you had finally mastered it, only to find yourself messing up shortly thereafter?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: We find progress, but also regression in the life of Abraham also. We have seen Abram's great faith; now we must look at his great sin, as well as its long-term effects.

Read Genesis 16:1-4

2. Why do you think Abram decided to do this? Think back to God's promise to Abram.

Answer: While Abram came to believe that God would give him a child (Gn 15:6), he still doubts that this promised child will come through his own marriage. After many years of marriage and no children, Abram's wife Sarai appears to be too old to conceive. Even she admits this and says to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go into my maid; it may be that I shall take children by her" (Gn 16:2).

Please read aloud: For many modern readers of the Old Testament, the patriarchs and other heroes in the Bible appear to break the moral code without any reprimand from God. That seems to be the case with Abram in Genesis 16. Abram has intimate relations with a woman named Hagar, who is not his wife, and yet he seemingly goes unpunished.

This is a clear act of adultery, and yet Abram's sin seems to be unnoticed by God. However, a closer reading of the Biblical narrative reveals God's fatherly discipline. The son conceived from this extramarital affair becomes a point of contention in Abram's family, causing discord between Hagar and Sarai (Gn 16 and 21). The rest of Biblical history shows how this marital infidelity sows seeds of division throughout the generations, all the way up to the present day.

Not only that, but the narrative slowly reveals Abram's punishment.

Read Genesis 17:1-21

3. This passage describes the next time God speaks to Abram. How old is Abram now? And how old was he when God spoke to him last? And what do God's words reveal about what he is expecting of Abram?

Answer: Up until this time, God has been actively involved in Abram's life (Gn 12-15), but after Abram's liaison with Hagar, the Bible records no discourse between God and Abram for thirteen long years. Then, when God finally speaks to Abram, the Lord's first words challenge him to live by a high moral standard: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless" (Gn 17:1). Abram's virtue must be on par with his heroic ancestors Enoch and Noah, who "walked with God" and were "blameless" (Gn 5:22; 6:9).

Please read aloud: God assures Abram that His covenant is still with him and that he will really become the father of a multitude of nations. To underscore this promise, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which literally means "the father of a multitude" (Gn 17:4-5). The Lord goes on to tell Abraham that he will be the father of great kings who will play an important role in God's covenant plan.

At this moment, Abraham must be thinking that his many descendants will come through Ishmael, but much to Abraham's surprise, God says these promises of kings and nations will be bestowed on a child given to Sarai. First, God changes Sarai's name to "Sarah," which means "princess," highlighting her association with the future kingdom promised to Abraham's heirs. God then emphasizes how the covenantal promise will be carried out not through his adulterous relationship with Hagar, but through Sarah, Abraham's wife.

4. Looking back at the passage, how does Abraham respond to God?

Answer: This pronouncement is abruptly interrupted by Abraham, who once again "fell on his face" (Gn 17:17), but this time he is not doing so out of worship: He is falling on his face in laughter! If Abraham doubted his wife could conceive a child thirteen years earlier, when he committed adultery with Hagar, the prospect of a ninety-year-old Sarah bearing a child now seems ridiculous to him. He says to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gn 17:17). He then proposes to God that Ishmael be his heir: "Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight!" (Gn 17: 18).

Please read aloud: But God is not laughing. The Lord reminds Abraham that He always intended the promised child to come from his marriage, not from adultery.

There is great irony in the name God instructs Abraham to give to this child: Isaac in Hebrew literally means "he laughs." Every time Abraham calls his son, he will be reminded of how he laughed incredulously when God said Sarah would conceive. Though Abraham initially laughed at God's promise, in the end, God will get the last laugh.

5. Additionally, what does God ask of Abraham and his descendants?

Answer: In this scene, God also gives Abraham a new covenantal sign: circumcision. God instructs Abraham, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gn 17:11).

6. Many modern readers think of circumcision in the Bible as simply an ancient religious ritual, but it was more than that. How does the sign of circumcision fit with Abraham's sin of adultery? And how does circumcision impact Abraham in relation to God's promise of a descendant?

Answer: In Genesis 16, Abraham committed adultery with Hagar; in the very next chapter, he is commanded by God to be blameless and to be circumcised. Think about what this would mean for Abraham: Here he is, a ninety-nine-year-old man, being told to cut off the flesh of his foreskin. For Abraham, circumcision probably would have felt, at least on some level, like a punishment—and the punishment fits the crime.

This ritual might also be seen as another test of Abraham's faith: On the heels of the fresh wound of circumcision, this elderly man and his barren wife are to have a son within a year? From a natural perspective, Abraham and Sarah have never before been less capable of fulfilling their call to become parents.

Please read aloud: Despite being circumcised, the Lord tells Abraham that within a year, he will have a son. The story reminds us that with God, nothing is impossible. Abraham is being called to trust in God's ability to overcome any obstacle. But, even after God finally gives Sarah a child named Isaac (Gn 21:1-3), Abraham must face the climactic test of his faith.

Read Genesis 22:1-18

7. God makes an incredible request of Abraham. What do we finally see in Abraham that has been missing so far?

Answer: Here we finally see Abraham's faith perfected. Throughout his life, Abraham has been willing to follow God, but not totally. Afraid of putting his life completely in God's hands, Abraham doubted God's promises (Gn 15:2-3) and pursued his own plans rather than God's ways (16:2-4). But here, finally, Abraham puts everything on the altar, holding nothing back—not even his beloved son—from God.

Abraham does what God asks, but there's more to the story. How does God's command fit with his promise to give Abraham descendants? Let's look at how St. Paul interprets this passage.

Read Hebrews 11:17-19

8. What does this passage tell us about Abraham's faith?

Answer: Though he has no idea how God will keep His promise if Isaac is sacrificed. Abraham has come to trust that God will do so somehow, even if that meant He would have to raise Isaac from the dead (see Heb 11:16-19).

Please read aloud: Many commentators on this passage focus on the faith of Abraham, but not as many consider the tremendous faith

Isaac must have had. Imagine what Isaac was going through when he saw his own father tie him up, lay him on the altar and pull out a knife to slay him!

9. What does Isaac do in this story? And what does this tell us about his age?

Answer: Isaac may have been in his teens at this time. He certainly was old enough to carry the wood up the mountain and to understand the intricacies for the kind of sacrifice being offered (Gn 22:7).

10. How might Isaac's age impact the way we understand this story? How did he also have faith? How did he also obey God?

Answer: If Isaac could carry the wood, he probably was wise and strong enough to run away when he saw what was happening or resist his elderly father who was over one hundred years at the time. This perspective would shed light on what a number of ancient Jewish rabbis and early Christians just assumed: that Isaac was a voluntary victim who willingly submitted to be sacrificed. In this view, Isaac freely chose to obey God's command even if that meant his own death. What amazing faith Isaac must have had!

Please read aloud: But as heroic as Abraham or Isaac's faith might have been, this passage is more than a story of heroic obedience. It also foreshadows how God will bring his saving plan for all humanity to completion.

11. What connections do you see between the story of Abraham and Isaac and the death of Jesus? There are at least 5 key parallels.

Answer:

1. The location of Abraham's sacrifice—Mount Moriah—is significant because it was a sacred place that later came to be associated with Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 3:1; Ps 76:1-3).

2. Just as Abraham went to offer his only beloved son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah, so did God the Father offer his only beloved Son on Calvary, which came to be known as one of the hills of Moriah.
3. Similarly, just as Isaac traveled up to Moriah on a donkey, so did Jesus ride a donkey up to Jerusalem a few days before he died.
4. Like Isaac who shouldered the wood for the sacrifice up the mountain, Jesus also carried the sacrificial wood—the wood of the cross—up to Calvary on Good Friday.
5. Finally, Jesus willingly stretched out his hands, laid his body on the wood and allowed himself to be bound to the cross and offered in sacrifice—harkening back to Isaac's offering of himself on that same mountain.

Please read aloud: Here we see how in the Bible, God uses more than words to communicate his plan of salvation. God doesn't just tell Abraham that the whole world will be blessed through him; He *shows* Abraham—and us—how He will do it. In this way, the suspenseful event of Abraham's sacrifice of his only beloved son on Mount Moriah serves as a ritually enacted statement about how God will bring his plan of salvation to completion through the sacrifice of His only beloved Son, Jesus Christ, on the mountain in Jerusalem on Good Friday.

12. What have you learned from the story of Abraham? How has God showed you how he will fulfill his plans for you? How does the story of Abraham help you understand more deeply the sacrifice of Christ for us?

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The story of Abraham's family picks up in Genesis 24 when his son Isaac marries a woman named Rebekah, who conceives twin sons that are rivals from the start as they "struggled together" in her womb (Gn 25:22). Even their birth was a moment of contention: When the first-born, Esau, was delivered, the second-born grabbed hold of Esau's heel (Gn 25: 26)—hence the younger brother was named "Jacob," which means "supplanter" or "cheater," or even more literally, "*he clutches the heel.*" Jacob's heel-grabbing move at birth foreshadows his future strife with Esau: Never content with second place, the heel-grabber at birth will grow up and grab at Esau's privileges as the first-born son.

First, Jacob grabs at Esau's birthright. When Esau returns from hunting one day, he is famished and pleads with Jacob for some food. Seeing an opportunity to best his older brother, Jacob says he will share some pottage with him in exchange for his birthright. The birthright represents his prerogatives and status as the first-born son, including the right to a double portion of the inheritance that his father would award each son. In a moment of rash desperation, Esau agrees and exchanges half his inheritance for a pottage of lentils (Gn 25:29-34).

Stolen Blessing

But getting the birthright was not enough for Jacob. He still wants more and grabs at the *blessing* Esau was supposed to receive from his father as well.

What is the difference between the birthright and the blessing? The *birthright* refers to the concrete, material inheritance a firstborn son would receive from the father—the lion's share of the father's estate. The *blessing* is a spiritual inheritance: The father invokes God's grace upon the first-born so that he can carry out his responsibility to lead his family as patriarch after his father dies. This was an almost king-like function, as his clan would be placed under his care and protection (see Gn 27:29, 37). The firstborn also assumed a priestly role, leading the family in worship and mediating their relationship with God (see Gn 8:20-21, 12:6-8, 15:9-21, 26:23-25).

In Esau's case, he was to receive the most important blessing mentioned in the Book of Genesis, for his father Isaac was the guardian of the covenant blessing that came to him from Abraham—a blessing that had its roots in God's blessing of Adam and Eve and was linked with God's promise to give Abraham's descendants a great land (Gn 28:3-4) and to bless the entire human family through them (Gn 23:14). Thus, as Isaac neared his death and prepared to bestow his blessing upon his first-born son, it would have been the greatest moment in Esau's life:

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son, and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field

and hunt game for me, and prepare for me savoury food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat; that I may bless you before I die.” (Gn 27:1-4)

It is at this pivotal point in Esau’s life that his younger brother Jacob steps in and steals his blessing—the heel-grabbing supplanter living up to his name once again. Jacob quickly puts on Esau’s best garments, covering himself with animal skins to make him appear more hairy like his older brother, and brings his father food that Rebekah prepared for him. Jacob thus deceives his father into thinking he is Esau coming for the blessing. The nearly blind Isaac is fooled and gives Jacob the covenantal blessing, elevating him as lord over all of Abraham’s family and the spiritual descendants of Abraham’s only beloved son.

“Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” (Gn 27:29)

When Esau returns, he is understandably devastated. By rights, he should have become the patriarchal father of the blessed line of Abraham and Isaac—but all this has been usurped by his younger brother. Isaac already gave the blessing to Jacob, and there is nothing he can do to take it back. As Isaac explains,

“Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you my son?” (Gn 27:37)

With an enraged Esau now plotting to kill his brother, Rebekah sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran. For Rebekah, this solves two

problems in one move: First, she can protect her beloved Jacob from Esau, and second, she can protect Jacob from the pagan immorality in the land. She has already lamented that Esau married two pagan Hittite women, making life bitter for her and Isaac (Gn 26:34-35). She does not want the same to happen to Jacob, so she sends him away, hoping he will find a godly wife among their own Hebrew kinsmen in Haran (Gn 27:42-28:1).

The Younger before the Older

Jacob’s sins, however, eventually catch up with him. When Jacob arrives in Haran, he meets Laban’s two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Leah, the first-born, is described as having weak eyes, and her name can be translated “cow.” In contrast, Laban’s younger daughter Rachel is described as “beautiful and lovely,” and her name literally means “ewe lamb” (Gn 29:17).

Jacob immediately falls in love with Rachel, but according to custom, the younger sister should not marry before the older one. Nevertheless, Jacob reaches for something that is not supposed to be his: He wants Rachel as his wife, even though her older sister Leah is not yet married. So much did Jacob desire Rachel that he agreed to serve uncle Laban for seven years in return for Rachel’s hand in marriage. “So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her” (Gn 29:20).

But when the day of the wedding arrives, Laban makes a cunning switch. At the end of the marriage feast that evening, instead of bringing Rachel to Jacob, Laban brings him the elder daughter, Leah. In the dark of night, Jacob consummates his marriage with a woman whom he presumes to be Rachel.

Jacob makes the startling discovery the next day: “And in the morning, behold, it was Leah” (Gn 29:25). That’s one big “behold”! In the clearer light of day, Jacob realizes that the daughter he had been given in marriage was not his beloved Rachel but her older, unattractive sister, Leah. The deceiver finds himself deceived; the trickster has been tricked. Jacob has finally gotten a taste of his own medicine.

Outraged, Jacob goes to his father-in-law and objects, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (Gn 29:25) Ironically, Jacob the archdeceiver now complains of having been duped himself. In accusing Laban of trickery, Jacob is unwittingly condemning himself.

But Laban’s response must have cut Jacob to the heart: “It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the first-born” (Gn 29:25-6).

Jacob has no response to this. Laban’s words probably remind Jacob of his own sin in putting himself before the firstborn Esau back in Canaan. He tried to supplant a first-born again here in Haran, but Laban says such a horrendous thing “is not so done *in our country*.” The stinging implication is that it should not have been done in Jacob’s home-land, either.

Many Wives?

After marrying Leah, Jacob ends up working an additional seven years in exchange for Rachel as his second wife. This is not good news. As we saw in the case of Abraham, a lack of faithfulness to one wife creates tension in the family. In Jacob’s case, this rivalry will affect not only his wives but also the sons they bear him.

First, the Lord recognizes that Leah was unloved and blesses her with the ability to conceive children (Gn 29:31). Rachel, who had been incapable of conceiving children of her own, becomes infuriated. She envies her sister Leah so much that she preferred her husband take yet *another* woman rather than concede supremacy to her rival. She offers her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob as a concubine, in the misguided hope that Bilhah somehow will bear children on Rachel’s behalf. But when Bilhah conceives, Rachel doesn’t defeat her rival; she merely creates a new one. Now there are *two* women who have borne children for her husband.

Not willing to be outdone by Rachel, Leah makes a similar move, offering her maidservant Zilpah as a concubine as well. Zilpah also conceives, only adding to the rivalry. Conflict begins to overwhelm the family.

Finally, God remembers the barren Rachel, and she gives birth to two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. All in all, Jacob fathers twelve sons through four different women. Though these twelve sons will become known as the twelve patriarchs of the nation of Israel, the Bible also shows that Jacob’s sons experience intense rivalry, and tension will arise in the history of their descendants. As we will see in the next chapter, the Bible reveals the long-term heartache that will come as a result of Jacob’s departure from God’s intention for marriage to be a permanent and exclusive union between one man and one woman.

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 25:19-34, 27:1-46, 29:15-30

1. Launching Question: In today's chapter, we are going to read more about Abraham's family—his son, Isaac, and Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau, including their sibling rivalry. As we get started, what do you think about when you consider your relationship with your siblings? Or what comes to mind when you think of how siblings interact?

Please read aloud: The story of Abraham's family picks up in Genesis 24 when his son Isaac marries a woman named Rebekah, who conceives twin sons that are rivals from the start.

Read Genesis 25:19-34

2. Jacob's name literally means "supplanter," "cheater," or "he clutches the heel." In what ways does Jacob live up to his name in this passage?

Answer: Jacob's heel-grabbing move at birth foreshadows his future strife with Esau: Never content with second place, the heel-grabber at birth grabs at Esau's privileges as the first-born son, stealing his birthright.

Please read aloud: The birthright represents Esau's prerogatives and status as the first-born son, including the right to a double portion of

the inheritance that his father would award each son. In a moment of rash desperation, Esau agrees and exchanges half his inheritance for a pottage of lentils (Gn 25:29-34).

3. What does this episode tell us about the character of Jacob and Esau?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Jacob is sneaky. Esau seems to care little for truly important things and gets caught up in more immediate, material concerns.

Please read aloud: But getting the birthright was not enough for Jacob. He still wants more and grabs at the *blessing* Esau was supposed to receive from his father as well.

Read Genesis 27:1-29

4. We've just seen Jacob steal Esau's birthright; now he plans to steal his blessing. Does anyone know the difference between the birthright and the blessing?

Answer: The birthright refers to the concrete, material inheritance a firstborn son would receive from the father—the lion's share of the father's estate. The blessing is a spiritual inheritance: The father invokes God's grace upon the first-born so that he can carry out his responsibility to lead his family as patriarch after his father dies. This was an almost king-like function, as his clan would be placed under his care and protection (see Gen 27:29, 37). The firstborn also assumed a priestly role, leading the family in worship and mediating their relationship with God (see Gn 8:20-21, 12:6-8, 15:9-21, 26:23-25).

5. Thinking back to our previous chapters of this Bible study, what blessings have we already encountered in our walk through

the Bible? What is so important about receiving this particular blessing? How is the blessing connected to previous stories?

Answer: In Esau's case, he was to receive the most important blessing mentioned in the Book of Genesis, for his father Isaac was the guardian of the covenant blessing that came to him from Abraham—a blessing that had its roots in God's blessing of Adam and Eve and was linked with God's promise to give Abraham's descendants a great land (Gn 28:3-4) and to bless the entire human family through them (Gn 23:14).

Please read aloud: It is at this pivotal point in Esau's life that his younger brother Jacob steps in and steals his blessing—the heel-grabbing supplanter living up to his name once again. Jacob quickly puts on Esau's best garments, covering himself with animal skins to make him appear more hairy like his older brother, and brings his father food that Rebekah prepared for him. Jacob thus deceives his father into thinking he is Esau coming for the blessing. The nearly blind Isaac is fooled and gives Jacob the covenantal blessing, elevating him as lord over all of Abraham's family and the spiritual descendants of Abraham's only beloved son:

“Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” (Gn 27:29)

When Esau returns, he is understandably devastated. Let's read about his response:

Read Genesis 27:30-46

6. How does Esau respond to Jacob's theft of his birthright?

Answer: Esau is enraged and is now plotting to kill his brother.

7. How does Rebekah respond to Esau's threats to Jacob? What two problems does this help her solve?

Answer: Rebekah sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran. For Rebekah, this solves two problems in one move: First, she can protect her beloved Jacob from Esau, and second, she can protect Jacob from the pagan immorality in the land. She has already lamented that Esau married two pagan Hittite women, making life bitter for her and Isaac (Gn 26:34-35). She does not want the same to happen to Jacob, so she sends him away, hoping he will find a godly wife among their own Hebrew kinsmen in Haran (Gn 27:42-28:1).

Please read aloud: At first, it might appear that Jacob gets away with his deceptive tricks, but let's read about how Jacob's sins eventually catch up with him in this new land with his uncle Laban.

Genesis 29:15-30

8. What happens in this story? Could someone provide a brief summary?

Answer: Jacob immediately falls in love with Rachel, but according to custom, the younger sister should not marry before the older one. Nevertheless, Jacob reaches for something that is not supposed to be his: He wants Rachel as his wife, even though her older sister Leah is not yet married. So much did Jacob desire Rachel that he agreed to serve uncle Laban for seven years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage (Gn 29:20). But when the day of the wedding arrives, Laban makes a cunning switch. At the end of the marriage feast that evening, instead of bringing Rachel to Jacob, Laban brings him the elder daughter, Leah. In the dark of night, Jacob consummates his marriage with a woman whom he presumes to be Rachel. Jacob makes the startling discovery the next day: “And in the morning, behold, it was Leah” (Gn 29:25). That's one big “behold”! In the clearer light of day, Jacob

realizes that the daughter he had been given in marriage was not his beloved Rachel but her older, unattractive sister, Leah.

9. Outraged at the trick, Jacob goes to his father-in-law and objects, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" (Gn 29:25) But Laban's response must have cut Jacob to the heart: "It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the first-born" (Gn 29:25-6). Why would Laban's words have had such a deep effect of Jacob? How does this story connect to the previous stories of Jacob and Esau?

Answer: Laban's words probably remind Jacob of his own sin in putting himself before the firstborn Esau back in Canaan. He tried to supplant a first-born again here in Haran, but Laban says such a horrendous thing "is not so done in our country." The stinging implication is that it should not have been done in Jacob's homeland, either. The deceiver is now deceived; Jacob's tricks are finally catching up to him.

Please read aloud: After marrying Leah, Jacob ends up working an additional seven years in exchange for Rachel as his second wife. This is not good news. As we saw in the case of Abraham, a lack of faithfulness to one wife creates tension in the family. In Jacob's case, this rivalry will affect not only his wives but also the sons they bear him.

If we continue reading the story, eventually, all in all, Jacob fathers twelve sons through four different women. The Bible shows that Jacob's sons experience intense rivalry, and tension will arise in the history of their descendants. As we will see in the next chapter, the Bible reveals the long-term heartache that will come as a result of

Jacob's departure from God's intention for marriage to be a permanent and exclusive union between one man and one woman.

10. Jacob's family experiences the negative effects of not abiding by God's plan for marriage. How have you witnessed something similar in your life? How does a neglect of God's plan for marriage impact people today?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

11. But the story doesn't end there, these twelve sons will become known as the twelve patriarchs of the nation of Israel, and in the next chapter, we will see how God brings good out of evil. How have you seen God work in your life or the lives of others despite difficult family situations? And how can God work in our families, despite their brokenness?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



Chapter VI

Bringing Good Out of Evil

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The most well-known sibling rivalry in the Book of Genesis comes in the story of Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Just as Jacob's favoritism toward Rachel caused turmoil in his marriages, his preference for her son, Joseph, causes tension among his many children.

Jacob not only favors Joseph, he dotes on his son in front of Joseph's brothers, inflating their envy to almost murderous levels. "Now Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age; and he made a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gn 37:3-4).

To make matters worse, Joseph claims to be a visionary who experiences prophetic dreams. When he tells his brothers of dreams he had of them bowing down before him in reverence, the fraternal animosity reaches a fever pitch. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back; the brothers now take Joseph by force and sell him into slavery. To cover up their treacherous deed, they take Joseph's tunic and dip it in blood and show the blood-stained cloak to their father, tricking Jacob into thinking that his beloved son has been devoured by a wild beast. Notice again how Jacob reaps what he has sown: In

his youth, Jacob deceived his own father when he stole the blessing from Esau. Now, in his old age, Jacob is deceived by his *own* children about what happened to Joseph.

Joseph's Purity

Joseph is a man who, in many ways, is the complete opposite of his father. We saw earlier that Jacob was a schemer who aggressively pursued his own self-interest and grasped at things that were not meant to be his. Instead of trusting in God and His plan for his life, Jacob tended to trust more in his *own* plans, which usually brought more harm than good to him and his family.

Joseph, on the other hand, is a simple, honest man who still rises to great prominence. It's clear that his life is truly guided by the Lord's hand, not his own. Despite suffering many betrayals and persecutions, Joseph remains a man of integrity. God protects him and elevates him to positions far beyond anything his father Jacob could have ever imagined.

After his brothers sell Joseph into slavery, he ends up in the house of a high-ranking Egyptian named Potipher. There, the Bible tells us, "the Lord was with Joseph" and everything he did prospered (Gen 39:2). Potipher noticed this and made Joseph the head of his entire household (Gn 39: 6).

Things were looking good for Joseph, until Potipher's wife begins to lust after him. Joseph refuses to give in to her desires, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gn 39:9). Not taking "no" for an answer, Potipher's wife continues her relentless pursuit, as day after day she asks Joseph to lie with her. Her lust finally turns to aggression when she seizes his garments and pulls him close

to herself. Joseph is forced to choose between giving in to her desires or fleeing, leaving only his garment in her grasp. A man of virtue, Joseph chooses to flee, and to this day he is hailed as a model of chastity in the Jewish tradition.

His act of virtue, however, is not appreciated by Potipher's wife. Humiliated and spurned, she realizes that she will never have her way with him. Her lust turns to anger, and she sets out to destroy Joseph. Using the garment that she stole from him, she accuses Joseph of attempting to rape her. In the face of his wife's accusation, Potipher throws his faithful servant into prison (Gn 39:7-18).

Falling Upward

Yet the Bible tells us again that "the Lord was with Joseph" even in the midst of this second ordeal (Gn 39:21). Just as Joseph the slave was elevated to head of Potipher's household, now, as an inmate, he wins the favor of the jailer and becomes the overseer of the entire prison.

And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison...and the keeper of the prison paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper. (Gn 39:22-23)

God's blessing continues to favor Joseph. While in jail, Joseph employs his gift of interpreting dreams for a fellow prisoner who had been the chief butler for Pharaoh's court. When the butler is restored to Pharaoh's good graces and the king starts having strange dreams of his own, the butler informs Pharaoh of Joseph, who is called up from prison to appear before Pharaoh and interpret his dream (Gn 39-41).

Pharaoh's dream foretells dramatic events about to take place in the Middle East. He dreams of seven fat cows coming out of the Nile River, followed by seven gaunt cows that come up and eat the seven fat cows. Joseph explains that the seven fat cows represent seven years of superabundant harvest in the land, while the seven gaunt cows represent seven years of devastating famine that will follow the years of plenty. Joseph goes on to offer Pharaoh wise counsel: Store the grain from the years of plenty, so that Egypt will have enough food during the years of famine.

Just as Potipher and the chief jailer recognized that the Lord was with Joseph and gave him special authority, Pharaoh too sees the Spirit of God in Joseph (Gn 41:39) and vests him with authority over all of Egypt, making him a prime minister, or "master of the palace," to rule the people on Pharaoh's behalf. Pharaoh says to him, "You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only as regards the throne will I be greater than you" (Gn 41:40). To mark his elevation, Pharaoh bestows upon Joseph his signet ring, makes him ride in his second chariot, and instructs all the people to kneel before him. Pharaoh tells him, "I am Pharaoh and without your consent no man shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt" (Gn 41:44).

What an amazing day this must have been for Joseph! He wakes up as prisoner in a dungeon and goes to bed that night in a palace, dressed in royal attire and reigning as second in command over all of Egypt. And all this happens without any scheming or vying for power on Joseph's part.

Because of God's blessing, every trouble that befalls Joseph leads to an even *greater* blessing. His brothers sell him into slavery, and he finds himself entrusted with the oversight of Potipher's house.

Potiphar's wife falsely accuses him and he is thrown into prison, but this becomes the opportunity to meet Pharaoh and become Pharaoh's right-hand man—and eventually, as we will now see, the savior of a great multitude.

Family Reunion

Just as Joseph had predicted, the time of abundant harvest ends after seven years and famine strikes Egypt and all the land. People from all over come to Egypt to buy grain (Gn 41:57)—including Joseph's own brothers. Providentially, this leads them right back to the same younger brother whom they betrayed so many years before.

To purchase the grain, the brothers have to go through Joseph, but they do not recognize him. They bow down before him, fulfilling the prophetic dreams of his youth about how he one day would reign over his older brothers and they would bow down before him (Gn 37:5-11, 42:6-9). Joseph, on the other hand, immediately recognizes his brothers but waits to reveal his identity. His love for his family is greater than his anger over having been sent away in slavery, but he uses the occasion to test their character. Joseph accuses the youngest brother, Benjamin, of stealing and threatens to imprison him as a test of the other brothers' loyalty. Years before, they had turned on a younger brother—Joseph himself—but now they demonstrate family allegiance, coming to the defense of Benjamin.

Overwhelmed by their devotion, particularly Judah's willingness to take the place of his younger brother and to be thrown into prison himself, Joseph finally reveals his identity. Reconciled, Joseph and his brothers send for their father and the rest of the family to rejoin them in Egypt (Gn 43-45).

Good from Evil

In Joseph's saga, the Bible highlights how God's providential care is more powerful than our human schemes. And this is a challenge to us: In what will we put our trust? Will we be more like Jacob the schemer and rely on our own plans and efforts? Or will we be more like Joseph, who simply seeks to do what is right and trusts in God to provide for him? We each may have certain plans and dreams for our own life, but Scripture teaches us that God has a plan for us as well. The drama of life is about choosing which plan to trust.

The story of Joseph also addresses one of the most perplexing problems that confronts humanity: the problem of suffering. How can an all-powerful, loving God allow bad things to happen to good people? Though not providing an exhaustive answer to this perennial question, the end of the Book of Genesis sheds some light on how God responds to the suffering of the righteous. The story of Joseph reveals that God is so powerful that He can use the evils of this world to bring about even greater good. As Joseph explains to his own brothers, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (Gn 50:20). God took the many evils inflicted upon Joseph and used them to bring about a greater good—to bring Joseph to power in Egypt so that he could save his family and all the earth from starvation (see Catechism, no. 312). In this sense, Joseph prefigures Jesus Christ: God took the greatest evil in history—the unjust crucifixion of His innocent Son—and used it to bring about the greatest good: the salvation of the human family.

The Blessing of Judah

The Book of Genesis concludes with Jacob gathering his twelve sons around him for a final blessing before he dies. These sons are the patriarchal fathers of the twelve tribes that will make up the nation of Israel. But one particular son, Judah, is given a unique blessing that elevates him above his brothers and foretells how God will bring a great king to Israel from Judah's descendants. This promised king in this prophetic blessing is symbolized by a lion and a royal scepter.

Consider Jacob's words to Judah:

"Judah, your brothers shall praise you;
Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
Your father's sons shall bow down before you.
Judah is a lion's whelp;
From the prey, my son, you have gone up.
He stooped down, he couched as a lion
And as a lioness; who dares rouse him up?
The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
Until he comes to whom it belongs
And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." (Gn 49:8-10)

Here we see the emergence of a royal line from the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's promise to Abraham that kings would arise from his family will be carried out through this particular tribe of Judah. Jacob speaks of Judah's leadership role in the family when he tells how Judah's brothers "shall bow down before you." But Jacob goes on to prophesy something even more amazing: A future royal leader from the tribe of Judah will rule not only over all twelve

tribes of Israel, but also over the whole world—"to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gn 49:8-12).

And who is this king to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of the peoples? Some may see a partial fulfillment of this prophecy in King David, but ultimately, it points to Jesus Christ Himself. He is the lion from the tribe of Judah, as the New Testament reveals (Rv 5:5-6). He is the one to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of all the nations. And so, at the close of the Book of Genesis, we have another foreshadowing of the great king who will establish a worldwide kingdom and gather all humanity back into covenant with God.

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 37:3-36, 39:1-23, 41:1-57

Please read aloud: The most well-known sibling rivalry in the Book of Genesis (even more than Jacob and Esau) comes in the story of Joseph, the first-born son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Just as Jacob's favoritism toward Rachel caused turmoil in his marriages, his preference for her son, Joseph, causes tension among his many children.

Read Genesis 37:3-11

1. Why are Joseph's brothers so upset with him? What reasons does his passage name?

Answer: Jacob not only favors Joseph, he dotes on his son in front of Joseph's brothers, inflating their envy to almost murderous levels. To make matters worse, Joseph claims to be a visionary who experiences prophetic dreams. When he tells his brothers of dreams he had of them bowing down before him in reverence, the fraternal animosity reaches a fever pitch.

Read Genesis 37:12-36

2. What do Joseph's brothers do to him because of their jealousy?

Answer: The brothers now take Joseph by force and sell him into slavery. To cover up their treacherous deed, they take Joseph's tunic

and dip it in blood and show the blood-stained cloak to their father, tricking Jacob into thinking that his beloved son has been devoured by a wild beast.

3. In his old age, Jacob is deceived by his own children about what happened to Joseph. How might this be, in a certain sense, fitting, considering what we know about Jacob from previous chapters?

Answer: Notice again how Jacob reaps what he has sown: In his youth, Jacob deceived his own father when he stole the blessing from Esau. Now he is tricked by his own children as well.

Please read aloud: We saw earlier that Jacob was a schemer who aggressively pursued his own self-interest and grasped at things that were not meant to be his. Instead of trusting in God and His plan for his life, Jacob tended to trust more in his own plans, which usually brought more harm than good to him and his family.

Let's observe how Joseph is different than his father in this story.

Read Genesis 39:1-23

4. This passage begins to reveal Joseph's character. What virtues does Joseph exemplify in this story?

Answer: Joseph is responsible and wise in his business dealings. Additionally, he demonstrates the virtue of chastity.

5. What reasons does Joseph cite for his refusal to commit adultery with Potiphar's wife? And what steps does he take to ensure that he does not fall into unchastity?

Answer: Joseph refuses to give in to her desires, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gn 39:9). Additionally, Joseph always refused her advances, even to the point of striving to avoid her (see Gn 39:10).

Please read aloud: Not taking “no” for an answer, Potipher’s wife continues her relentless pursuit, as day after day she asks Joseph to lie with her. Her lust finally turns to aggression when she seizes his garments and pulls him close to herself. Joseph is forced to choose between giving in to her desires or fleeing, leaving only his garment in her grasp. A man of virtue, Joseph chooses to flee, and to this day he is hailed as a model of chastity in the Jewish tradition.

6. What can we learn from Joseph about practicing the virtue of chastity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Joseph’s act of virtue, however, is not appreciated by Potipher’s wife. Humiliated and spurned, she realizes that she will never have her way with him. Her lust turns to anger, and she sets out to destroy Joseph. Using the garment that she stole from him, she accuses Joseph of attempting to rape her. In the face of his wife’s accusation, Potipher throws his faithful servant into prison (Gn 39:7-18).

7. Sometimes doing the right thing, doesn’t always make our lives easier. Why is it still important to do what is right, even if others don’t respond positively? How have you experienced this in your own life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Despite the difficulties, the Bible tells us again that “the Lord was with Joseph” even in the midst of this second ordeal (Gn 39:21). God continues to be faithful to Joseph even in these difficult circumstances.

Read Genesis 41:1-46

What an amazing day this must have been for Joseph! He wakes up as prisoner in a dungeon and goes to bed that night in a palace, dressed in royal attire and reigning as second in command over all of Egypt. And all this happens without any scheming or vying for power on Joseph’s part.

Because of God’s blessing, every trouble that befalls Joseph leads to an even *greater* blessing. His brothers sell him into slavery, and he finds himself entrusted with the oversight of Potipher’s house. Potipher’s wife falsely accuses him and he is thrown into prison, but this becomes the opportunity to meet Pharaoh and become Pharaoh’s right-hand man—and eventually, as we will now see, the savior of a great multitude.

8. What does Joseph’s story teach us about God’s faithfulness and how we should respond in times of adversity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The story of Joseph continues in the next several chapters of Genesis. It’s a longer narrative, so for the sake of time, here is a summary of what happens:

Just as Joseph had predicted, the time of abundant harvest ends after seven years and famine strikes Egypt and all the land. People from all over come to Egypt to buy grain (Gn 41:57)—including Joseph’s own brothers. Providentially, this leads them right back to the same younger brother whom they betrayed so many years before.

To purchase the grain, the brothers have to go through Joseph, but they do not recognize him. They bow down before him, fulfilling the prophetic dreams of his youth about how he one day would reign over his older brothers and they would bow down before him (Gn

37:5-11, 42:6-9). Joseph, on the other hand, immediately recognizes his brothers but waits to reveal his identity. His love for his family is greater than his anger over having been sent away in slavery, but he uses the occasion to test their character. Joseph accuses the youngest brother, Benjamin, of stealing and threatens to imprison him as a test of the other brothers' loyalty. Years before, they had turned on a younger brother—Joseph himself—but now they demonstrate family allegiance, coming to the defense of Benjamin.

Overwhelmed by their devotion, particularly Judah's willingness to take the place of his younger brother and to be thrown into prison himself, Joseph finally reveals his identity. Reconciled, Joseph and his brothers send for their father and the rest of the family to rejoin them in Egypt (Gn 43-45).

9. In Joseph's saga, the Bible highlights how God's providential care is more powerful than our human schemes. And this is a challenge to us: In what will we put our trust? Will we be more like Jacob the schemer and rely on our own plans and efforts? Or will we be more like Joseph, who simply seeks to do what is right and trusts in God to provide for him? We each may have certain plans and dreams for our own life, but Scripture teaches us that God has a plan for us as well. The drama of life is about choosing which plan to trust. How has the story of Joseph inspired you to put your trust in God, instead of your own plans?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The story of Joseph also addresses one of the most perplexing problems that confronts humanity: the problem of suffering. How can an all-powerful, loving God allow bad things to happen to good people? Though not providing an exhaustive answer to this perennial question, the end of the Book of Genesis sheds some

light on how God responds to the suffering of the righteous. The story of Joseph reveals that God is so powerful that He can use the evils of this world to bring about even greater good. As Joseph explains to his own brothers, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (Gn 50:20).

10. How have you seen the principle of God bringing good out of evil in your own life? And what does Joseph story teach us about the problem of suffering?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The Book of Genesis concludes with Jacob gathering his twelve sons around him for a final blessing before he dies. These sons are the patriarchal fathers of the twelve tribes that will make up the nation of Israel. But one particular son, Judah, is given a unique blessing that elevates him above his brothers and foretells how God will bring a great king to Israel from Judah's descendants. This promised king in this prophetic blessing is symbolized by a lion and a royal scepter.

Consider Jacob's words to Judah:

Read Genesis 49:8-10

Here we see the emergence of a royal line from the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's promise to Abraham that kings would arise from his family will be carried out through this particular tribe of Judah. Jacob speaks of Judah's leadership role in the family when he tells how Judah's brothers "shall bow down before you." But Jacob goes on to prophesy something even more amazing: A future royal leader from the tribe of Judah will rule not only over all twelve tribes of Israel, but also over the whole world—"to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gn 49:8-12).

11. Looking ahead to the rest of this study, who might this king be to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of the peoples? How is this a fitting end to the book of Genesis?

Answer: Some may see a partial fulfillment of this prophecy in King David, but ultimately, it points to Jesus Christ Himself. He is the lion from the tribe of Judah, as the New Testament reveals (Rv 5:5-6). He is the one to whom belongs the royal scepter and the obedience of all the nations. And so, at the close of the Book of Genesis, we have another foreshadowing of the great king who will establish a worldwide kingdom and gather all humanity back into covenant with God.

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Chapter VII

Leaving Egypt

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Our journey through the big picture of the Bible now takes us to the Book of Exodus—a book that begins with a startling twist. On one hand, the Lord continues to work his covenantal plan for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even in the land of Egypt. The first chapter notes that the people were “fruitful” and “multiplied” (Ex 1:7), which recalls what the Bible said about Adam, Noah and the patriarchs. This underscores how the Israelites continue to share in the same blessing given to their forefathers. Indeed, the small tribe of seventy people that Jacob brought down to Egypt has now, hundreds of years later, “increased greatly” and become “exceedingly strong” (Ex 1:7).

On the other hand, Exodus introduces a new threat to God’s covenantal promises when it reports that a new king arises in Egypt “who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8).

This lack of “knowing” does not mean that the new Pharaoh was unacquainted with the famous dream interpreter, Joseph—the one who saved Egypt from famine and became Pharaoh’s chief administrator of the kingdom. Rather, in the politics of the day, the expression indicates a fundamental breach in Egypt’s stance toward Joseph’s family.

The term “to know” (*yadah*) in Hebrew signifies an intimate, covenant friendship with another person (see Gn 29:5, 2 Sm 7:2). The word can describe the profound communion an individual has with God (Ez 24:27, Is 1:3) and is even used as a euphemism for the most intimate union between a man and woman. When Adam *knew* his wife, she conceived a child (Gn 4:1).

Thus, Exodus 1:8 indicates that, with the rise of this new Pharaoh, Israel’s relationship with the Egyptians has been drastically ruptured. The new king does not “know” Joseph. This means the descendants of Jacob and Joseph no longer experience close covenant friendship with the Egyptian king. Instead of viewing the Israelites as an ally and a blessing, he views their increasing strength as a threat. He has them enslaved and attempts to destroy them by having every newborn male child thrown into the Nile River (Ex 1:8-21).

God responds to this crisis by sending His people Moses. The circumstances surrounding Moses’ birth have great significance, for they foreshadow his future vocation to rescue God’s people: Pharaoh’s daughter discovers the Hebrew child in a basket floating on the Nile, after his Israelite mother put him there in a desperate attempt to save the child’s life. The child is named “Moses,” which in Hebrew is derived from the verb *mashah*, meaning “to draw out of.” The one who was saved by being drawn out of the dangerous waters of the Nile will later rescue Israel by drawing the people out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and leading them to the Promised Land.

Ten Strikes against Egypt’s Gods

One of the most famous aspects of the Exodus story is that of the ten

plagues that fall on Egypt. Though God (through Moses) commands Pharaoh to let His people go, the Egyptian king repeatedly refuses; as a result, his nation is afflicted by a series of plagues. At first glance, these plagues seem to be merely intended to make life miserable for the Egyptians and to serve as a punishment for their enslaving the Israelites. However, if we examine these divine acts of judgment in their historical context, we will see that they are also intended to help the Egyptians reject their pagan ways and embrace the one, true God.

First, note the theme of “knowing” in the account of Pharaoh and the plagues. When Moses first confronts Pharaoh with God’s command to release the people, the king responds, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not *know* the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go” (Ex 5:2 emphasis added).

Recall how the word “know” refers to an intimate relationship: Right from the start, Pharaoh obstinately proclaims that he does not “know” the Lord and refuses to let the people go. Yet every time Pharaoh rejects God, his nation is confronted with another plague, whose purpose is to help the stubborn king overcome his lack of knowing the Lord. In fact, in almost every instance, Moses says each plague is given so that Pharaoh and the Egyptians may “*know*” the Lord (Ex 7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:29; 10:2). This refrain of *knowing* the Lord tells us that one of the main purposes of the plagues is to lead Egypt to *know* the one, true God—to recognize the supremacy of Yahweh.

But how do the plagues do this? These plagues are not random acts of retribution; they are strategic. Many scholars have pointed out that the ten plagues are connected with various Egyptian deities.

SIDEBAR – EGYPTIAN GODS

For example, the Nile River, whose waters were a source of life in this region, was associated with various Egyptian gods. The god Osiris ruled the world, and the Nile represented his bloodstream. The Nile-god Hapy was a god of creation and fertility who was linked with the river’s annual inundation. There were even songs sung to the Nile, which itself was hailed as a deity: “Hail to thee, O Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive!”¹ But in the first plague, when Moses strikes the Nile, it turns to blood, symbolizing judgment on the false gods associated with this river. In fact, all the plagues demonstrate superiority over the supposed gods of Egypt.

Similarly, the Egyptians worshipped the sun god Re, and in the ninth plague, the sun is darkened for three days, expressing Yahweh’s sovereignty over this supreme Egyptian deity. Underlying all of the plagues is a subversion of the Egyptian belief in Pharaoh himself as a god with power over the cosmos. According to Egyptian tradition, Pharaoh was responsible for ensuring that the land was fertile, that the Nile provided water, and that the sun shined its light. With this background, we can see how plagues bringing a darkened sun, destruction of crops, and a bloody, undrinkable, frog-infested Nile River would be a direct attack on Pharaoh’s divine attributes. They show that the God of Israel—not Pharaoh—is in control of the cosmos.

More than simply a display of God’s wrath, the plagues reveal the dominance of the God of Israel as He exercises divine judgment over the many false gods of the Egyptians (Ex 12:12). This is why God

¹ “Hymn to the Nile” in ANET, 372-3. See Goran Larson, *Bound for Freedom* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), p. 60. On the plagues and Egyptian idolatry, see also John J. Davis, *Moses and the gods of Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1998).

often says that the plagues are given so that “the Egyptians shall *know* that I am the Lord” (Ex 7:5): Coming to know the Lord would involve recognizing the superiority of Yahweh and rejecting the Egyptian deities, who are powerless in the face of the God of Israel.

Not Forty Years

But the Egyptians are not the only people in the Book of Exodus who need to turn to God. A second key aspect of the Exodus story is the specific plan God has for Israel. It is often thought that God called Moses at the burning bush to lead Israel out of slavery and into the desert on their way to the Promised Land. However, if we take a closer look, we will see that God’s first concern is to liberate the people from a much deeper form of slavery than their drudgery under Egyptian taskmasters. Listen to what God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh:

You and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, we pray you, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.” (Ex 3:18)

Notice that the message to Pharaoh does not include anything about a permanent liberation, a forty-year journey through the wilderness, or Israel’s moving to the Promised Land. This initial request focuses on a short three-day journey, in which the Hebrews will worship God in the desert and then return to Egypt.

Certainly, God’s long-term goal is to bring Israel to the land originally promised to Abraham’s family (Gn 12:1-3, Ex 3:17). However, the initial need for a three-day journey to sacrifice in the desert may point to a

deeper and more profound spiritual crisis in Israel than the problem slavery under Pharaoh. After the fourth plague, Pharaoh temporarily relents and says he will allow the Hebrews to sacrifice to their God, but they must do so within the land of Egypt. Moses responds by saying that this is not possible:

“It is not right to do so; for we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God offerings abominable to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? We must go three days’ journey into the wilderness and sacrificed to the Lord our God as he will command us.” (Ex 8:26-27)

Why does Israel need to go out into the wilderness to offer these sacrifices? And why would Moses be so nervous about offering them within the land of Egypt? Moreover, why would Moses say that the Egyptians will *kill* the Israelites if they see the people offering these particular sacrifices?

Moses is probably aware that the animals the Israelites intend to offer in sacrifice were associated with various Egyptian deities. Indeed, according to ancient Jewish interpretations (as well as many of the early Christian writers known as the Church Fathers), God commanded Israel to sacrifice the very animals that represented some of the most prominent gods in the Egyptian cult. For example, the sun goddess, Hathor, was depicted as a cow; the fertility god, Apis, as a bull; the gods Amun and Khnum as rams. Killing these animals that represented Egyptian deities would have been an abomination to the Egyptians.² Such an action would have incited a riot and put the lives of the Israelites at risk. For this reason, Israel needed to

² Genesis 46:34 refers to shepherds in a similar way: “For every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.” Perhaps since shepherds oversaw cattle, sheep, and goats—animals that were cultic representations of Egyptian deities—and treated them in an utterly profane way, the Egyptians viewed the shepherds themselves as an abomination.

go a three-day's journey away from the Egyptians to sacrifice these animals in the solitude of the desert.

But why did God want Israel to sacrifice these animals in the first place? On a basic level, such an action expresses a rejection of the Egyptian deities associated with these animals. But there may be something more: The Bible reveals that, after hundreds of years of dwelling in the land of Egypt, the Israelites had not only been living with the Egyptians but also living *like* them, as Egyptian immorality and idolatry had crept into their hearts (see Jos 24:14, Ez 20:7-8). By instructing the people to sacrifice these animals, the Lord was, at least in part, challenging the people to acknowledge Him as the one true God and to renounce any lingering belief in the Egyptian deities represented by these animals. The three-day ceremony would provide the opportunity for the Israelites to repent and realign themselves with the covenant Yahweh established with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Here we see that God is not only trying to get Israel out of Egypt, He is also trying to get *Egypt* out of Israel.³

The Passover Choice

Even in the face of God's mighty deeds, Pharaoh digs in his heels and refuses to let the people go to the wilderness to worship the Lord. God finally intervenes with one more plague that will be the impetus for the liberation of the people. In this tenth and most devastating plague, all the firstborn sons in Egypt will be killed, except those in households that celebrated a ritual called the Passover. The ritual involved sacrificing an unblemished lamb from their sheep or goats (Ex 12:5) and marking one's doorpost with the blood of the lamb.

Think about how dangerous this would have been for the Israelites: The animals being sacrificed in the Passover—sheep and goats—

were associated with Egyptian gods! We just saw how Moses did not want the people to sacrifice such animals in Egypt because he feared it would incite the Egyptians to kill them (Ex. 8:25-27). But now, with Pharaoh refusing to let the Israelites take leave, God commands them to sacrifice these animals right in the land of Egypt and then mark their doorposts with the sacrificial blood for all to see. The first Passover, therefore, involves a public renunciation of Egyptian idolatry that challenges the Israelites to make a decisive choice between serving the Lord or serving the Egyptian gods. It marks a key turning point away from their past and starting anew with Yahweh.

Out of Egypt

Imagine the grief and terror of the Egyptians the following morning when they awoke to find all the first born sons in Egypt dead, except those sons of the Israelites who had celebrated the Passover the night before. Pharaoh finally relents and lets the people go without any conditions. He drives them from the land, saying, "Go, serve the Lord, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said and be gone" (Ex 12:32).

Yet shortly after the Israelites are leaving, Pharaoh has a change of heart. He sends his army after the Israelites, which chases the people all the way to the Red Sea. This sets the stage for one of God's greatest acts in the Old Testament, one that will serve as a paradigm for all future saving acts of God: the miraculous parting of the sea. With Israel backed up against the Red Sea and no way of escape, Moses miraculously divides the waters so that the people can pass to the other side. When Pharaoh and his army try to follow the Israelites, the waters collapse upon them and they are killed. Israel is definitively freed from the Egyptians.

³ See Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1995), 136-39.

Coming to Know the Lord

Looking back now on the strife between Moses and Pharaoh, we can see that the plagues did begin to fulfill their purpose, as some of the Egyptians at least came to see the supreme power of Israel's God. After the third plague of the gnats, Pharaoh's own magicians, for example, admit to the king, "This is the finger of God" (Ex 8:19). With the announcement of the seventh plague involving hail, some of Pharaoh's servants are described as "fearing the word of the Lord" and acting to protect their cattle and slaves from the impending punishment (Ex 9:20). After the eighth plague of the locusts, Pharaoh's servants beg him to let the people go: "Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" (Ex 10:7).

This movement toward recognizing the supreme power of Yahweh reached a peak after the death of the firstborns, when many in Egypt joined themselves to the Israelites and followed Moses out of Egypt (Ex 12:38)—a significant turn of events that points to Israel's ultimate vocation to gather the nations into covenant with God.

The Chosen People?

Even though the people have witnessed so many miraculous manifestations of God's power, life on pilgrimage is not easy. In their hurried escape, the people have fled Egypt without adequate provisions for food or water—a significant concern for a large group of hundreds of thousands of people traveling in the desert. Nevertheless, God continues to care for their daily needs, miraculously providing them with heavenly bread (called manna) for food and the water from a rock (see Ex 16-17) as they make their way toward the Promised Land.

At Mount Sinai, God will give the Israelites the Ten Commandments and re-establish them as His covenant people. But first, the Lord reveals more of His plan for Israel—a plan that entails much more than giving them the Promised Land. God shares His vision and calling for the nation of Israel in a key passage that serves as a mission statement for God's people:

"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19:6)

This is an important passage that sheds light on why Israel is sometimes called "the chosen people." From a modern Western perspective, this designation might seem unfair. Why would God "choose" one group of people and not another? Why does God give to Israel Moses, the law, the prophets, and the covenant and not to the other nations?

But this passage helps us see that God does not choose Israel *instead* of the rest of the world; He chooses Israel *for the sake of* the rest of the world.⁴ God always had the entire human family in mind when He raised Israel up to be His covenantal people. From the very beginning, God intended the descendants of Abraham to be His instrument for bringing blessing to all the nations (Gn 12:3, 22:18).

At Mount Sinai, God now elaborates on this universal mission by referring to Israel as a "kingdom of priests." This indicates that God's people are called to be a great kingdom, but one with a priestly ministry to the world. Israel is called to act as God's representative to the other nations, leading them, like a priest, to worship the one, true God. In fact, this priestly mission to the nations fits God's motivation

⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1995), p.

in the preceding verse: “For all the earth is mine,” God said (Ex 19:5). God’s particular call for Israel has a universal scope. Israel is to be a “kingdom of priests” for the sake of the rest of the world—“for all the earth is mine,” says the Lord.

This royal priestly mission also may be reflected in God's designation of Israel as his "first born son" (Exodus 4:22). Recall from the previous chapter how the father in ancient Israel possessed a kingly and priestly role in the family that was passed on to the firstborn by means of a blessing. If Israel were called God's "first-born son" (Ex 4:22), it is fitting that Israel would also be seen as a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). Like a firstborn son in a household, Israel, as God's first-born son in the family of nations, appropriately has a kingly and priestly mission to the other members of God's family, the other nations. Indeed, Israel is the bearer of the covenant blessings for the whole world. The question will be: How well will Israel live up to this high calling?

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Exodus 1:8-14; 2:1-10; 3:13-20; 5:1-2; 7:17-18; 12:1-13; 19:3-6

Please read aloud: Our journey through the big picture of the Bible now takes us to the Book of Exodus—a book that begins with a startling twist. A new king has arisen in Egypt “who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8).

Read Exodus 1: 8-14

1. What might it mean that Pharaoh did not “know” Joseph? (Ex. 1:8)
Did the new Pharaoh really not know who Joseph was?

Answer: We read that there is a new king in Egypt – one who does not “know” Joseph. This lack of “knowing” does not mean that the new Pharaoh was unacquainted with the famous dream interpreter, Joseph. Rather, in the politics of the day, the expression indicated a fundamental breach in Egypt’s stance toward Joseph’s family. The term “to know” (yadah, in Hebrew) signifies an intimate, covenant friendship with another person. Thus, Exodus 1:8 indicates that, with the rise of this new Pharaoh, Israel’s relationship with the Egyptians has been drastically ruptured. Out of fear that the Israelites might continue to multiply and thus grow too powerful, Pharaoh has not only subjected the Israelites to lives of hard service but has even gone so far as to command that all sons born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile (Ex. 1:21).

2. What might it mean that the Israelites were made to “serve” (Hebrew: *Avad*)? (Ex. 1:14)

Answer: While the term “serve” is indeed used to describe the physical toil and labor of the Israelites, the word has a second and very important meaning. “Avad”, the Hebrew word for “serve”, connotes both work and worship. Therefore, the Israelites were not only held captive physically, but spiritually as well. This theme of freedom to worship is critical for understanding the Exodus narrative.

Please read aloud: This is going to be an important thing to keep in mind throughout this study. The Exodus is not simply about getting Israel out of Egypt, but also about getting Egypt (and its idolatry) out of Israel.

The story continues with the person of Moses. Let’s read a bit more about him:

Read Exodus 2: 1-10

3. What does Moses’ name mean? Why does he have this name, and how might this foreshadow his role in the story?

Answer: The circumstances surrounding Moses’ birth have great significance, for they foreshadow his future vocation to rescue God’s people: Pharaoh’s daughter discovers the Hebrew child in a basket floating on the Nile, after his Israelite mother put him there in a desperate attempt to save the child’s life. The child is named “Moses,” which in Hebrew is derived from the verb mashah, meaning “to draw out of.” The one who was saved by being drawn out of the dangerous waters of the Nile will later rescue Israel by drawing the people out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and leading them to the Promised Land.

Please read aloud: There is so much that happens in Moses' story—more than we could fully cover in this chapter. But when Moses has grown up, he flees to Midian after an altercation with an Egyptian. It is there, at Mount Horeb, that he encounters God in the burning bush. This is a key moment for understanding Moses' role in Salvation History:

Read Exodus 3: 13-20

4. What does God initially tell Moses to ask of Pharaoh? (See Ex. 3:18). Why is this important?

Answer: God tells Moses to ask permission for the Israelites to take a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord. It is often thought that God called Moses at the burning bush to lead Israel out of slavery and into the desert on their way to the Promised Land. However, God's first concern is to liberate the people from a much deeper form of slavery than their drudgery under Egyptian taskmasters. The initial need for a three-day journey to sacrifice in the desert points to a deeper and more profound spiritual crisis in Israel than the problem of slavery under Pharaoh.

5. Later in the story, Moses will tell Pharaoh that the Israelites cannot sacrifice to God in Egypt for fear of being stoned by the Egyptians. Why do you think Israel needs to go into the wilderness in order to safely offer sacrifices to God? (Hint: recall the meaning of the term "avad" discussed earlier).

Answer: The animals the Israelites intended to offer in sacrifice were associated with various Egyptian deities. Indeed, God commanded Israel to sacrifice the very animals that represented some of the most prominent gods in the Egyptian cult. For example, the sun goddess, Hathor, was depicted as a cow; the fertility god, Apis, as a bull; the gods Amun and Khnum as rams. Killing these animals that represented

Egyptian deities would have been an abomination to the Egyptians.¹ Such an action would have incited a riot and put the lives of the Israelites at risk. For this reason, Israel needed to go a three-day's journey away from the Egyptians to sacrifice these animals in the solitude of the desert.

6. Given the relationship between these animals and Egyptian gods, why do you think God wanted Israel to sacrifice these animals in the first place?

Answer: On a basic level, such an action expresses a rejection of the Egyptian deities associated with these animals. But there may be something more: The Bible reveals that, after hundreds of years of dwelling in the land of Egypt, the Israelites had not only been living with the Egyptians but also living like them, as Egyptian immorality and idolatry had crept into their hearts (see Jos 24:14, Ez 20:7-8). By instructing the people to sacrifice these animals, the Lord was challenging the people to acknowledge Him as the one true God and to renounce any lingering belief in the Egyptian deities represented by these animals. The three-day ceremony would provide the opportunity for the Israelites to repent and realign themselves with the covenant Yahweh established with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Here we see that God is not only trying to get Israel out of Egypt, He is also trying to get Egypt out of Israel.²

7. What are some of the "pagan gods" of the culture we live in? (Some examples might be success, popularity, fitness, education, or technology). How can these things become idols in our lives? In what ways could we "sacrifice" these idols?

Allow the group to discuss.

¹ Genesis 46:34 refers to shepherds in a similar way: "For every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians." Perhaps since shepherds oversaw cattle, sheep, and goats—animals that were cultic representations of Egyptian deities—and treated them in an utterly profane way, the Egyptians viewed the shepherds themselves as an abomination.

² See Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1995), 136-39.

Please read aloud: We now move onto one of the most famous parts of the narrative: the ten plagues. At first glance, these plagues seem to be merely intended to make life miserable for the Egyptians and to serve as a punishment for their enslaving the Israelites. However, if we examine these divine acts of judgment in their historical context, we will see that they are also intended to help the Egyptians reject their pagan ways and embrace the one, true God.

Read Exodus 5:1-2 and 7:17-18

8. Based on your reading of these passages, what do you think is the purpose of the plagues? (Hint: recall the earlier discussion of the term “yadah”).

Answer: Note the theme of “knowing” in the account of Pharaoh and the plagues. Right from the start, Pharaoh obstinately proclaims that he does not “know” the Lord and refuses to let the people go. Yet every time Pharaoh rejects God, his nation is confronted with another plague, whose purpose is to help the stubborn king overcome his lack of knowing the Lord. In fact, in almost every instance, Moses says each plague is given so that Pharaoh and the Egyptians may “know” the Lord (Ex 7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:29; 10:2). This refrain of knowing the Lord tells us that one of the main purposes of the plagues is to lead Egypt to know the one, true God—to recognize the supremacy of Yahweh. In fact, the plagues themselves can be seen as judgement on the Egyptian gods, and an invitation to come to know the Lord (see sidebar).

SIDEBAR – EGYPTIAN GODS

9. Why do you think God chose the specific plagues he did? Are they random, or is there some significance to them?

Answer: Many scholars have pointed out that the ten plagues are connected with various Egyptian deities. For example, the Nile River, whose waters were a source of life in this region, was associated with various Egyptian gods. The god Osiris ruled the world, and the Nile represented his bloodstream. The Nile-god Hapy was a god of creation and fertility who was linked with the river’s annual inundation. There were even songs sung to the Nile, which itself was hailed as a deity: “Hail to thee, O Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive!”³ But in the first plague, when Moses strikes the Nile, it turns to blood, symbolizing judgment on the false gods associated with this river.

Similarly, the Egyptians worshipped the sun god Re, and in the ninth plague, the sun is darkened for three days, expressing Yahweh’s sovereignty over this supreme Egyptian deity. Underlying all of the plagues is a subversion of the Egyptian belief in Pharaoh himself as a god with power over the cosmos. According to Egyptian tradition, Pharaoh was responsible for ensuring that the land was fertile, that the Nile provided water, and that the sun shined its light. With this background, we can see how plagues bringing a darkened sun, destruction of crops, and a bloody, undrinkable, frog-infested Nile River would be a direct attack on Pharaoh’s divine attributes. They show that the God of Israel—not Pharaoh—is in control of the cosmos.

³ “Hymn to the Nile” in ANET, 372-3. See Goran Larson, *Bound for Freedom* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), p. 60. On the plagues and Egyptian idolatry, see also John J. Davis, *Moses and the gods of Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1998).

10. Based on this background, how would you summarize the purpose of the plagues?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Additionally: More than simply a display of God's wrath, the plagues reveal the dominance of the God of Israel as He exercises divine judgment over the many false gods of the Egyptians (Ex 12:12). This is why God often says that the plagues are given so that "the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" (Ex 7:5): Coming to know the Lord would involve recognizing the superiority of Yahweh and rejecting the Egyptian deities, who are powerless in the face of the God of Israel.

Please read aloud: This leads us to the next major event in the narrative: the institution of Passover.

Read Exodus 12:1-13

Please read aloud: In this tenth and most devastating plague, all the firstborn sons in Egypt will be killed, except those in households that celebrated a ritual called the Passover. The ritual involved sacrificing an unblemished lamb from their sheep or goats (Ex 12:5) and marking one's doorpost with the blood of the lamb.

Think about how dangerous this would have been for the Israelites: The animals being sacrificed in the Passover—sheep and goats—were associated with Egyptian gods. We just saw how Moses did not want the people to sacrifice such animals in Egypt because he feared it would incite the Egyptians to kill them (Ex. 8:25-27). But now, with Pharaoh refusing to let the Israelites take leave, God commands them to sacrifice these animals right in the land of Egypt and then mark their doorposts with the sacrificial blood for all to see. The first Passover, therefore, involves a public renunciation of Egyptian idolatry that

challenges the Israelites to make a decisive choice between serving the Lord or serving the Egyptian gods. It marks a key turning point away from their past and starting anew with Yahweh.

11. The Passover was a bold challenge to the Israelites to make their faith public in a hostile environment. How does this challenge relate to us as Christians today? Have you ever felt like God was calling you to display your faith publicly though you knew it might not be well-received? How did it turn out?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Imagine the grief and terror of the Egyptians the following morning when they awoke to find all the first born sons in Egypt dead, except those sons of the Israelites who had celebrated the Passover the night before. Pharaoh finally relents and lets the people go without any conditions. Yet shortly after the Israelites leave, Pharaoh has a change of heart. He sends his army after the Israelites, which chases the people all the way to the Red Sea. With Israel backed up against the Red Sea and no way of escape, Moses miraculously divides the waters so that the people can pass to the other side. When Pharaoh and his army try to follow the Israelites, the waters collapse upon them and they are killed. Israel is definitively freed from the Egyptians.

12. Do you think the plagues achieved their purpose of helping the Egyptians to know the one, true God?

Answer: Looking back now on the strife between Moses and Pharaoh, we can see that the plagues did begin to fulfill their purpose, as some of the Egyptians at least came to see the supreme power of Israel's God. (See Ex 8:19; Ex 9:20; Ex 10:7). This movement toward recognizing the supreme power of Yahweh reached a peak after the death of the firstborns, when many in Egypt joined themselves to the

Israelites and followed Moses out of Egypt (Ex 12:38)—a significant turn of events that points to Israel's ultimate vocation to gather all the nations into covenant with God.

Please read aloud: This is a momentous moment; however, it is only the beginning for the people of Israel. It is in the midst of their desert wanderings that Yahweh reveals to the Israelites the next step of his plan for his chosen people – a plan that entails much more than giving them the Promised Land. God shares His vision and calling for the nation of Israel in a key passage that serves as a mission statement for God's people.

Read Exodus 19:3-6

13. In this passage, the Israelites are referred to as God's "own possession" and a "kingdom of priests." In other places they are referred to as God's "chosen people." What might these designations mean?

Answer: From a modern, Western perspective, the designation "chosen people" might seem unfair. Why would God "choose" one group of people, and not another, to receive the law, the prophets, and the covenant? This passage helps us see that God does not choose Israel instead of the rest of the world; He chooses Israel for the sake of the rest of the world.⁴ God always had the entire human family in mind when He raised Israel up to be His covenantal people. From the very beginning, God intended the descendants of Abraham to be His instrument for bringing blessing to all the nations (Gn 12:3, 22:18).

At Mount Sinai, God elaborates on this universal mission by referring to Israel as a "kingdom of priests." This indicates that God's people are called to be a great kingdom, but one with a priestly ministry to

the world. Israel is called to act as God's representative to the other nations, leading them, like a priest, to worship the one, true God.

14. God's many gifts to his chosen people (the law, the prophets, the covenant) were meant to be used by Israel to bring all nations into relationship with God. What gifts has God given you? How might God be "choosing" you to use these gifts to serve him?

Allow the group to discuss.

⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1995), p.



UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 164 - 170



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The road from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land was a bumpy one for Israel, filled with examples of heroic virtue but also fraught with many failures and lack of trust in God's love. We will walk this challenging road with Israel, focusing on four key moments in the journey. In this chapter, we will look at the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai (Ex 24) and the people's idolatry in worshiping a golden calf (Ex 32). In the next chapter, we will see how the people surprisingly reject the land God promised them and are punished to wander in the desert for forty years (Nm 14) and how at the end of this period, a new generation of Israelites squander an opportunity to start anew with God by falling into idolatry like their parents did at Sinai, this time with one of the gods of the people in the new land (Nm 25).

At every step of the way, we will see God testing the hearts of His people and the people coming up short. The forty-year journey of testing will make it abundantly clear that the people have hearts that are weak, selfish, and fearful, incapable of following His commandments. But the difficult journey ends with Moses offering hope for the future, announcing a great healing work that God will eventually accomplish: a healing of their hearts, which will cause them to walk in God's ways. This is one of the first clear foreshadowings of the healing power of God's grace in the Bible. God will solve the problem of man's sinful heart and enable His people to do what they could never do on their

own. With this future spiritual healing in mind, Moses can finally say to the people something he has never been able to say confidently before—“You will love the Lord your God with all your *heart*” (Dt 30:6, emphasis added).

Test No. 1: The Heart of Worship

A crucial event in Israel's desert journey comes in Exodus 24, which tells one of the most astonishing stories in the Old Testament. After freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and bringing them to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, God now invites the Israelite leaders up the mountain to share a meal in His divine presence.

For many Christian readers in the twenty-first century, this ritual meal may not mean much. For the ancient Israelites, however, sharing a meal had powerful symbolic connotations, expressing covenant unity and a shared life. For them, to share a meal meant that all at the table were like family. In fact, meals were so important that two enemies making a peace treaty could solidify their new covenant relationship by eating a meal together. The former enemies would leave the table as covenant partners, even using the language of family to describe their new committed friendship. Even adversaries become brothers through covenant meals (see Gn 18:26-33). Therefore, when we read about the Israelite leaders having a *meal* in God's presence, we should see this as a pivotal moment in Israel's relationship with the Lord. This ritual meal symbolizes the intimate covenant relationship God is now forging with His people.

Let's take a closer look at the structure of this covenant ceremony at Sinai, where we will discover that each of the ritual words and actions are rich in meaning. They shed light on the kind of relationship God

wants with Israel and even tell us about the kind of relationship God wants to have with us today.

Bloody Sacrifice

As the leader of this ceremony, Moses first proclaims “all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances” to the people. In turn, the Israelites respond to God’s commandments with faith and commitment, saying, “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do” (Ex 24: 3).

Second, Moses leads the people in a sacrificial rite that has three parts: the offering of animals, a blood ritual, and a communion meal. Each part is packed with symbolic significance.

Sacrifice: The sacrifices offered at Mount Sinai are all about God examining the hearts of His people. Will Israel’s heart be truly for Yahweh or for the false gods of the pagan nations? As we saw in the last chapter, God required Israel to go into the wilderness to sacrifice animals that were associated with Egyptian deities (see Ex 8:25-27). Now that they have escaped Egypt, the Israelites have arrived at this mountain in the desert to perform the sacrificial ritual. While animal sacrifice has many levels of significance in the Old Testament, here it symbolizes a rejection of those Egyptian deities represented by those animals and a renewal of Israel’s loyalty to Yahweh as the one, true God. Thus, in a sense, this particular sacrifice at Sinai could be seen as a ritual enactment of the First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God....You shall not have any other strange gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3).

Blood Ritual: Next, Moses performs a ritual in which he gathers the blood from the animals into basins and sprinkles half of it on the altar as an offering to God and throws the rest of it on the people. What is

the significance of this strange ritual? For the ancient Israelites, blood symbolized life, and similar to sharing a meal, the sharing of blood symbolized the sharing of life and covenant union. Therefore, with half the blood being offered to God on the altar and half the blood being poured on the people, this act would symbolize a new shared life between Israel and the Lord. Now, one of the main goals of the exodus is achieved: The people of Israel have formally become one in covenant with the Almighty God.

Communion Meal: Finally, the consummation of this ceremony at Sinai is a communion meal symbolically shared between the leaders of Israel and Yahweh Himself. “Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the leaders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel.... They beheld God, and ate and drank” (Ex 24:9, 11). Because sharing a meal signifies covenant union, the fact that the Israelite leaders eat this covenant meal in God’s presence symbolizes the profound relationship God forges with His people. Through this ritual, they have become sealed as God’s covenant family.

Going to Sinai, Going to Mass

This ritual at Sinai is not only important for understanding a foundational moment in Israel’s relationship with God; it also tells us a lot about how we Christians are to worship the Lord today, for the specifics of this ritual at Mount Sinai reflect a divine pattern for worship. Already in the time of Moses, God establishes the basic structure for worship that He desires to be used for the rest of time. Note how, at Sinai, there is found a Liturgy of the Word and a Liturgy of Sacrifice. Moses first proclaims the Word of God and then leads the people in sacrifice, a blood ritual, and a communion meal.

This pattern continues throughout the history of Israel and is

fulfilled ultimately in the Eucharist that Jesus institutes. The Mass we celebrate today starts with the Liturgy of the Word and ends with a Eucharistic liturgy of *sacrifice*, in which Christ's sacrifice on the cross is made present (see Catechism, nos. 1362-67). We share Christ's *blood* and partake of His crucified and resurrected body in a *communion meal*. Therefore, when Catholics worship God in the Mass, they are not following the practices invented merely by some human pastor, minister, or theologian; they are participating in the divine order of worship that Jesus established at the Last Supper in the Eucharist—a liturgical structure that God foreshadowed long before, going all the way back to what He revealed at Sinai in the time of Moses.

Test No. 2: The Golden Calf

The Israelites' newly affirmed faithfulness at Sinai is about to be tested by the absence of their anointed leader. At the end of the covenant meal, the glory-cloud manifesting God's presence descends on Mount Sinai and Moses enters its midst, where he remains for forty days and forty nights, unseen by the Israelites at the base of the mountain (Ex 24:18).

Once again, God wants to see what is in their hearts. How do the Israelites fare? "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, 'Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses...we do not know what has become of him'" (Ex 32:1). Alone in the desert wilderness and uncertain about what happened to Moses, the people give in to their fears and their hearts turn back toward Egypt as they fall into idolatry. Although they speak about dedicating a feast to the Lord (Ex 32:5), they idolatrously worship the image of a golden bull calf, reminiscent of the Egyptian god Apis (Ex 32:4). As was typical of many pagan rituals, Israel's worship

of the golden calf included debauchery, drunkenness, and sexual immorality, which is reflected by the Hebrew idiom, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (Ex 32:6).

If the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24 represents a high point in Israel's relationship with God, the events surrounding the golden calf apostasy mark one of the lowest. In the covenant ceremony, the leaders ate, drank, and beheld God (Ex 24:11). Now the people eat, drink, and engage in sexual play as they worship the golden idol. So devastating was this sin for Israel that one could call it a "second fall," marking a fundamental break in Israel's relationship with God. What Adam did in the garden as an individual rebelling against God, Israel did as a nation at Sinai.

And at least in some respects, the sin at Sinai appears graver. The people fall into idolatry *after* they have witnessed God's great love for them, liberating them from slavery with many miracles in Egypt and drawing them into intimate covenant union with Him on Sinai. Moreover, the people just accepted the First Commandment about not having other gods before Yahweh, solemnly promising to keep it (Ex 24:7). To turn to idolatry after all this is a complete rejection of the God who so lovingly rescued them and the God to whom they just vowed their loyalty.

'Your People'

The radical rupture in Israel's relationship with Yahweh is reflected in God's words to Moses on top of Sinai, informing him of the idolatry at the base of the mountain:

Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned

aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Ex 32:7-8)

Notice how God seems to disown the people, no longer speaking of Israel as His own but as the people whom Moses brought out of Egypt ("*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land"). Yet God's words merely reflect Israel's tragic choice that day: God offered the people covenant friendship, but they reject Him and instead worship the golden calf. In doing so, they put themselves outside of the covenant union God extended to them. God's language, therefore, simply reflects Israel's decision not to live in covenant with Yahweh.

The devastating impact on Israel's relationship with the Lord is also seen when God refers to the how the people "have corrupted themselves" (Ex 32:7). The Hebrew word here for "corrupted" is used in the Bible to describe a defective animal that is disqualified for sacrifice (Lv 22:25). It is also used to describe a fault that makes a man unfit for priestly service (Lv 19:7). Thus, although Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:5-6), its people are now, after the golden calf apostasy, likened to a blemished animal and a disqualified priest who is unable to draw near to God's presence in the sanctuary. This is a sad time in Israel's history, but it isn't the end of their story. We'll see in the next chapter how God continues to lead his people.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Exodus 24:1-11, Exodus 32:1-9

Please read aloud: The road from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land was a bumpy one for Israel, filled with examples of heroic virtue but also fraught with many failures and lack of trust in God's love. We will walk this challenging road with Israel, focusing on four key moments in the journey. In this chapter, we will look 2 of those moments: the covenant ceremony at Mount Sinai (Ex 24) and the people's idolatry in worshiping a golden calf (Ex 32).

Read Exodus 24:1-11

Please read aloud: Let's take a closer look at the structure of this covenant ceremony at Sinai, where we will discover that each of the ritual words and actions are rich in meaning. They shed light on the kind of relationship God wants with Israel and even tell us about the kind of relationship God wants to have with us today.

Moses leads the people in a sacrificial rite that has three parts: the offering of animals, a blood ritual, and a communion meal. Each part is packed with symbolic significance.

First, the sacrifice: As we saw in the last chapter, God required Israel to go into the wilderness to sacrifice animals that were associated with

Egyptian deities (see Ex 8:25-27). Now that they have escaped Egypt, the Israelites have arrived at this mountain in the desert to perform the sacrificial ritual.

1. Thinking back to the last chapter, what is the significance of sacrificing these animals? What are the people of Israel professing by making these sacrifices?

Answer: While animal sacrifice has many levels of significance in the Old Testament, here it symbolizes a rejection of those Egyptian deities represented by those animals and a renewal of Israel's loyalty to Yahweh as the one, true God. Thus, in a sense, this particular sacrifice at Sinai could be seen as a ritual enactment of the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God....You shall not have any other strange gods before me" (Ex 20:2-3).

Please read aloud: Next, Moses performs a ritual in which he gathers the blood from the animals into basins and sprinkles half of it on the altar as an offering to God and throws the rest of it on the people.

2. What might be the significance of this strange ritual?

Answer: For the ancient Israelites, blood symbolized life, and similar to sharing a meal, the sharing of blood symbolized the sharing of life and covenant union. With half the blood being offered to God on the altar and half the blood being poured on the people, this act would symbolize a new shared life between Israel and the Lord. Now, one of the main goals of the exodus is achieved: The people of Israel have formally become one in covenant with the Almighty God.

Please read aloud: Finally, the consummation of this ceremony at Sinai is a communion meal symbolically shared between the leaders of Israel and Yahweh Himself. "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the leaders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel.... They beheld God, and ate and drank" (Ex 24:9, 11).

For many Christian readers in the twenty-first century, this ritual meal may not mean much. For the ancient Israelites, however, sharing a meal had powerful symbolic connotations, expressing covenant unity and a shared life. For them, to share a meal meant that all at the table were like family. In fact, meals were so important that two enemies making a peace treaty could solidify their new covenant relationship by eating a meal together. The former enemies would leave the table as covenant partners, even using the language of family to describe their new committed friendship. Even adversaries become brothers through covenant meals (see Gn 18:26-33).

3. In light of this background, what does this tell us about Israel sharing a meal with God? What does this mean?

Answer: When we read about the Israelite leaders having a meal in God's presence, we should see this as a pivotal moment in Israel's relationship with the Lord. This ritual meal symbolizes the intimate covenant relationship God is now forging with His people. Because sharing a meal signifies covenant union, the fact that the Israelite leaders eat this covenant meal in God's presence symbolizes the profound relationship God forges with His people. Through this ritual, they have become sealed as God's covenant family.

Please read aloud: This ritual at Sinai is not only important for understanding a foundational moment in Israel's relationship with God; it also tells us a lot about how we Christians are to worship the Lord today, for the specifics of this ritual at Mount Sinai reflect a divine pattern for worship. Already in the time of Moses, God establishes the basic structure for worship that He desires to be used for the rest of time. Note how, at Sinai, there is found a Liturgy of the Word and a Liturgy of Sacrifice. Moses first proclaims the Word of God and then leads the people in sacrifice, a blood ritual, and a communion meal.

4. Where do you see this same structure of worship today? How does it fit with what Catholics do at Mass?

Answer: The Mass we celebrate today starts with the Liturgy of the Word and ends with a Eucharistic liturgy of sacrifice, in which Christ's sacrifice on the cross is made present (see Catechism, nos. 1362-67). We share Christ's blood and partake of His crucified and resurrected body in a communion meal. Therefore, when Catholics worship God in the Mass, they are not following the practices invented merely by some human pastor, minister, or theologian; they are participating in the divine order of worship that Jesus established at the Last Supper in the Eucharist—a liturgical structure that God foreshadowed long before, going all the way back to what He revealed at Sinai in the time of Moses.

Please read aloud: The Israelites' newly affirmed faithfulness at Sinai is about to be tested by the absence of their anointed leader. At the end of the covenant meal, the glory-cloud manifesting God's presence descends on Mount Sinai and Moses enters its midst, where he remains for forty days and forty nights, unseen by the Israelites at the base of the mountain (Ex 24:18).

Once again, God wants to see what is in their hearts. Let's see how the Israelites fare:

Read Exodus 32:1-9

5. What do the people do in this passage? Why is this so serious?

Answer: Alone in the desert wilderness and uncertain about what happened to Moses, the people give in to their fears and their hearts turn back toward Egypt as they fall into idolatry. Although they speak about dedicating a feast to the Lord (Ex 32:5), they idolatrously worship the image of a golden bull calf, reminiscent of the Egyptian

god Apis (Ex 32:4). As was typical of many pagan rituals, Israel's worship of the golden calf included debauchery, drunkenness, and sexual immorality, which is reflected by the Hebrew idiom, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (Ex 32:6).

Please read aloud: If the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24 represents a high point in Israel's relationship with God, the events surrounding the golden calf apostasy mark one of the lowest. In the covenant ceremony, the leaders ate, drank, and beheld God (Ex 24:11). Now the people eat, drink, and engage in sexual play as they worship the golden idol. So devastating was this sin for Israel that one could call it a "second fall," marking a fundamental break in Israel's relationship with God. What Adam did in the garden as an individual rebelling against God, Israel did as a nation at Sinai.

6. At least in some respects, the sin at Sinai even appears graver than Adam's sin. Why might this be?

Answer: The people fall into idolatry after they have witnessed God's great love for them, liberating them from slavery with many miracles in Egypt and drawing them into intimate covenant union with Him on Sinai. Moreover, the people just accepted the First Commandment about not having other gods before Yahweh, solemnly promising to keep it (Ex 24:7). To turn to idolatry after all this is a complete rejection of the God who so lovingly rescued them and the God to whom they just vowed their loyalty.

Please read aloud: The radical rupture in Israel's relationship with Yahweh is reflected in God's words to Moses on top of Sinai, informing him of the idolatry at the base of the mountain:

Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned

aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Ex 32:7-8)

7. Did you notice how God refers to the people in this passage? What does this slight change tell us about Israel's relationship with God?

Answer: Notice how God seems to disown the people, no longer speaking of Israel as His own but as the people whom Moses brought out of Egypt ("your people, whom you brought up out of the land"). Yet God's words merely reflect Israel's tragic choice that day: God offered the people covenant friendship, but they reject Him and instead worship the golden calf. In doing so, they put themselves outside of the covenant union God extended to them. God's language, therefore, simply reflects Israel's decision not to live in covenant with Yahweh.

8. Have you ever experienced feeling separated from God? Or have you observed how your sins lead you away from him? Explain your experience.

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

9. Like the Israelites, sometimes we too might have moments of deep closeness to God. At other times, we might turn away from him. How is God calling us to respond in each of these situations?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



Chapter IX

Entering the Promised Land

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Page 172 - 181

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 182 - 190

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

After a year's stay at Mount Sinai following the golden calf idolatry, the Israelites finally depart and head to the Promised Land (Nm 10:11). They are on the verge of receiving this great blessing God has promised the people ever since the time of Abraham. Indeed, God is prepared to give them the Land right now—but, as we will soon discover, when Israel faces its next test in the desert, their hearts are still not ready to receive this great gift.

Let's turn to Numbers 13-14 to see what prevents the Israelites from entering the Promised Land at this time.

Test No. 3: Afraid to Enter the Land

Now, a third testing of Israel takes place as the people come to the edge of the Promised Land. The Lord tells Moses to select one man from each of the twelve tribes to scout out the land of Canaan. They return bearing a mixed report. On one hand, the land is good, flowing with milk and honey. On the other hand, they report that the people in the land are remarkably strong and live in fortified cities. Ten of the spies view the strength of these inhabitants as an insurmountable obstacle: "We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we" (Nm 13:31). Hearing this evil report, the congregation of Israel cries out against Moses and Aaron,

saying, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the Lord bring us into this land, to fall by the sword?" (Nm 14:2-3).

Outraged at the people's lack of trust in God to protect them, two of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb, stand up and tear their clothes, pleading with the people not to rebel against the Lord: "Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them" (Nm 14:9).

But this only enrages the people all the more. They are so terrified about facing the powerful Canaanite armies that they were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb for their insistence that they follow God into this dangerous (though divinely promised) land. At just this moment, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people of Israel, rescuing Joshua and Caleb from the rebellious mob.

In a severe example of His justice, God grants the people what they desire. They say they don't want to enter the land; therefore, God won't give it to them. Only Joshua and Caleb—the two faithful spies who defended Yahweh and trusted in His plan—will be permitted to receive God's promise (Nm 14:30). The rest of this unfaithful generation of Israelites will be disinherited from the land and will have to wander in the desert for forty years until they die: "Your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness; and of all your number, numbered from twenty years old and upward, who have murmured against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell" (Nm 14:29-30). Why forty years in the desert? God explains, "According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years" (Nm 14:34).

Like Fathers, Like Sons

Israel's travel plans have taken an unexpected detour. An entire generation of the people is condemned to wander forty years in the desert and never enter the Promised Land. But at the end of this period, there is hope. The older generation has passed and their children have now come of age. This new group of Israelites approach the edge of the Promised Land that their parents rejected and are given the opportunity to start anew with the Lord.

Hopes for renewed faithfulness are quickly dashed when the Israelites develop an association with the pagan women in the land which will lead to their downfall. Numbers 25 tells us that the Israelites “began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab” and began worshipping one of their gods, Baal of Peor (Nm 25:2-3). This idolatry represents another dramatic break in Israel's relationship with God—one that will be felt down through the generations.

God's response to this new generation's idolatry will be to issue a new disciplinary law that comes to be known as Deuteronomy, which literally means “second law.” It is a “book of the boundary” that is first understood geographically (it is at the border of the promised land) but also *morally* since the people of Israel stand at a critical turning point in their relationship with God (see sidebar).

SIDEBAR - THE SECOND LAW: A BOOK ON THE BOUNDARY

Biblical scholar Christopher Wright describes Deuteronomy as “a book on the boundary.” This certainly can be understood *geographically*, since Deuteronomy was given at a place called Beth Peor (Dt 3:29), which was only a day's journey to the Promised Land. But this

description also makes sense *morally*, since the people of Israel stand at a critical turning point in their relationship with God. They are about to enter the Promised Land, whose inhabitants have built an alluring pagan, immoral culture. Though initially hostile to Israel, these Canaanite societies have many enticing elements that could lead God's people astray, as was made evident by the seductive power of the Moabite women to lead the people quickly into worshipping Baal of Peor. If such apostasy occurred when the Israelites dwelt on the outskirts of these pagan cultures, what will happen when they enter the heart of this new land?

Deuteronomy is a law that prepares the people for life in this pagan, polytheistic society. This law is, first of all, uncompromisingly monotheistic. Take, for example, the monotheistic “creed” which the Israelites are to recite throughout their daily lives. Every morning and evening, and whenever they go out in the streets or sit in their homes, they are to have on their lips these solemn words professing their total allegiance to the one Lord:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Dt 6:4-9)

Subverting the pagan religions in the land, Deuteronomy does not simply emphasize the existence of one God but unabashedly proclaims that the one true God is Yahweh—not any of the pagan deities, but the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt, entered into a special covenant relationship with them, and brought them to the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy also calls for unconditional loyalty to Yahweh in the way the people live. Faithfulness to God is more than just an intellectual

conviction (that there is only one God, Yahweh); it is also a matter of the heart. The people are called to live lives that are markedly different from the pagans in the land. In Deuteronomy, perhaps more than anywhere else in the Bible, Moses emphasizes the vital necessity of steadfastly following God's commandments. Since he knows the people will face pressures to conform to the enticing pagan lifestyles around them—immoral ways of living that promise a false and fleeting happiness—Moses stresses that obedience to God's law is the only pathway to the abundant life and the true, lasting happiness that God wants to give the people: "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God...by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments....then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it" (Dt 30:16). But if the people's hearts turn away from God and turn toward the pagan ways of life, they will experience the emptiness of life outside the blessing—what the Bible calls the curse.

The Two Ways

In Deuteronomy 28, Moses presents to Israel what is known as "the two ways." He challenges the people to choose between two paths: the way of life and the way of death. On one hand, if the people keep God's law, they will be blessed in the Promised Land (Dt 28:1-14). Israel will be "set high above all the nations of the earth" (Dt 28:1) and the Promised Land will be for them like a return to paradise, a new Eden. They are told that they will be blessed and fruitful with children, as Adam and Eve were told in Eden (Dt 28:4, Gn 1:26-28). The ground shall be blessed again, as well as all the work of their hands in the field (Dt 28:4, 12)—blessings that are the reversals of the curses on the ground and on man's labors after the fall (Gn 3:17-19).

But, on the other hand, if the people fail to keep the law, they will place themselves outside these wonderful blessings that God wants to give them. Instead, they will put themselves under curses, the culmination of which will be Israel's being driven from the land in exile (Dt 28:15-68). Just as Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden when they sinned, so will the Israelites be driven from the Promised Land if they break the covenant with God.

This is the choice Moses offers the people: the way of covenant faithfulness to God that leads to blessedness, and the way of infidelity that leads to death. He pleads with the people to make the right choice: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days" (Dt 30:19-20).

This challenge of the two ways applies to us, too, for we are faced with a similar choice: Every day we make decisions that lead us down the path either to the abundant life and true happiness that comes from walking in God's ways, or to the insecurity, emptiness, frustration, and disappointment that comes from not making God our priority. Right now, if you had to evaluate your own life, on which path would you say you are traveling?

Not If, But When...

Back to Israel: Which path will God's people take? Moses makes Israel's future clear: "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among the nations where the Lord your God has driven you..." (Dt 30:1). These are ominous words. Notice how Moses does not say "if

all these things come upon you”, but “*when*.” In other words, Moses knows Israel is going to be unfaithful to the covenant. He foretells that Israel will experience some of the blessings in the land, but, in the end, the people will break the covenant and the curses will fall upon them. They will lose the land and be scattered among the nations in exile.

These curses will bring God’s people face to face with their own brokenness, humbly standing before the Lord and crying out for mercy. One theological reflection we could draw out of the Book of Deuteronomy is how the law helps the people recognize their weakness and beg for God’s help and mercy. The Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai, but the Israelites’ forty years in the desert have made it evident that they do not yet have the heart to keep God’s commands. As the next several books of the Bible will reveal, their future life in the Promised Land will make their weakness all the more evident. God’s people might possess the law—so they *know* what is good—but they do not seem to have the ability to keep it.

This points to one important purpose of the law: It reveals both the good that we should do and our utter inability to live it out. The Lord’s commandments, therefore, make it abundantly clear how much we need God’s grace to fulfill the law, and it humbles us so that we are more inclined to call out to the Lord for help. As St. Augustine explained in *The Spirit and the Letter*, “The law was given so that grace might be sought; grace was given so that the law might be fulfilled.”

Circumcision of Heart

This healing power of grace is foreshadowed in the same passage of Deuteronomy that offers a bleak forecast about Israel’s future in exile. In this condition of exiled suffering, the Israelites will turn their

hearts to God and God will rescue them, bringing them back to the land:

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you this day, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples.”
(Dt 30:1-3)

Furthermore, Moses foretells how God will accomplish an even *greater* act of salvation for the Israelites than rescuing them from their enemies. God will perform a profound work in their own hearts, empowering them to finally fulfill the law.

“And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.... And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all his commandments.” (Dt. 30:6, 8)

In these verses, we encounter one of the most important prophecies in the Bible so far about the kind of salvation that God wants to work in our lives. God doesn’t want merely obedient servants who follow His commandments. Ultimately, He wants sons and daughters who love Him. He doesn’t just want external obedience—simply doing what is right; like a lover, he wants our hearts. The people of Israel have demonstrated that their hearts are weak, selfish, fearful, and incapable of remaining faithful to the Lord. This is not a problem

specific to Israel; not one of us, by our own power, is capable of loving God the way we ought. But Moses announces that God will heal their wounded hearts and give His people the ability to do what they could not do on their own. This transformation of their hearts will cause them to walk in God's ways, so much so that Moses can finally say to them, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart."

This is the ultimate goal for God's dealings with Israel throughout the Exodus story. God wants to free His people not only from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin. He wants to take them through "an internal exodus" in which their hearts are healed and they are transformed by His love. All this, of course, foreshadows the work that Jesus Christ will accomplish through His death, resurrection, and sending "the Spirit into our hearts," so that, "led by the Spirit," we can finally live as sons and daughters of God, faithfully loving and serving Him as our heavenly Father (Rom 8:13-15, Gal 4:6).

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Numbers 13:25-33; 14:5-10; Deuteronomy 6:4-10; 28:1-11, 15-20; 30:1-8

Please read aloud: So close...and yet so far! After a year's stay at Mount Sinai following the golden calf idolatry, the Israelites finally depart and head to the Promised Land (Nm 10:11). They are on the verge of receiving this great blessing God has promised the people ever since the time of Abraham. Indeed, God is prepared to give them the Land right now—but, as we will soon discover, when Israel faces its next test in the desert, their hearts are still not ready to receive this great gift.

Let's turn to Numbers 13-14 to see what prevents the Israelites from entering the Promised Land at this time. Before we read the passage, a little bit of background. Moses is sending 12 spies to scope out the land. Were there other people there? Was the land good? Were the cities walled? Was the land fertile (Nm 13:17-20)? Let's read about their report:

Read Numbers 13:25-33.

1. What is the report of the twelve spies about the land? What do they find there?

Answer: They return bearing a mixed report. On one hand, the land is good, flowing with milk and honey. On the other hand, they report that the people in the land are remarkably strong and live in fortified cities. Ten of the spies view the strength of these inhabitants as an insurmountable obstacle: "We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we" (Nm 13:31).

Please read aloud: Hearing this report, the congregation of Israel cries out against Moses and Aaron, saying, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the Lord bring us into this land, to fall by the sword?" (Nm 14:2-3). But two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, have a different perspective.

Read Numbers 14:5-10.

2. What do Joshua and Caleb propose for the people of Israel? Why do they suggest this? Why do they think differently than the others?

Answer: Outraged at the people's lack of trust in God to protect them Joshua and Caleb stand up and tear their clothes, pleading with the people to enter the land and not to rebel against the Lord: "Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them" (Nm 14:9). Joshua and Caleb trust in the Lord's promise, even though the situation appears difficult.

3. How do the people respond to Joshua and Caleb?

Answer: This only enrages the people all the more. They are so terrified about facing the powerful Canaanite armies that they were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb for their insistence that they follow God into this dangerous (though divinely promised) land.

Please read aloud: At just this moment, the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people of Israel, rescuing Joshua and Caleb from the rebellious mob. In a severe example of His justice, God grants the people what they desire. They say they don't want to enter the land; therefore, God won't give it to them. Only Joshua and Caleb—the two faithful spies who defended Yahweh and trusted in His plan—will be permitted to receive God's promise (Nm 14:30).

4. Like the Israelites, have you ever struggled to trust in God's promises? Like Caleb and Joshua have you ever boldly believed? What does this story teach us about trusting God, even when things are difficult or other people are unfaithful?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: At the end of forty years, the older generation has passed and their children have now come of age. This new group of Israelites approach the edge of the Promised Land that their parents rejected and are given the opportunity to start anew with the Lord. Hopes for renewed faithfulness, however, are quickly dashed. Numbers 25 tells us that the Israelites “began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab” and began worshipping one of their gods, Baal of Peor, on the outskirts of the promised land (Nm 25:2-3).

5. If such apostasy occurred when the Israelites dwelt on the outskirts of these pagan cultures, what is likely to happen when they enter the heart of this new land? Knowing that the people are likely to be unfaithful, if you were God, what do you think you might do to try and help the people be faithful?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: God's response to this new generation's idolatry is to issue a new disciplinary law that comes to be known as Deuteronomy, which literally means “second law.” Deuteronomy is a

law that prepares the people for life in this pagan, polytheistic society. Let's look at a few key passages:

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-10.

6. What is God asking of his people? Why is this so important for the Israelites?

Answer: This law is, first of all, uncompromisingly monotheistic. Subverting the pagan religions in the land, Deuteronomy does not simply emphasize the existence of one God but unabashedly proclaims that the one true God is Yahweh—not any of the pagan deities.

7. Deuteronomy calls for unconditional loyalty to Yahweh in the way the people live. Yet, even though the book is called “Deuteronomy” or “second law,” how does this passage (Deut 6:4-10) show us that God is asking for more than just “following the rules?”

Answer: Faithfulness to God is more than just an intellectual conviction (that there is only one God, Yahweh); it is also a matter of the heart.

Please read aloud: In Deuteronomy, the people are called to live lives that are markedly different from the pagans in the land. Perhaps more than anywhere else in the Bible, Moses emphasizes the vital necessity of steadfastly following God's commandments. Since he knows the people will face pressures to conform to the enticing pagan lifestyles around them—immoral ways of living that promise a false and fleeting happiness—Moses stresses that obedience to God's law is the only pathway to the abundant life and the true, lasting happiness that God wants to give the people. But if the people's hearts turn away from God and turn toward the pagan ways of life, they will experience the emptiness of life outside the blessing—what the Bible calls the curse.

This is what has become known as “the two ways.” Let’s read an example of each:

Read Deuteronomy 28:1-11.

Read Deuteronomy 28:15-20.

8. How would you describe these two ways? What happens if the people are faithful? What will happen if they are unfaithful?

Answer: On one hand, if the people keep God’s law, they will be blessed in the Promised Land (Dt 28:1-14). On the other hand, if the people fail to keep the law, they will place themselves outside these wonderful blessings that God wants to give them. Instead, they will put themselves under curses (Dt 28:15-68).

Please read aloud: This is the choice Moses offers the people: the way of covenant faithfulness to God that leads to blessedness, and the way of infidelity that leads to death. He pleads with the people to make the right choice: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days” (Dt 30:19-20).

9. How does God offer us a similar choice between these two ways? How are we invited to choose “life” and “blessing” as the Israelites were?

Allow the group to discuss. Every day we make decisions that lead us down the path either to the abundant life and true happiness that comes from walking in God’s ways, or to the insecurity, emptiness, frustration, and disappointment that comes from not making God our priority.

10. Right now, if you had to evaluate your own life, on which path would you say you are traveling? In what ways are you on one path and what ways are you on the other?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Back to Israel: Let’s see which path it will take.

Read Deuteronomy 30:1.

11. What does this passage tell us about Israel’s future?

Answer: Moses makes Israel’s future clear. Notice how Moses does not say “if all these things come upon you”, but “when.” In other words, Moses knows Israel is going to be unfaithful to the covenant. He foretells that Israel will experience some of the blessings in the land, but, in the end, the people will break the covenant and the curses will fall upon them. They will lose the land and be scattered among the nations in exile.

Please read aloud: The curses will bring God’s people face to face with their own brokenness, humbly standing before the Lord and crying out for mercy. One theological reflection we could draw out of the Book of Deuteronomy is how the law helps the people recognize their weakness and beg for God’s help and mercy. The Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai, but the Israelites’ forty years in the desert have made it evident that they do not yet have the heart to keep God’s commands. As the next several books of the Bible will reveal, their future life in the Promised Land will make their weakness all the more evident. God’s people might possess the law—so they *know* what is good—but they do not seem to have the ability to keep it.

12. Have you experienced this reality in your own life? How so?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: This struggle points to one important purpose of the law: It reveals both the good that we should do and our utter inability to live it out. The Lord's commandments, therefore, make it abundantly clear how much we need God's grace to fulfill the law, and it humbles us so that we are more inclined to call out to the Lord for help. As St. Augustine explained in *The Spirit and the Letter*, "The law was given so that grace might be sought; grace was given so that the law might be fulfilled."

This healing power of grace is foreshadowed in the same passage of Deuteronomy that offers a bleak forecast about Israel's future in exile. In this condition of exiled suffering, the Israelites will turn their hearts to God and God will rescue them, bringing them back to the land:

Read Deuteronomy 30:2-8.

13. What does God promise he will do in this passage? What does this tell us about God and what he wants from us?

Answer: Moses foretells how God will accomplish an even greater act of salvation for the Israelites than rescuing them from their enemies. God will perform a profound work in their own hearts, empowering them to finally fulfill the law. God doesn't want merely obedient servants who follow His commandments. Ultimately, He wants sons and daughters who love Him. He doesn't just want external obedience—simply doing what is right; like a lover, he wants our hearts.

Please read aloud: This is the ultimate goal for God's dealings with Israel throughout the Exodus story. God wants to free His people not only from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin. He wants to take them through "an internal exodus" in which their hearts are healed

and they are transformed by His love. All this, of course, foreshadows the work that Jesus Christ will accomplish through His death, resurrection, and sending "the Spirit into our hearts," so that, "led by the Spirit," we can finally live as sons and daughters of God, faithfully loving and serving Him as our heavenly Father (Rom 8:13-15, Gal 4:6).

14. After discussing God's dealings with Israel, what have you learned about what God wants to do with your own heart? How is God calling you to "love him with all your heart?"

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



Chapter X

A Land Without a Leader

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Page 192 - 199

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 200 - 208

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

After the death of Moses, we encounter two key figures in the next two books of the Bible who represent different kinds of leaders for Israel in the Promised Land—leaders who will either inspire the nation to godly living or drag the people down because of their own personal weaknesses.

At one end of the spectrum, Joshua stands out as the courageous leader who is committed to God's covenant, challenges the people spiritually, and encourages them to live a more godly life. On the other end of the spectrum, Samson is a failed leader who is a slave to his passions. Though endowed with unique gifts, he does not have the inner moral strength to use those gifts for good. Lacking self-control, Samson gives in to his anger, his stomach, and his sexual appetites, selfishly using his gifts to pursue pleasure for himself instead of carrying out his mission to help others and rescue the Israelites from their oppressors.

As salvation history moves forward to its next phase of life in the Promised Land, the stories of Joshua and Samson remind us that real strength lies not in muscles, wealth, sex, or power, but deep within the soul that remains faithful to God.

The Book of Joshua: Entering the Land

Let's begin by considering the exemplary leadership of Joshua. After Moses dies, the governance of Israel now passes on to this man, who had been Moses' faithful servant throughout the desert wanderings. God first assures Joshua of His presence with him. He calls him to be "strong and courageous" and careful to follow the law that Moses had given, as he is about to lead the people into the Promised Land (Jos 1: 5-9). Joshua was one of the few who had faith in God's promises when the Israelites rebelled out of fear that God would not protect them, after which they were forced to wander the desert for forty years until they perished. At last, Joshua stands at the Jordan River, ready to lead the people into that same land that their parents had rejected.

By means of a miracle reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea, Joshua parts the Jordan River and the Israelites pass over into the Promised Land on dry ground (Jos 4). Their first significant action is to head to the fortified city of Jericho, where God demonstrates how the Israelites will possess the land originally promised to their forefather Abraham: not by military might alone, but by divine intervention.

Some archeologists have noted that the walls of Jericho were wide enough to race chariots on top of them. Scripture itself notes that some people even had their homes built *inside* the walls (Jos 2:15). But this heavily fortified city ends up falling not through weapons but through worship, as the Levites guide the nation in a procession around Jericho, with the Ark of the Covenant leading the way. They do this for seven consecutive days, culminating with trumpet blasts and shouts from the people—and miraculously, the walls tumble down *without the use of a single weapon*. The message of this first victory in the Promised Land is clear: Israel will come to possess the land not through its own machinations or military might but through the intervention and protection of the Lord.

Covenant Renewal at Shechem

The rest of the book of Joshua chronicles the initial settling of the Promised Land until, at the end of his life, Joshua gathers the people one last time at Shechem. This place is significant, for it was the first place in the land of Canaan where Abraham had built an altar to worship God, marking out the land God gave to him and his descendants (Gn 12:6). Now, centuries later, Joshua gathers the people together and calls them to worship the one, true God, just as their father Abraham had done at this same sacred place.

However, there is one problem Joshua needs to address first: Idolatry is still plaguing the people. This new generation of Israelites has fallen into the same sin as the generation before, bringing a part of Egypt, its idolatry, into the Promised Land. Joshua confronts the people and calls them to renounce their idolatry once and for all, saying, “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the Lord” (Jos 24:14).

Joshua stands here as a new Moses. Just as Moses, near the end of his life, challenged the people to choose between the way of obedience that leads to life and the way of covenant infidelity that leads to death, so too does Joshua, near the end of his days, force the people to make a choice between the pagan gods and Yahweh. He says to them, “Choose this day whom you will serve,” and he leads the people with his own pledge of fidelity: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Jos 24:15).

Joshua’s challenge was effective: The Scriptures tell us, “And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work which the Lord did for Israel” (Jos 24:31).

The Book of Judges: The Downward Spiral

The Book of Judges, however, opens up with a dramatic shift in Israel’s history. For two generations, the people have flourished under the godly leadership of Moses and Joshua—true spiritual leaders, calling the people to faithfulness. But after Joshua’s death, Israel languishes without strong leaders who challenge them to walk in the Lord’s ways. Judges 2 announces the harmful results of this leadership vacuum: “There arose another generation...who did not know the Lord” and began to “serve” other gods from the nations around them (Jgs 2:10-12).

To feel the full force of this statement, recall how the fundamental purpose of the exodus from Egypt was to liberate Israelites so that they could *know* the Lord—to live in covenant with Him—and to *serve* Him, which means to worship him (see Ex 4:22). The fact that this next generation no longer even *knows* the Lord and is *serving* other gods represents a reversal of the exodus. Although God has redeemed (literally, “*bought back*”) the Israelites from the Egyptians (Ex 6:6, 15:13), He now “*sold* them into the power of their enemies round about” (Jgs 2:14). This highlights the critical importance of handing on the faith. No matter how faithful one generation is, there will be a cultural crisis if the faith is not passed on to the next generation.

In Judges 2, we come face to face with the Israelites’ spiritual amnesia: they no longer even know the Lord. Furthermore, they have forgotten who they are and how they need to live as God’s chosen people.

This is the beginning of a catastrophic cycle that will enslave Israel for more than 300 years. Seven times in the Book of Judges, Israel falls into the following pattern of sin, slavery, supplication, and salvation:

- *Sin*: First, the people forget the Lord and fall into sin by serving foreign gods.
- *Slavery*: Second, their punishment is to be enslaved by foreign nations that oppress them.
- *Supplication*: In their distress, they cry out to God in supplication.
- *Salvation*: God sends them a judge to save them from their enemies—at least until they fall back into sin and repeat the cycle.

The fact that this cycle of sin repeats over and over again demonstrates that the judges whom God sends to rescue the people do not leave a lasting, beneficial spiritual impact. Some may successfully free the people from their enemies, but even they do not seem to challenge the people to turn away from their sins. Moreover, many judges are themselves corrupt, leading the people away from God's law.

Strength Is More than Physical

This fact is demonstrated most clearly in the life of the famous judge Samson. Samson embodies both the call and the weakness of God's people. He was endowed with extraordinary gifts of strength and a mission to liberate Israel from their current oppressors, the Philistines. Moreover, an angel revealed to his parents that he was to be consecrated to the Lord as a Nazarite. Nazarites were Israelite men and women who were set apart for special service to the Lord. They expressed their consecration by vowing to never consume alcohol, cut their hair, or come in close contact with a corpse (Jgs 13:4-5, Nm 6:1-8).

Though Samson was called to do great things for the Lord, he failed to carry out his mission. Instead of liberating Israel from the Philistines,

he fell into their pagan ways, marrying a pagan woman (Jgs 14:1-3), getting drunk (14:10), murdering in vengeance (Jgs 15:7-8), and taking a prostitute (Jgs 16:1). In the end, he died as one of their prisoners. Samson is a man who gives in to his passions for food, drink, and sex. Though physically strong, he was not strong in virtue. His moral weakness leads him to break his three Nazarite vows.

First, Samson sees a swarm of bees and honey inside the carcass of a lion. He was so desperate for the honey that he scrapes it out of the carcass with his hands and eats it—even though this violates his vow to avoid corpses (Jgs 14:8-9).

Second, the Bible tells us that Samson goes to the vineyards of Timnah and has a feast there, “for so the young men used to do” (Jgs 14:10). The word for feast (*mishteh*) implies a drinking bout. Samson thus violates his second vow of a Nazarite, that of abstaining from wine or strong drink.

Third, when the seductive Philistine woman Delilah pleads with him day after day to reveal the secret of his strength, Samson finally gives in and tells her, “A razor has never come upon my head for I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother’s womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man” (Jgs 16:18). With this knowledge, Delilah has Samson’s head shaved while he is sleeping, and his third vow is broken. The strength of the Lord immediately leaves him, and he is captured by the Philistines, who gouge out his eyes.

The very names of Samson and Delilah sum up the story of this tragic judge. The name Samson is connected with the Hebrew word *shemesh* (which means sun) and can be translated “sun child.”¹ Delilah’s name literally means “lady of the night.” Samson was called

¹ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 153.

to do great things for Israel and for the Lord—in a sense, to be a light for God’s people. But in the end, this “sun child” of Israel is eclipsed by a Philistine “lady of the night.”

The life of Samson embodies the history of Israel in the period of the judges. Israel was called uniquely among all the nations to serve the Lord in this Promised Land, but like Samson, the Israelites intermarry with the pagans and live more like the people around them than as sons and daughters set apart for the Lord. Enticed by the pagan ways of life around them, the Israelites break covenant with God and fall into greed, murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry, all culminating in a great civil war.

The result of this spiritual death spiral can be seen in the final verse of the Book of Judges: "In those days there was no king of Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Jgs 21:25). With no spiritual leader like Joshua to lead them and challenge them, the people fall deeper and deeper into the slavery of sin.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Joshua 1:1-9; 6:1-5, 15-20; 24:1-5; Judges 13:2-7; 14:5-9; 16:4-22

Please read aloud: After the death of Moses, we encounter two key figures in the next two books of the Bible who represent different kinds of leaders for Israel in the Promised Land—leaders who will either inspire the nation to godly living or drag the people down because of their own personal weaknesses. Let's begin by considering the exemplary leadership of Joshua.

Read Joshua 1:1-9.

1. What does God promise to Joshua in this passage, and what does he expect of Joshua and the people? Why might this be important at this stage in the story?

Answer: God first assures Joshua of His presence with him. He calls him to be "strong and courageous" and careful to follow the law that Moses had given. This is essential as he is about to lead the people into the Promised Land—especially after their failure to be courageous previously.

Please read aloud: After this, at last, Joshua stands at the Jordan River, ready to lead the people into that same land that their parents had

rejected. By means of a miracle reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea, Joshua parts the Jordan River and the Israelites pass over into the Promised Land on dry ground.

Their first significant action is to head to the fortified city of Jericho, where God demonstrates how the Israelites will possess the land originally promised to their forefather Abraham:

Read Joshua 6:1-5 and 6:15-20.

2. What causes the wall of Jericho to fall? What does this teach us about what God wants to do? How will Israel come to possess the land?

Answer: This heavily fortified city ends up falling not through weapons but through worship, as the Levites guide the nation in a procession around Jericho, with the Ark of the Covenant leading the way. They do this for seven consecutive days, culminating with trumpet blasts and shouts from the people—and miraculously, the walls tumble down without the use of a single weapon. The message of this first victory in the Promised Land is clear: Israel will come to possess the land not through its own machinations or military might but through the intervention and protection of the Lord.

Please read aloud: The rest of the book of Joshua chronicles the initial settling of the Promised Land until, at the end of his life, Joshua gathers the people one last time at Shechem. This place is significant, for it was the first place in the land of Canaan where Abraham had built an altar to worship God, marking out the land God gave to him and his descendants (Gn 12:6). Now, centuries later, Joshua gathers the people together and calls them to worship the one, true God, just as their father Abraham had done at this same sacred place.

Read Joshua 24:1-5

3. What does Joshua ask of the people? Specifically, what does he ask them to get rid of? What problem is still rampant in Israel? (Direct participants to v. 14, if necessary.)

Answer: He asks them to be faithful and cast out their idols. Idolatry is still plaguing the people. This new generation of Israelites has fallen into the same sin as the generation before, bringing a part of Egypt, its idolatry, into the Promised Land.

Please read aloud: Joshua stands here as a new Moses. Just as Moses, near the end of his life, challenged the people to choose between the way of obedience that leads to life and the way of covenant infidelity that leads to death, so too does Joshua, near the end of his days, force the people to make a choice between the pagan gods and Yahweh.

Moreover, Joshua's challenge was effective: The Scriptures tell us, "And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work which the Lord did for Israel" (Jos 24:31).

4. Joshua was effective in leading the people. What was it that made him a good leader? What were some of the keys to his leadership? And how might God be inviting you to be more like Joshua?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Now we move on to the book of Judges. For two generations, the people have flourished under the godly leadership of Moses and Joshua—true spiritual leaders, calling the people to faithfulness. But after Joshua's death, Israel languishes without strong leaders who challenge them to walk in the Lord's ways. Judges 2 announces the harmful results of this leadership vacuum: "There

arose another generation...who did not know the Lord" and began to "serve" other gods from the nations around them (Jgs 2:10-12).

5. Knowing what we've studied up to this point—God's work in the Exodus, Israel's wanderings in the desert, and Joshua's leadership of the people in the Promised Land—how significant are these words? What does this mean for Israel?

Answer: The fundamental purpose of the exodus from Egypt was to liberate Israelites so that they could know the Lord—to live in covenant with Him—and to serve Him, which means to worship him (see Ex 4:22). The fact that this next generation no longer even knows the Lord and is serving other gods represents a reversal of the exodus.

6. No matter how faithful one generation is, there will be a cultural crisis if the faith is not passed on to the next generation. In Judges 2, we come face to face with the Israelites' spiritual amnesia: they no longer even know the Lord. Furthermore, they have forgotten who they are and how they need to live as God's chosen people. What does this reality teach us about the importance handing on the faith? How have you experienced this in your own life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: This is the beginning of a catastrophic cycle that will enslave Israel for more than 300 years. Seven times in the Book of Judges, Israel falls into the following pattern of sin, slavery, supplication, and salvation:

- **Sin:** First, the people forget the Lord and fall into sin by serving foreign gods.
- **Slavery:** Second, their punishment is to be enslaved by foreign nations that oppress them.

- *Supplication:* In their distress, they cry out to God in supplication.
- *Salvation:* God sends them a judge to save them from their enemies—at least until they fall back into sin and repeat the cycle.

7. What does this repeated cycle tell us about Israel and its leadership during this time?

Answer: The fact that this cycle of sin repeats over and over again demonstrates that the judges whom God sends to rescue the people do not leave a lasting, beneficial spiritual impact. Some may successfully free the people from their enemies, but even they do not seem to challenge the people to turn away from their sins.

Please read aloud: Many judges were themselves corrupt, leading the people away from God's law. This fact is demonstrated most clearly in the life of the famous judge Samson. Samson embodies both the call and the weakness of God's people. He was endowed with extraordinary gifts of strength and a mission to liberate Israel from their current oppressors, the Philistines.

To understand Samson's story, we must first understand the special service he was supposed to offer to the Lord. To begin, let's read about how Samson's birth is foretold:

Read Judges 13:2-7.

8. What does God ask Samsons' parents to do? And what isn't Samson supposed to do, even after he is born?

Answer: God asks Samson's parents to consecrate him to the Lord. And, even after he is born, he isn't supposed to cut his hair as part of this consecration.

Please read aloud: The angel revealed to his parents that Samson was to be consecrated to the Lord as a Nazarite. Nazarites were Israelite men and women who were set apart for special service to the Lord. They expressed their consecration by vowing to never consume alcohol, cut their hair, or come in close contact with a corpse (See Nm 6:1-8).

Though Samson was called to do great things for the Lord, he failed to carry out his mission. Instead of liberating Israel from the Philistines, he fell into their pagan ways, marrying a pagan woman (Jgs 14:1-3), getting drunk (14:10), murdering in vengeance (Jgs 15:7-8), and taking a prostitute (Jgs 16:1). In the end, he died as one of their prisoners. Samson is a man who gives in to his passions for food, drink, and sex. Though physically strong, he was not strong in virtue. His moral weakness leads him to break all three of his Nazarite vows. Let's read about each:

Read Judges 14:5-9.

9. At first, this might seem like an unimportant story, but how does this act show a lack of character and infidelity on Samson's part?

Answer: Samson sees a swarm of bees and honey inside the carcass of a lion. He was so desperate for the honey that he scrapes it out of the carcass with his hands and eats it—even though this violates his vow to avoid corpses (Jgs 14:8-9).

Please read aloud: Secondly, the Bible tells us that Samson goes to the vineyards of Timnah and has a feast there, "for so the young men used to do" (Jgs 14:10). The word for feast (*mishteh*) implies a drinking bout. Samson thus violates his second vow of a Nazarite, that of abstaining from wine or strong drink.

Now, let's read about the breaking of the third vow:

Read Judges 16:4-22.

10. First, how does Samson violate his vow a third time?

Answer: When the seductive Philistine woman Delilah pleads with him day after day to reveal the secret of his strength, Samson finally gives in and tells her, "A razor has never come upon my head for I have been a Nazarite to God from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man" (Jgs 16:18). With this knowledge, Delilah has Samson's head shaved while he is sleeping, and his third vow is broken.

11. What happens to Samson because he has broken this final vow?

Answer: The strength of the Lord immediately leaves him, and he is captured by the Philistines, who gouge out his eyes.

Please read aloud: The very names of Samson and Delilah sum up the story of this tragic judge. The name Samson is connected with the Hebrew word *shemesh* (which means sun) and can be translated "sun child."¹ Delilah's name literally means "lady of the night." Samson was called to do great things for Israel and for the Lord—in a sense, to be a light for God's people. But in the end, this "sun child" of Israel is eclipsed by a Philistine "lady of the night."

12. How did Samson fail in leadership, and what can we learn from his (bad) example?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The life of Samson embodies the history of Israel in the period of the judges. Israel was called uniquely among all the

nations to serve the Lord in this Promised Land, but like Samson, the Israelites intermarry with the pagans and live more like the people around them than as sons and daughters set apart for the Lord. Enticed by the pagan ways of life around them, the Israelites break covenant with God and fall into greed, murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry, all culminating in a great civil war.

The result of this spiritual death spiral can be seen in the final verse of the Book of Judges: "In those days there was no king of Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Jgs 21:25). With no spiritual leader like Joshua to lead them and challenge them, the people fall deeper and deeper into the slavery of sin.

13. How does "everyone doing what is right in their own eyes" lead to problems? Where do you see this today? In opposition to simply "doing what is right in our own eyes," how are we called to live as Christians?

Allow the group to discuss.

¹ Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 153.

NOTES



Chapter XI

A King After God's Own Heart

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Page 210 - 217

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 218 - 224

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Book of 1 Samuel begins with Israel beaten down and exhausted by the sins and failures of its leaders. The people turn to the last of their judges, a man named Samuel, and ask him for a king. This, in itself, is a noble request: All the way back in Genesis, God had promised Abraham that kings would eventually come from his descendants. Unfortunately, the people don't ask for a king who would be a spiritual leader like Moses and Joshua; rather, they want a king "like all the nations" (1 Sm 8:5). God concedes and gives them the kind of king they desire: Saul.

From a worldly perspective, Saul is the ideal king. He is tall, handsome, wealthy, popular, and great on the battlefield—a natural leader. What Saul is not, however, is a man after the Lord's own heart. He is proud and vain, wanting to be liked more than to lead the people to what is best for them. He is the kind of leader who is always worried about public opinion and what others think of him. Despite his significant military achievements, he is incapable of securing the Promised Land for Israel. In the end, he disobeys one of God's commands because he feared that, if he followed it, the people would think less of him (1 Sm 13:8-12, 15:24). God announces that he will take away Saul's kingship, because he put his desire to be accepted by others over obedience to God's law (1 Sm 13:13-14, 15:26-28).

Passing over Saul, the Lord has Samuel anoint a new king who will be a man after the Lord's own heart (1 Sm 13:14). His name is David, and he is nothing like his predecessor. He is a mere youth, too young to be a soldier. His only experience has been shepherding sheep while his brothers were off at war. Yet this is the man the Lord commands Samuel to anoint, telling him, "The Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sm 16:7).

In reality, David was much more than a shepherd boy. The Scriptures tell us that, despite his diminutive size, he has a warrior's heart. While he was alone tending sheep, he defended his flock by killing lions and bears that tried to attack them (see 1 Sm 17:36). His faithfulness eventually leads David to the battlefield when he brings food and supplies to his brothers, who are supposed to be fighting for Israel on the front lines against the Philistines. What he finds there, however, surprises him: The Israelites are in a standoff with their enemies, with the champion of the Philistines, Goliath, having challenged any Israelite to engage him in battle.

What most surprises David is that, for forty days, no Israelite stepped forward. Seeing this as a clear battle between God's people and the pagans, David asks, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Sm 17:26). David confidently trusts that the Lord will defeat the enemy and does what no other man in Israel's camp was willing to do: He goes out to meet Goliath. With a bold faith reminiscent of Joshua, David says, "You come to me with sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (1 Sm 17:45).

Before he launches his famous sling shot, David says: “This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...that all the earth may *know* that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may *know* that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand” (1 Sm 17:47; emphasis added).

Remember that *knowing* the Lord was a key goal of the Exodus story, and that ever since the period of the judges Israel had failed to keep covenant with God. Now, with David, Israel finally has an emerging spiritual leader who challenges the people to *know* the Lord once again.

2 Samuel: Israel Becomes a Great Dynasty

Eventually, King Saul dies in battle, and all the tribes of Israel gather around David to enter covenant with him as their new king (2 Sm 5:1-4). David's first move as king is to capture the city of Jerusalem, an event that sets the stage for a pivotal moment in David's life and in Israel's history. With this last Canaanite stronghold in the Promised Land finally defeated, the Israelites can rest from their enemies about them (2 Sm 7:1). The people can now live secure in the land that was promised to Abraham back in Genesis 12—the land to which Israel was led by Moses and Joshua, and which it now finally possesses in tranquility with David.

This sparks David to do something he had never done before. David had won many military victories in his lifetime, but he had never called for the Ark of the Covenant to be transferred to those places. Yet in 2 Samuel 6, David sends for the Ark to be permanently stationed in Jerusalem, which will soon become the home of a central sanctuary for God's people.

Why does he do this? David is a faithful Israelite, and the narrative of salvation history has never been far from his mind. He recognizes in these dramatic events the fulfillment of God's promises. He knows that, when the Israelites find rest, they are to establish a central sanctuary in the land (Dt 12:9-11). With Israel finally secure, it is time to build a house for the Lord—in other words, a temple for the Ark.

But God has other plans: The Lord wants to build *David* a house. The prophet Nathan announces to David: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Would you build me a house to dwell in?... Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house’” (2 Sm 7:5, 11).

The Hebrew word for house (*bayit*) here has three meanings. It can refer to: (1) a son or an heir; (2) a kingdom or dynasty; (3) or an actual building, a home.¹ God seems to have in mind all three levels of meaning, as He goes on to tell David, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (2 Sm 7:12-13). Notice how all three meanings of *bayit* come into play here. God speaks of an actual “offspring,” a son that will come to David, and this son will be given a dynasty—a “kingdom” and a “throne” forever. Finally, this son will build an actual building, a “house” for God's name—in other words, a temple.

Here, David is given much more than a kingdom, like Saul; he is promised an everlasting dynasty, where his descendants will rule forever.

For centuries, Israel had been longing for the second great promise God made to Abraham—a great name or a dynastic line of kings (Gn 12:2; 17:6,16)—to be fulfilled. When David hears that God is going to

¹ Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995), 320.

make for *him* a great name (2 Sm 7:9) and give *him* a never-ending kingdom, he realizes that this second promise is being fulfilled in *him*! Overwhelmed with emotion, David thus exclaims: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?" (2 Sm 7:18). In awe, David realizes that the great dynasty God promised more than one thousand years ago is being given to his own household!

At this moment, David stands at a crucial turning point in the history of the world. As king of this new dynasty, David realizes that Israel is positioned to move toward the fulfillment of her ultimate calling: to be a source of blessing for every family on earth—the third and final promise given to Abraham. This sheds light on an intriguing statement David then makes to God: "Thou hast shown me law for humanity"² (2 Sm 7:19).

The significance of this statement is often missed due to awkward translations. The Hebrew text of this verse (*wasoth torath ha'adam*) employs words that recall the Hebrew word for *torah*, the covenant law and the Hebrew word for humanity or "adam." Hence, David seems to understand that law for humanity is being entrusted to him." Yet some might wonder why David would say he was given law *for all humankind*. David is just the king over Israel, not the ruler over the human race. He may possess law for Israel, but why would he say that God has shown him the law for the whole human family?

The answer has to do with Israel's mission. With the land and kingdom firmly in place, Israel is finally poised to become the great kingdom of priests for the whole world that it was always meant to be (see Ex 19:6). As the shepherd of the dynasty that is meant to bring the truth

about God to the nations, David realizes that the law entrusted to him is meant not just for Israel; it is meant to be shared with the rest of the world. Hence, he can make a statement no one else in the Bible had ever said before: He proclaims that God has shown him law for all mankind.

² See the translation and explanation in Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995), 322, 346-7. See also Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, 213.

NOTES

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

1 Samuel 17:1-51, 2 Samuel 7:1-29,

Please read aloud: This week, we move ahead in salvation history to the book of 1 Samuel, which begins with Israel beaten down and exhausted by the sins and failures of its leaders. The people turn to the last of their judges, a man named Samuel, and ask him for a king. God concedes and gives them the kind of king they desire: Saul.

From a worldly perspective, Saul is the ideal king. He is tall, handsome, wealthy, popular, and great on the battlefield—a natural leader. What Saul is not, however, is a man after the Lord's own heart. He is proud and vain, wanting to be liked more than to lead the people to what is best for them. Saul is unfaithful and God announces that he will take away Saul's kingship, because he put his desire to be accepted by others over obedience to God's law (1 Sm 13:13-14, 15:26-28).

Passing over Saul, the Lord has Samuel anoint a new king who will be a man after the Lord's own heart (1 Sm 13:14). His name is David, and he is nothing like his predecessor. He is a mere youth, too young to be a soldier. His only experience has been shepherding sheep while his brothers were off at war. Yet this is the man the Lord commands Samuel to anoint, telling him, "The Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sm 16:7). Let's read about David:

Note to the Leader: You may read all of 1 Samuel 17, or you may read the selections below.

Read 1 Samuel 17:4-11

Read 1 Samuel 17:21-26

Read 1 Samuel 17:41-51

1. First, what is David surprised about? What is different about David than the other men Israel?

Answer: What most surprises David is that, for forty days, no Israelite stepped forward. Seeing this as a clear battle between God's people and the pagans, David asks, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Sm 17:26). David confidently trusts that the Lord will defeat the enemy and does what no other man in Israel's camp was willing to do: He goes out to meet Goliath. With a bold faith reminiscent of Joshua, David says, "You come to me with sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (1 Sm 17:45).

2. What does David say to Goliath before the battle? What does this tell us about David?

Answer: Before he launches his famous sling shot, David says: "This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sm 17:47). David knows and trusts in the Lord.

Please read aloud:

3. While the word might be translated differently depending on which translation you are using, the “know” appears in this passage several times. How does this idea of “knowing” fit with Israel’s journey so far? How does this show that David is the kind of leader that Israel needs?

Answer: Remember that knowing the Lord was a key goal of the Exodus story, and that ever since the period of the judges Israel had failed to keep covenant with God. Now, with David, Israel finally has an emerging spiritual leader who challenges the people to know the Lord once again.

Please read aloud: Eventually, King Saul dies in battle, and all the tribes of Israel gather around David to enter covenant with him as their new king (2 Sm 5:1-4). David’s first move as king is to capture the city of Jerusalem, an event that sets the stage for a pivotal moment in David’s life and in Israel’s history. With this last Canaanite stronghold in the Promised Land finally defeated, the Israelites can rest from their enemies about them (2 Sm 7:1). The people can now live secure in the land that was promised to Abraham back in Genesis 12—the land to which Israel was led by Moses and Joshua, and which it now finally possesses in tranquility with David.

This sparks David to do something he had never done before. David had won many military victories in his lifetime, but he had never called for the Ark of the Covenant to be transferred to those places. Yet in 2 Samuel 6, David sends for the Ark to be permanently stationed in Jerusalem, which will soon become the home of a central sanctuary for God’s people.

4. Why does he do this? Any ideas? It requires some subtle knowledge of the Bible to understand.

Answer: David is a faithful Israelite, and the narrative of salvation history has never been far from his mind. He recognizes in these dramatic events the fulfillment of God’s promises. He knows that, when the Israelites find rest, they are to establish a central sanctuary in the land (Dt 12:9-11). With Israel finally secure, it is time to build a house for the Lord—in other words, a temple for the Ark.

Please read aloud: Let’s see how God responds to David’s actions:

Read 2 Samuel 7:1-29.

5. How does God respond to David’s desire to build him a house?

Answer: The Lord wants to build David a house. The prophet Nathan announces to David: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Would you build me a house to dwell in?... Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house’” (2 Sm 7:5, 11).

Please read aloud: The Hebrew word for house (*bayit*) here has three meanings. It can refer to: (1) a son or an heir; (2) a kingdom or dynasty; (3) or an actual building, a home.¹ God seems to have in mind all three levels of meaning, as He goes on to tell David, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son” (2 Sm 7:12-13).

6. How does the meaning of this word (*bayit*) come into play here?

Answer: Notice how all three meanings of bayit come into play here. God speaks of an actual “offspring,” a son that will come to David, and this son will be given a dynasty—a “kingdom” and a “throne” forever. Finally, this son will build an actual building, a “house” for God’s name—in other words, a temple.

¹ Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995), 320.

7. What is God promising to David in this passage?

Answer: David is given much more than a kingdom, like Saul; he is promised an everlasting dynasty, where his descendants will rule forever.

Please read aloud: For centuries, Israel had been longing for the second great promise God made to Abraham—a great name or a dynastic line of kings (Gn 12:2; 17:6,16)—to be fulfilled. When David hears that God is going to make for *him* a great name (2 Sm 7:9) and give *him* a never-ending kingdom, he realizes that this second promise is being fulfilled in *him*! Overwhelmed with emotion, David thus exclaims: “Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?” (2 Sm 7:18). In awe, David realizes that the great dynasty God promised more than one thousand years ago is being given to his own household!

At this moment, David stands at a crucial turning point in the history of the world.

8. Why do you think this moment is a turning point? And how is it connected to what we have already learned in salvation history?

Answer: As king of this new dynasty, David realizes that Israel is positioned to move toward the fulfillment of her ultimate calling: to be a source of blessing for every family on earth—the third and final promise given to Abraham.

Please read aloud: The fact that Israel will be a blessing for the whole world sheds light on an intriguing statement David then makes to God: “Thou hast shown me law for humanity”² (2 Sm 7:19).

² See the translation and explanation in Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 1995), 322, 346-7. See also Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, 213.

The significance of this statement is often missed due to awkward translations. The Hebrew text of this verse (*wasoth torath ha'adam*) employs words that recall the Hebrew word for *torah*, the covenant law and the Hebrew word for humanity or “adam.” Hence, David seems to understand that law for all of humanity is being entrusted to him.

9. Some might wonder why David would say he was given a law *for all humankind*. David is just the king over Israel, not the ruler over the human race. He may possess law for Israel, but why would he say that God has shown him the law for the whole human family?

Answer: The answer has to do with Israel's mission. With the land and kingdom firmly in place, Israel is finally poised to become the great kingdom of priests for the whole world that it was always meant to be (see Ex 19:6). As the shepherd of the dynasty that is meant to bring the truth about God to the nations, David realizes that the law entrusted to him is meant not just for Israel; it is meant to be shared with the rest of the world. Hence, he can make a statement no one else in the Bible had ever said before: He proclaims that God has shown him law for all mankind.

10. How do you see this idea of a “law for humanity” fulfilled today in the Church? How are the teachings of the Church a guide and blessing for all humanity?

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



Chapter XII

From Dynasty to Exile

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Page 226 - 235

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Page 236 - 246



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” This opening line from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* could certainly be used to describe the rise and fall of the Davidic monarchy. We can see this right from the dynasty’s beginnings. On one hand, the combined reigns of David and Solomon represent a high point in Israel’s history: Israel experiences prosperity, territorial expansion, and the conversion of many nations that turn to their king to hear the wisdom of God. But on the other hand, the cancerous effects of sin still lurk in the background of these men’s lives and end up undermining God’s covenantal kingdom.

Near the end of his life, David crowns Solomon as his successor in the dynastic kingdom. The covenantal protection God promised to David will pass on to Solomon and all his royal heirs. However, the kingdom he entrusts to Solomon has been wounded by David’s own sins. In 2 Samuel 11, David commits adultery with Bathsheba and orders the murder of her husband, Uriah. Though David sincerely repented (2 Sm 12:13; cf. Ps 51) and was indeed forgiven by the Lord, we will see how the effects of his sins will continue to haunt the dynasty in the next generation and all the way up to the coming of Christ.

Let’s look at how the short-lived glory of Israel is embodied in the life of David’s first heir, King Solomon.

Solomon Prefiguring Christ

Solomon starts off as a noble and faithful king who takes Israel to its highest point in its history. When God offers to bless him in any way he chooses, Solomon asks for something that wouldn’t simply serve himself but would help him rule the people well: He asks for the gift of wisdom. Solomon also carried out his father’s wishes to build the Lord’s house, spending seven years constructing the temple and then leading his people in worship at the ceremonial dedication of this new central sanctuary.

Solomon’s greatness is seen most vividly in his international influence, leading even some from the pagan nations to the wisdom of God. 1 Kings highlights how many gentile kings covenant themselves to Solomon’s kingdom because they want to learn from his divinely given wisdom: “And men came from all the peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom” (1 Kgs 4:34). For a brief period, we see in Solomon the fulfillment of what David had said about the dynasty, that it would be a vehicle for the *torah adam*, the law for all humanity (2 Sm 7:19).

In these ways, Solomon prefigures Jesus Christ. He is the son of David and king of Israel; he is known for his divine wisdom and for being the temple builder; and his kingdom has international influence. His life is a foreshadowing of Jesus, who is the ultimate son of David and the king who fulfills all the promises made to David’s dynasty. Like Solomon, Jesus is known for His great wisdom and is the one who builds the new temple in His body (Jn 2); and it is Christ’s kingdom that ultimately fulfills Israel’s worldwide mission, extending God’s reign over all the earth.

The Fall of Solomon

However, while Solomon takes Israel to its highest glory, he also drags the nation down to one of the lowest points in its history. How did such a good, wise, and successful king fall so quickly and so hard? In the shadow of Solomon's great triumphs lurk the secrets that lead to the unraveling of his kingdom.

The First Book of Kings shows how Solomon spent seven years building the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 6:38). But in the very next verse, the narrative tells us Solomon spent thirteen years building his *own* palace, a building that was almost four times larger than the Lord's temple. While Solomon appeared to love and worship God, he began to use his wisdom and authority to serve his own selfish interests rather than God and the people.

The Scriptures provided the future kings of Israel clear guidance on how to use their authority and avoid certain traps that ensnared other worldly leaders. Deuteronomy 17 warns kings not to use their authority to serve themselves in three specific ways—by building up their military might, multiplying their wives, or increasing wealth for themselves.

Unlike David, Solomon gradually becomes openly defiant of God's word when he breaks all three of these stipulations. First, Solomon begins using his authority to gather 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen—a violation of the first command for the king (1 Kgs 10:26).

Second, Solomon uses his royal position to build up a large harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of whom were pagans who seduced Solomon into idolatry. We are told that “his wives turned away his heart after their gods” (1 Kgs 10:4) and that Solomon built

temples to the pagan deities and “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (1 Kgs 11:4-8).

Third, Solomon used his royal position to increase his own wealth to excessive proportions. In addition to other revenues from foreigners, Solomon receives in one year 666 talents of gold—a number symbolizing the epitome of evil.¹ While Solomon prefigures Christ in his kingship, his wisdom, and his construction of the new temple, he also becomes an anti-Christ figure in his self-indulgence and rejection of the ways of the one, true God. Indeed, Solomon's three-fold temptation toward money, sex and power will remain formidable challenges to all who seek to overcome the world and follow the Lord.

As a result of Solomon's sinfulness, God curses the dynasty and announces that the kingdom will become divided. “I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son” (1 Kgs 11:11-12). This prophecy is carried out in the life of his heir, Rehoboam. The events that unfold in Rehoboam's reign fundamentally alter the rest of Israel's history. The united kingdom of the twelve tribes of Israel will be divided into two warring monarchies, with brothers battling brothers, until the two separate nations are brought to ruin.

Divided Kingdom

In a misguided effort to consolidate his power, the new king, Rehoboam, decides to raise the already oppressive taxes in the land (1 Kgs 12:1-16). This sparks the rebellion of the ten northern tribes under their self-appointed leader, Jeroboam, splitting the kingdom into two. In the north, the ten tribes gather to form a newly aligned

¹ When read in the context of all of Scripture, this figure points to the demonic beast in the Book of Revelation, whose number is 666. In fact, it is the only other passage in the Bible where this number is used.

kingdom around Jeroboam and arrogate to themselves the name “Israel.” In the south, the remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priestly Levites, form the Kingdom of Judah.

Recognizing the distinction between these two separated kingdoms is a key to understand the rest of the Old Testament. From now on, whenever “Israel” is mentioned, it is often a reference to the ten northern tribes that are in rebellion with the Davidic dynasty. On the other hand, references to “Judah” call to mind those people in union with the divinely appointed royal sons of David.

The rebellion of the northern tribes is more than a political division. Their severance quickly turns into apostasy, as the ten northern tribes separate from the central sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem and establish their own cities of worship in Bethel and Dan. They also separate from the divinely appointed Levitical priesthood, as Jeroboam appoints his own “priests” to serve at these unsanctioned shrines (1 Kgs 13:31-34). Finally, Jeroboam, who spent his younger years in Egypt, imports idolatrous Egyptian practices into his realm as he leads his people to worship two golden calves, reminiscent of Israel's idolatry at Mount Sinai (1 Kgs 12:28).

The northern kingdom thus rebels not just against the Davidic kings but against God's covenantal plan for the Davidic dynasty, the Levitical priesthood, and the temple in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the people there rebel against God Himself as they start worshiping false deities. Because of their unfaithfulness, the northern kingdom does not survive for long. It begins a quick downward spiral of civil strife, sin, and rebellion against God that culminates in the nation's destruction. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians invade the region and send many people from the northern tribes into exile while they resettle the land with five pagan nations (2 Kgs 17). The effect of this imposed assimilation

with the pagans will drive the northern tribes even further away from their Davidic king and their covenant with God.

Trouble in the South

In the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the kings are not that much better, as almost all of them either lead the people into idolatry or fail to curb the idolatrous practices of their wicked predecessors. Their continued failure to lead the people spiritually allows the kingdom to fall into covenant disobedience, triggering the curses of Deuteronomy 28. As Moses foretold in that passage, Israel's infidelity to God's covenant will lead them into exile: In 586 B.C., the Babylonians attack Jerusalem, burn the temple to the ground, and lead all but the poorest and weakest of the Jews into exile, forcing them to be slaves in Babylon.

Though suffering in a foreign land, Israel receives some consolation from the prophets who remind the people that God has not abandoned them and that, one day, God will rescue them from their enemies and provide a definitive restoration of the Davidic kingdom.

One such prophecy comes from a Jewish youth who grew up in the Babylonian exile: the prophet Daniel. The Babylonian king has a strange dream about a large statue with the head made of gold, its breasts and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. The king then saw a stone cut without human hands that struck the statue and destroyed it. But the stone became a great mountain and filled the entire earth (Dn 2:31-35).

Daniel was given insight from God to interpret the dream. He explains that the four parts of the statue represent a series of four pagan kingdoms that will dominate the region and oppress the Jews. The

first part, the head of gold, represents the current world power, Babylon (Dn 2:38). The next three parts of the statue represent three future kingdoms that rule the region over the next several centuries: the Persian kingdom that ruled from 539 to 331 B.C.; the Greeks, who ruled over the land from 331 to 63 B.C.; and the Roman empire, who rule the Jews from 63 B.C. to the time of Christ.

At the climax of Daniel's interpretation, he announces that, in the days of that fourth and most fierce kingdom (which is later shown to be Rome), God himself will establish His own kingdom, which will never end. The rock that smashes the statue and becomes a great world-filling mountain represents the worldwide kingdom God will establish in those days, while the destruction of the statue symbolizes God's judgment upon those pagan oppressors. "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed.... It shall break to pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever" (Dn 2:44).

For Daniel and the Jews in exile, this prophecy would inspire great hope. Even though they are suffering as slaves in Babylon, God has not forgotten His promise about the Davidic kingdom. A new king will come who will establish it forever.

Seventy Weeks of Years

The Book of Daniel not only provides a road-map for the rest of Israel's history up to the time of Christ. It also offers a time-table.

The Jews spend about seventy years in Babylon. Near the end of that exile, the angel Gabriel announces to Daniel that, while the Jews will soon return to Jerusalem, the full restoration of the kingdom will come much further in the future. Gabriel announces that this process

will take "seventy weeks of years" (Dn 9:24). Following seventy years of exile, there will be seven times seventy years—"seventy weeks of years"—before the restoration will occur and a new anointed king will come.

In other words, after having waited seventy years in Babylon, God's people are told that they will now have to wait seven times this long—some 490 years—before the full restoration of Israel and the coming of the great messiah. At the end of this period, sin will be atoned for, all prophecy will be fulfilled, and everlasting righteousness will be established (Dn 9:24). An anointed one (a king) will be set apart and will establish a worldwide covenant with the many nations (see Dn 9:26-27).

This may help explain why, some 490 years later—precisely when the Jews are suffering under the oppression of the fourth pagan nation, the Romans—many in Israel are longing for the coming of the messiah and of God's kingdom. It also sheds light on why many Jews responded so enthusiastically to John the Baptist's message: "Repent, the *kingdom* of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2 emphasis added).

NOTES

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*1 Kings 3:4-15, 6:38, 7:1, 10:14, 10:26, 11:1-8, 12:1-16,
Deuteronomy 17:14-20*

Please read aloud: This week, we pick up the story of the kingdom in the life of David's son, Solomon.

Near the end of his life, David crowns Solomon as his successor in the dynastic kingdom. The covenantal protection God promised to David will pass on to Solomon and all his royal heirs. However, the kingdom he entrusts to Solomon has been wounded by David's own sins. In 2 Samuel 11, David commits adultery with Bathsheba and orders the murder of her husband, Uriah. Though David sincerely repented (2 Sm 12:13; cf. Ps 51) and was indeed forgiven by the Lord, we will see how the effects of his sins will continue to haunt the dynasty in the next generation and all the way up to the coming of Christ.

Let's look at how the short-lived glory of Israel is embodied in the life of David's first heir, King Solomon.

Read 1 Kings 3:4-15.

1. What does Solomon ask of the Lord, and how does the Lord respond? What does this reveal about the kind of king Solomon will be?

Answer: Solomon starts off as a noble and faithful king who takes Israel to its highest point in its history. When God offers to bless him in any way he chooses, Solomon asks for something that wouldn't simply serve himself but would help him rule the people well: He asks for the gift of wisdom.

Please read aloud: Not only did Solomon ask for wisdom, he also carried out his father's wishes to build the Lord's house, spending seven years constructing the temple and then leading his people in worship at the ceremonial dedication of this new central sanctuary.

Solomon's greatness is also seen vividly in his international influence, leading even some from the pagan nations to the wisdom of God. 1 Kings highlights how many gentile kings covenant themselves to Solomon's kingdom because they want to learn from his divinely given wisdom: "And men came from all the peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom" (1 Kgs 4:34).

2. How does Solomon's wisdom and influence on the "nations" fulfill what God had promised to David in the previous chapter of this study?

Answer: For a brief period, we see in Solomon the fulfillment of what David had said about the dynasty, that it would be a vehicle for the torah adam, the law for all humanity (2 Sm 7:19).

3. Solomon is a king who governs with wisdom, builds the temple, and has international influence. How do these aspects of Solomon's life prefigure Jesus Christ?

Answer: Solomon's life is a foreshadowing of Jesus, who is the ultimate son of David and the king who fulfills all the promises made to David's dynasty. Like Solomon, Jesus is known for His great wisdom and is the one who builds the new temple in His body (Jn 2); and it is Christ's

kingdom that ultimately fulfills Israel's worldwide mission, extending God's reign over all the earth.

Please read aloud: While Solomon takes Israel to its highest glory, he also drags the nation down to one of the lowest points in its history. How did such a good, wise, and successful king fall so quickly and so hard? In the shadow of Solomon's great triumphs lurk the secrets that lead to the unraveling of his kingdom.

Read 1 Kings 6:38 and 1 Kings 7:1.

4. What do these two simple verses reveal about Solomon?

Answer: The First Book of Kings shows how Solomon spent seven years building the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 6:38). But in the very next verse, the narrative tells us Solomon spent thirteen years building his own palace, a building that was almost four times larger than the Lord's temple. While Solomon appeared to love and worship God, he began to use his wisdom and authority to serve his own selfish interests rather than God and the people.

Please read aloud: The Scriptures provided the future kings of Israel clear guidance on how to use their authority and avoid certain traps that ensnared other worldly leaders. Let's read these laws from the book of Deuteronomy:

Read Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

5. What does this section of the law state that kings specifically should not do?

Answer: Deuteronomy 17 warns kings not to use their authority to serve themselves in three specific ways—by building up their military might, multiplying their wives, or increasing wealth for themselves.

Please read aloud: Now let's read about what Solomon does:

Read 1 Kings 10:14, 1 Kings 10:26, and 1 Kings 11:1-8.

6. How well does Solomon obey (or disobey) the laws for the king given in Deuteronomy?

Answer: Unlike David, Solomon gradually becomes openly defiant of God's word when he breaks all three of these stipulations. First, Solomon begins using his authority to gather 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen—a violation of the first command for the king (1 Kgs 10:26).

Second, Solomon uses his royal position to build up a large harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines, many of whom were pagans who seduced Solomon into idolatry. We are told that "his wives turned away his heart after their gods" (1 Kgs 10:4) and that Solomon built temples to the pagan deities and "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kgs 11:4-8).

Third, Solomon used his royal position to increase his own wealth to excessive proportions. In addition to other revenues from foreigners, Solomon receives in one year 666 talents of gold—a number symbolizing the epitome of evil.¹

Please read aloud: While Solomon prefigures Christ in his kingship, his wisdom, and his construction of the new temple, he also becomes an anti-Christ figure in his self-indulgence and rejection of the ways of the one, true God. Indeed, Solomon's three-fold temptation toward money, sex and power will remain formidable challenges to all who seek to overcome the world and follow the Lord.

¹ When read in the context of all of Scripture, this figure points to the demonic beast in the Book of Revelation, whose number is 666. In fact, it is the only other passage in the Bible where this number is used.

7. How do the temptations of money, sex and power continue to lead others astray today? Have you experienced this in your own life or observed it in lives of others?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: As a result of Solomon's sinfulness, God curses the dynasty and announces that the kingdom will become divided. "I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son" (1 Kgs 11:11-12). This prophecy is carried out in the life of his heir, Rehoboam. Let's read about what Rehoboam does when he comes to power:

Read 1 Kings 12:1-16.

8. What advice do the elders and the young men each give to Rehoboam? What does Rehoboam do? And what does this reveal about Rehoboam's character?

Answer: The elders recommend lessening the burden of the people, so as to win them over. However, the young men recommend increasing the people's burden. In a misguided effort to consolidate his power, the new king, Rehoboam, decides to raise the already oppressive taxes in the land. Here we can see Rehoboam being foolish with his office, which will ultimately lead to problems for God's people.

Please read aloud: Rehoboam's action sparks the rebellion of the ten northern tribes, splitting the kingdom into two: "Israel" in the north and "Judah" in the south. The severance of the northern tribes quickly turns into apostasy, as they separate from the central sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem and establish their own cities of worship in Bethel and Dan, appoint their own "priests," and worship two golden calves, reminiscent of Israel's idolatry at Mount Sinai (1 Kgs 12:28).

The northern kingdom thus rebels not just against the Davidic kings but against God's covenantal plan for the Davidic dynasty, the Levitical priesthood, and the temple in Jerusalem. Because of their unfaithfulness, the northern kingdom begins a quick downward spiral of civil strife, sin, and rebellion against God that culminates in the nation's destruction in 722 BC, when the Assyrians carry the northern tribes into exile.

In the Southern Kingdom of Judah, however, the kings are not that much better, as almost all of them either lead the people into idolatry or fail to curb the idolatrous practices of their wicked predecessors. As Moses foretold in Deuteronomy 28, Israel's infidelity to God's covenant will lead them into exile: In 586 B.C., the Babylonians attack Jerusalem, burn the temple to the ground, and lead all but the poorest and weakest of the Jews into exile, forcing them to be slaves in Babylon.

9. This is a low point of the history of Israel. Think back through salvation history. How did Israel get to this point?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Though suffering in a foreign land, Israel receives some consolation from the prophets who remind the people that God has not abandoned them and that, one day, God will rescue them from their enemies and provide a definitive restoration of the Davidic kingdom. Let's read one of these prophecies from the prophet Daniel, a Jewish youth who grew up in the Babylonian exile:

Read Daniel 2:25-45.

10. What happens in this passage? Can someone summarize it?

Answer: The Babylonian king has a strange dream about a large

statue with the head made of gold, its breasts and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. The king then saw a stone cut without human hands that struck the statue and destroyed it. But the stone became a great mountain and filled the entire earth (Dn 2:31-35).

Daniel was given insight from God to interpret the dream. He explains that the four parts of the statue represent a series of four pagan kingdoms that will dominate the region and oppress the Jews.

At the climax of Daniel's interpretation, he announces that, in the days of that fourth and most fierce kingdom, God himself will establish His own kingdom, which will never end. The rock that smashes the statue and becomes a great world-filling mountain represents the worldwide kingdom God will establish in those days, while the destruction of the statue symbolizes God's judgment upon those pagan oppressors.

Please read aloud: This prophecy is fulfilled in history. The first part, the head of gold, represents the current world power, Babylon (Dn 2:38). The first three parts of the statue represent three future kingdoms that rule the region over the next several centuries: the Persian kingdom that ruled from 539 to 331 B.C.; the Greeks, who ruled over the land from 331 to 63 B.C.; and the Roman empire, who rule the Jews from 63 B.C. to the time of Christ. The stone represents the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the "stone which the builders rejected" (Mt 21:42, Acts 4:11).

For Daniel and the Jews in exile, this prophecy would inspire great hope. Even though they are suffering as slaves in Babylon, God has not forgotten His promise about the Davidic kingdom. A new king will come who will establish it forever.

The Book of Daniel not only provides a road-map for the rest of Israel's history up to the time of Christ. It also offers a time-table.

Read Daniel 9:24-27.

11. According to this prophecy, when will this new kingdom emerge?
Answer: The Jews spend about seventy years in Babylon. Near the end of that exile, an angel announces to Daniel that, while the Jews will soon return to Jerusalem, the full restoration of the kingdom will come much further in the future. He announces that this process will take "seventy weeks of years" (Dn 9:24). Following seventy years of exile, there will be seven times seventy years—"seventy weeks of years"—before the restoration will occur and a new anointed king will come.

In other words, after having waited seventy years in Babylon, God's people are told that they will now have to wait seven times this long—some 490 years—before the full restoration of Israel and the coming of the great messiah. At the end of this period, sin will be atoned for, all prophecy will be fulfilled, and everlasting righteousness will be established (Dn 9:24). An anointed one (a king) will be set apart and will establish a worldwide covenant with the many nations (see Dn 9:26-27).

Please read aloud: This prophecy may help explain why, some 490 years later—precisely when the Jews are suffering under the oppression of the fourth pagan nation, the Romans—many in Israel are longing for the coming of the messiah and of God's kingdom. It also sheds light on why many Jews responded so enthusiastically to John the Baptist's message: "Repent, the *kingdom* of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2 emphasis added).

12. Finally, who is speaking to the prophet Daniel in this passage?
Hint: See v. 21. And where else do we hear this name in Scripture?
And what does this connection tell us?

Answer: The angel Gabriel is speaking, the same Gabriel who speaks to Mary at the annunciation (Lk 1:26). By connecting these two passages, we can see that after the 490 years of waiting, the prophecy is fulfilled as Christ becomes incarnate in the womb of Mary.

NOTES

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Chapter XIII

The Climax of the Covenant

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

It's difficult to imagine the sense of despair—and also hope—many Jews must have experienced in the first century. For most of the last 500 years, God's people had been without a Davidic king, oppressed by various foreign powers and suffering like exiles in their own land. The Roman Empire represented the latest and fiercest of the regimes oppressing the Jewish people. Persecuted by the unprecedented force of Roman violence, taxation, and idolatry, the Jewish people were, on many levels, suffering as never before.

Nevertheless, against this backdrop of pain and misery, their expectation and desire for a restored kingdom and a messianic savior were reaching a fevered pitch.

It is in the midst of this drama that a strange figure appears in the desert, clothed only in animal skins and eating insects and wild honey. His name is John, and he stands at the Jordan River, telling the people, "Repent!" Just as Joshua led the people through the wilderness to this very river and into the Promised Land centuries ago at the culmination of the first exodus, so now John leads the people to these same waters and invites them to a new and even greater exodus: an interior journey away from sin. He proclaims, "Repent...for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The Old Testament prophets foretold that God would one day come to rescue His people from their oppressors and restore the great Davidic kingdom. They also depicted that restoration of Israel as a new exodus. It's no wonder, then, that John's message in the desert by the Jordan River (recalling the climax of the Exodus story) and his announcement about a great kingdom dawning (stirring the hopes about a future Davidic king) drew a lot of attention. Large crowds went out to follow him, hoping that the long-expected kingdom would soon arrive.

Then, one day, it finally happens: A young and unknown descendant of David named Jesus comes out to join this movement in the wilderness. He goes to John and asks to be baptized. As He rises from the waters, the Spirit of God descends upon Him, and a heavenly voice speaks the words that signal His true identity: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). Indeed, now that Jesus is present, the kingdom of heaven *is* truly at hand.

The King

At the heart of Jesus' public ministry, we find more than abstract principles about ethics or salvation. As king, Jesus' mission is to restore the kingdom of David. Everywhere He goes, He preaches "the gospel of the kingdom" (Mt 4:23), which attracts people from all around the land (Mt 4:25). His famous Sermon on the Mount begins and ends with a message about the kingdom. Through His powerful healings, He is recognized as "the son of David," the true king of the Jews. Much of His preaching and many of His parables elaborate upon this kingdom with various images: It is like a field, a treasure, a mustard seed, a pearl of great price. Clearly, Jesus is claiming to usher in a great kingdom. In the first-century Jewish context, practically everyone would understand that kingdom to be the promised restoration of the kingdom of David.

At a key turning point in His public ministry, Jesus calls His disciples to recognize that the central issue of this kingdom is His very identity. He asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” In response, Peter declares, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). The term “Christ” refers to the anointed messiah king whom the prophets foretold.

Peter is the first to refer explicitly to Jesus as the Christ, the messiah. In response to Peter’s faith, Jesus gives Him the keys of His kingdom:

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Mt 16:18-19)

These keys of the kingdom symbolically represent one of the most important offices in the Davidic kingdom, the head of the royal household. In the Davidic dynasty of old, the king had a prime minister-like official who was vested with the king’s authority and who governed the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom. His office was symbolized by “the key of the house of David” (Is 22:22). With this background in mind, it becomes clear that, when Jesus the king gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, he is establishing him as the prime minister in the kingdom that He is establishing. It is no surprise that the Catholic Church sees this passage as shedding light on the papacy since it highlights the important leadership role Jesus gave to Peter (and those who succeed him in this office of prime minister) over the Church Christ founded.

Climax of the Covenant

Jesus’ kingdom will be established in a paradoxical manner. Despite His many Jewish followers, the rulers of the Jews reject Him, handing Him over to the Romans to be crucified. Yet it is through His death on that cross and His resurrection on the third day that Jesus saves His people and establishes the neverending kingdom.

How does this occur? Consider how all the covenants we have been studying—from Adam, Noah, and Abraham to Moses and David—converge on the cross and find their fulfillment there, shedding light on the meaning of Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

Jesus, as the new Adam, finds Himself in a garden (the Garden of Gethsemane) tested by the devil, but He proves to be a faithful Son (whereas Adam was unfaithful). He bore Adam’s curses—sweat, thorns, and death (Gn 3:18-19)—by sweating blood, being crowned with thorns, and dying on the cross (see Chapter One).

Like Noah, Jesus is a faithful son of Adam in the midst of a corrupt world. Like Noah, He offers salvation to His household, the family of God. Noah’s salvation came through the ark, which the Church Fathers saw as prefiguring the Church. Just as God used the ark to save Noah’s family from the flood, so does Christ save all humanity from sin through the Church He established by His death and resurrection (see Chapter Two and Catechism, no. 845).

Like Abraham’s only beloved son Isaac, Jesus, as the heavenly Father’s only beloved son, travels on a donkey to the ancient Mount Moriah, now in the city of Jerusalem, and bears the wood of sacrifice to Calvary in order to offer himself as a voluntary victim to atone for our sins and bring blessing to the entire world. (see Chapter Four).

Like Moses, who began the exodus from Egypt with the Passover, Jesus begins His passion—the work of the new exodus—with the Passover meal at the Last Supper. Just as the first Passover lambs were slain to spare the first-born Israelites in Egypt, so Jesus is sacrificed on the cross as the new Passover lamb, offering redemption to all humanity. And as the Passover was not just a sacrifice but a meal, all who participate in this new Passover are called to consume the flesh of the sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist (see Chapter Six and Jn 6, 1 Cor 5:6-7).

And most of all, in a paradoxical way, Jesus' passion and death reveal His royal status as the true Davidic king (see Chapter Eight). He is crowned, but with thorns; He is vested with a royal robe, but in mockery; He is hailed as a king by the soldiers, but in jest. His royal elevation is not to a throne, but to a cross with a simple sign above His head that reads, "Jesus the Nazorean, King of the Jews." Though the Romans intended all this to mock Jesus' royal claims, the Gospel writers highlight how they unwittingly reveal the truth: Jesus is, in fact, the true King of Kings. While His crucifixion is seen by the world to be His moment of defeat, it is actually His moment of triumph over sin and death. His execution is actually His enthronement as He establishes His kingdom, the Church.

Not Just the Jews

Jesus clearly fulfills all the covenants God made to His people. However, God's people are not just the Jews; like David himself, the messianic son of David is to reign over *all* of Israel, which originally consisted of all twelve tribes. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Jews, as the name suggests, are those Israelites who remained loyal to the divinely established Davidic dynasty in the southern kingdom of Judah. The ten northern tribes rebelled against their king and

established their own kingdom, only to be invaded by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.—which became known as Samaria.

The Assyrians had a particular way of treating their vanquished foes. Most of the defeated Israelites were scattered into foreign territories, but a small portion of them were left behind in the land. The Assyrians then brought in pagans from five other nations that they had conquered (2 Kgs 17:24-31). The result was that the northern tribes remaining in the land found themselves dwelling side by side pagan peoples and their idolatrous practices. They eventually intermarried with these peoples, yoking themselves to their pagan way of life and even their foreign gods. It was thus that the ten northern tribes lost their ethnic and religious identity.

In Jesus' time, this mixed population of descendants from the old Northern Kingdom was known collectively as the Samaritans. They were hated by their estranged brethren, the Jews, for their unfaithfulness to Yahweh throughout the centuries and for their intermarriage with godless people. In fact, God sent the prophets to the northern kingdom and warned them that their idolatry was an act of covenant infidelity, likening it to adultery. This was a most fitting description, since Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel was likened to the kind of intimate union that exists between a husband and wife: Yahweh was the bridegroom and Israel was His bride. The Samaritans' unfaithfulness to the covenant and their worshiping of other gods was, according to the prophets, similar to the infidelity of a spouse.

One of those prophets who confronted Samaria was a man named Hosea. At the same time that Hosea spoke out against Samaria's sins, his own life embodied the broken relationship between God and His people. At the start of his prophetic ministry, Hosea was called

to marry a prostitute, who went on to commit flagrant adultery and conceive children by other men. The public infidelity of Hosea's wife served as a powerful image to illustrate Israel's own unfaithfulness. Like Hosea's wife, Israel was an unfaithful spouse whose idolatry was devastating for her relationship with Yahweh.

Yet even in the face of Israel's spiritual harlotry, Hosea tells the people that there will be a time when Yahweh, the divine husband, will come to his spouse again, speak to her in love, and call her back into relationship.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.... For I will remove the names of the Ba'ls from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. And I will make for you a covenant.... And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord." (Hos 2:14, 17-18, 19-20)

This prophecy was given just before the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians. To give this destitute Samaritan people hope, God reminds them that He will *never* abandon His bride. He foretells that, despite her infidelities, He will speak kindly to her and eventually woo her back into the fullness of His covenant love.

All's Well that Ends Well—John 4

This background provides important context for understanding Jesus' public ministry in the Gospel of John. After gathering Jewish disciples in Galilee (Jn 1) and teaching and performing miracles for the Jews in Jerusalem (Jn 2), Jesus takes His disciples into the land of Judea

where they begin to baptize the Jews (Jn 3). John the Baptist sees the call to Christ's baptism as a spousal gesture, referring to Jesus as the bridegroom coming for His chosen people (Jn 3:29-30).

But Jesus' bride is not just the Jews, and the chosen people extend beyond the borders of Judea. Thus, Jesus next leaves Judea and goes to Samaria, the land where many people from the separated ten northern tribes dwell.

As He enters this region, Jesus goes to a well where a woman comes to draw water—an evocative setting in light of the Old Testament. Many of Israel's ancient leaders found their wives at a well: Isaac's wife Rebecca (Gn 24:11), Jacob's wife Rachel (Gn 29:2), and Moses's wife Zipporah (Ex 2:15). Now, Jesus, who already has been described as the "bridegroom" in John's Gospel, meets a Samaritan woman at a well.

He asks her for a drink, which shocks her. She says, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jn 4:9). Her surprise reflects the tragic history of her people, who had been at odds with their Jewish kinsmen for nearly a thousand years. Coming as the new, royal son of David, Jesus breaks down these barriers and speaks kindly to this Samaritan woman.

As we listen to their conversation, we discover that the Samaritan woman has had a heart-wrenching life—and one that actually embodies the disastrous history of her nation. She has suffered through the misery of marital infidelity. Like Samaria, she had been an adulterous wife; she had yoked herself to five different men, just as Samaria had yoked itself to five foreign nations and their idolatrous practices (2 Kgs 17:29-34). Her life, therefore, is an icon of the covenant infidelity of Israel that Hosea had condemned.

But now, Jesus tenderly approaches her as the divine bridegroom seeking out unfaithful Samaria to woo her back into covenant union, just as Hosea prophesied. He speaks gently to her and extends His loving mercy. As the ever-faithful husband, Jesus does not reject her but invites her to return to God's kingdom.

At the same time, Jesus reminds her that "salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). This is a reference to God's plan to save all humanity through the Davidic dynasty—a plan that the Samaritans rejected. The woman now realizes she is standing in the presence of a great prophet and asks Jesus about the Jewish belief in the coming of a savior from the line of David, a messiah-king. Jesus, the true son of David, replies, "I who speak to you am he" (Jn 2:26).

The woman comes to believe in Jesus and tells others of her great discovery. Many Samaritans begin to believe in Christ and thus return to their bridegroom (Jn 4:39-42). In this one scene, God Himself has come to draw this woman—and the estranged Samaritan people whom she represents—back to His heart. Jesus, the Jewish messiah, is the savior not only of the Jews but of all of Israel, including the Samaritans—no matter how far they have strayed.

To All the Nations

This inclusion of the Samaritans is just the first step of extending the Kingdom of David beyond the Jewish people. As Jesus begins to gather the lost sheep of Israel, we are reminded that the promises given to Abraham and David were not just for the twelve tribes of Israel but for the entire human family. We have seen throughout this study that God always intended to use the people of Israel and the kingdom of David as His instruments to gather back all the families of the earth into covenant union.

Thus, Jesus, at the beginning of His public ministry, reminds Israel of its universal mission, summoning the people to be the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13-14). He Himself consistently welcomes the sinners, covenant outcasts, and gentiles into His kingdom (see Mt 8:1-13, 9:9-13). He even praises the faith of a Roman centurion and the humility of a Syro-Phoenecian woman as more remarkable than the faith He has witnessed in Israel.

Indeed, His final act before ascending into heaven is to remind the Church of its worldwide mission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:19-20).

The Mission of the Church (Acts 1:8)

This mission of Jesus to the Jews, the Samaritans, and the gentiles is continued in the Church. In fact, the Book of Acts reveals the Church's mission as a recapitulation of Christ's public ministry.

Acts of the Apostles begins with a subtle but important point: "In the first book...I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts. 1:1). What is this "first book"? It is the Gospel of Luke, which covers Christ's life from the incarnation to His ascension. Acts 1:1 reminds us, however, that Luke's Gospel is just the start of what Jesus *began* to do and teach. In this second volume, known as the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will focus on what Jesus *continues* to do and teach through His Church. This highlights a fundamental principle: What Jesus did in His physical body two thousand years ago, He continues to do throughout history in His mystical body, the Church.

Just as Jesus had proclaimed His kingdom to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the gentiles, so now He commands His disciples to do the same. He tells them, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

This single verse serves as a table of contents for the evangelical mission of the early Church as outlined in Acts of the Apostles. The apostles, like their Master, will have the Holy Spirit descend upon them, and then they will preach the kingdom to the Jews. They begin their ministry in Jerusalem at Pentecost, sharing the Gospel of the King with Jews from all over the world (Acts 2). However, after persecution breaks out in Jerusalem, many Christians flee the city, and soon the Gospel spreads to Judea and then to Samaria, as multitudes outside Jerusalem are drawn into the Church (Acts 8).

After the conversion of Paul (Acts 9), he and the other Christian leaders take the Gospel of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth, moving outward through Asia Minor, Greece, and all the way to the heart of Roman Empire, the capital city of Rome itself. By the conclusion of Acts, we are told that Paul is there “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered” (Acts 28:31).

Thus, at the end of Acts, this universal kingdom, which began with the mustard seed of Jesus' life, is now firmly rooted in Rome under the leadership of Peter and Paul. Its branches have extended throughout the known world, through the witness of the apostles and those men they appointed to succeed them to gather all nations into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Indeed, God's third promise to Abraham for a worldwide family is now being fulfilled through Jesus Christ and the Church He established.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Matthew 3:1-17, 28:18-29, Genesis 3:18-19, Luke 22:44, John 19:2, 19:30, Acts 1:1

Please read aloud: It's difficult to imagine the sense of despair—and also hope—many Jews must have experienced in the first century. For most of the last 500 years, God's people had been without a Davidic king, oppressed by various foreign powers and suffering like exiles in their own land. The Roman Empire represented the latest and fiercest of the regimes oppressing the Jewish people. Persecuted by the unprecedented force of Roman violence, taxation, and idolatry, the Jewish people were, on many levels, suffering as never before.

Nevertheless, against this backdrop of pain and misery, their expectation and desire for a restored kingdom and a messianic savior were reaching a fevered pitch. Enter John the Baptist:

Read Matthew 3:1-12.

1. Where is John Baptizing? What was important about that place in the story of salvation history? Why might this connection be significant?

Answer: John stands at the Jordan River, telling the people, "Repent!" Just as Joshua led the people through the wilderness to this very river

and into the Promised Land centuries ago at the culmination of the first exodus, so now John leads the people to these same waters and invites them to a new and even greater exodus: an interior journey away from sin. He proclaims, "Repent...for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Please read aloud: The Old Testament prophets foretold that God would one day come to rescue His people from their oppressors and restore the great Davidic kingdom. They also depicted that restoration of Israel as a new exodus. It's no wonder, then, that John's message in the desert by the Jordan River (recalling the climax of the Exodus story) and his announcement about a great kingdom dawning (stirring the hopes about a future Davidic king) drew a lot of attention. Large crowds went out to follow him, hoping that the long-expected kingdom would soon arrive. Then, one day, it finally happens:

Read Matthew 3:13-17.

2. What does this passage tell us about Jesus's identity? And what is the significance of this for the Jewish people?

Answer: As Jesus rises from the waters, the Spirit of God descends upon Him, and a heavenly voice speaks the words that signal His true identity: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). Indeed, now that Jesus is present, the kingdom of heaven is truly at hand.

SIDEBAR - THE KING

At the heart of Jesus' public ministry, we find more than abstract principles about ethics or salvation. As king, Jesus' mission is to restore the kingdom of David. Everywhere He goes, He preaches "the gospel

of the kingdom” (Mt 4:23), which attracts people from all around the land (Mt 4:25). His famous Sermon on the Mount begins and ends with a message about the kingdom. Through His powerful healings, He is recognized as “the son of David,” the true king of the Jews. Much of His preaching and many of His parables elaborate upon this kingdom with various images: It is like a field, a treasure, a mustard seed, a pearl of great price. Clearly, Jesus is claiming to usher in a great kingdom. In the first-century Jewish context, practically everyone would understand that kingdom to be the promised restoration of the kingdom of David.

At a key turning point in His public ministry, Jesus calls His disciples to recognize that the central issue of this kingdom is His very identity. He asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” In response, Peter declares, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). The term “Christ” refers to the anointed messiah king whom the prophets foretold.

Peter is the first to refer explicitly to Jesus as the Christ, the messiah. In response to Peter’s faith, Jesus gives Him the keys of His kingdom:

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Mt 16:18-19)

These keys of the kingdom symbolically represent one of the most important offices in the Davidic kingdom, the head of the royal household. In the Davidic dynasty of old, the king had a prime

minister-like official who was vested with the king’s authority and who governed the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom. His office was symbolized by “the key of the house of David” (Is 22:22). With this background in mind, it becomes clear that, when Jesus the king gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, he is establishing him as the prime minister in the kingdom that He is establishing. It is no surprise that the Catholic Church sees this passage as shedding light on the papacy since it highlights the important leadership role Jesus gave to Peter (and those who succeed him in this office of prime minister) over the Church Christ founded.

Please read aloud: Indeed, the kingdom is truly present in Jesus, but his kingdom will be established in a paradoxical manner. Despite His many Jewish followers, the rulers of the Jews reject Him, handing Him over to the Romans to be crucified. Yet it is through His death on that cross and His resurrection on the third day that Jesus saves His people and establishes the never-ending kingdom.

How does this occur? Let’s consider how all the covenants we have been studying—from Adam, Noah, and Abraham to Moses and David—converge on the cross and find their fulfillment there, shedding light on the meaning of Christ’s atoning sacrifice.

First, let’s look at Adam, and compare this with scenes from Jesus’s passion and death:

Read Genesis 3:18-19.

Read Luke 22:44, John 19:2, 19:30.

3. What connections do you see between what happens to Adam and these scenes in Christ's life?

Answer: Jesus, as the new Adam, finds Himself in a garden (the Garden of Gethsemane) tested by the devil, but He proves to be a faithful Son (whereas Adam was unfaithful). He bore Adam's curses—sweat, thorns, and death—by sweating blood, being crowned with thorns, and dying on the cross.

Please read aloud: Now, let's look at Noah. Consider these words from the Catechism:

To reunite all his children, scattered and led astray by sin, the Father willed to call the whole of humanity together into his Son's Church....According to another image dear to the Church Fathers, she is prefigured by Noah's ark, which alone saves from the flood.

4. How is Jesus like a new Noah? How does he save the world through his Church?

Answer: Like Noah, Jesus is a faithful son of Adam in the midst of a corrupt world. Like Noah, He offers salvation to His household, the family of God. Noah's salvation came through the ark, which the Church Fathers saw as prefiguring the Church. Just as God used the ark to save Noah's family from the flood, so does Christ save all humanity from sin through the Church He established by His death and resurrection.

Please read aloud: Now, consider Abraham. Think back to the story of Abraham and Isaac, where Abraham is willing to offer his only son in sacrifice.

5. What parallels do you notice between Abraham's story and Jesus? (See Genesis 22:1-19 for reference.)

Answer: Like Abraham's only beloved son Isaac, Jesus, as the heavenly Father's only beloved son, travels on a donkey to the ancient Mount Moriah, now in the city of Jerusalem, and bears the wood of sacrifice to Calvary in order to offer himself as a voluntary victim to atone for our sins and bring blessing to the entire world.

Please read aloud: Now, let's look at Moses.

6. How does Jesus provide for a "new exodus" and a "new Passover?" (See Exodus 12-13, for reference.)

Answer: Like Moses, who began the exodus from Egypt with the Passover, Jesus begins His passion—the work of the new exodus—with the Passover meal at the Last Supper. Just as the first Passover lambs were slain to spare the first-born Israelites in Egypt, so Jesus is sacrificed on the cross as the new Passover lamb, offering redemption to all humanity. And as the Passover was not just a sacrifice but a meal, all who participate in this new Passover are called to consume the flesh of the sacrificial lamb, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist.

Please read aloud: And most of all, in a paradoxical way, Jesus' passion and death reveal His royal status as the true Davidic king. He is crowned, but with thorns; He is vested with a royal robe, but in mockery; He is hailed as a king by the soldiers, but in jest. His royal elevation is not to a throne, but to a cross with a simple sign above His head that reads, "Jesus the Nazorean, King of the Jews." Though the Romans intended all this to mock Jesus' royal claims, the Gospel writers highlight how they unwittingly reveal the truth: Jesus is, in fact, the true King of Kings.

7. How is Jesus's crucifixion really Jesus's moment of triumph?

Answer: While His crucifixion is seen by the world to be His moment of defeat, it is actually His moment of triumph over sin and death. His execution is actually His enthronement as He establishes His kingdom, the Church.

8. Looking at all the parallels, what stands out to you? What do you notice when you discover how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament? What implications does this have for your own understanding of the Bible and Christianity?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Jesus clearly fulfills all the covenants God made to His people. However, God's people are not just the Jews; like David himself, the messianic son of David is to reign over *all* of Israel, which originally consisted of all twelve tribes. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Jews, as the name suggests, are those Israelites who remained loyal to the divinely established Davidic dynasty in the southern kingdom of Judah. The ten northern tribes rebelled against their king and established their own kingdom, only to be invaded by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.—which became known as Samaria. In Jesus's ministry, he also restores these lost ten tribes (Jn 4, see also Hosea 2).

But this is just the first step of extending the Kingdom of David beyond the Jewish people. As Jesus begins to gather the lost sheep of Israel, we are reminded that the promises given to Abraham and David were not just for the twelve tribes of Israel but for the entire human family. We have seen throughout this study that God always intended to use the people of Israel and the kingdom of David as His instruments to gather back all the families of the earth into covenant union.

Thus, Jesus, at the beginning of His public ministry, reminds Israel of its universal mission, summoning the people to be the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13-14). He Himself consistently welcomes the sinners, covenant outcasts, and gentiles into His kingdom (see Mt 8:1-13, 9:9-13). He even praises the faith of a Roman centurion and the humility of a Syro-Phoenecian woman as more remarkable than the faith He has witnessed in Israel.

Indeed, His final act before ascending into heaven is to remind the Church of its worldwide mission:

Read Matthew 28:18-20.

9. How does the Old Testament background give us a deeper understanding of the mission of the Church? What is Jesus commanding his disciples in this passage, and how does this fit with what God has been trying to do with his people from the beginning?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: This mission of Jesus to the Jews, the Samaritans, and the gentiles is continued in the Church. In fact, the Book of Acts reveals the Church's mission as a recapitulation of Christ's public ministry.

Read Acts 1:1.

10. Acts of the Apostles begins with a subtle but important point: “In the first book...I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts. 1:1). What is this “first book”?

Answer: It is the Gospel of Luke.

Please read aloud:

11. Acts 1:1 reminds us that Luke's Gospel is just the start of what Jesus *began* to do and teach. What does the word "began" imply in this context? And what does this tell us about the Church?

Answer: In this second volume, known as the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will focus on what Jesus continues to do and teach through His Church. This highlights a fundamental principle: What Jesus did in His physical body two thousand years ago, He continues to do throughout history in His mystical body, the Church.

Please read aloud: Indeed, just as Jesus had proclaimed His kingdom to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the gentiles, so now He commands His disciples to do the same. He tells them, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

This single verse serves as a table of contents for the evangelical mission of the early Church as outlined in Acts of the Apostles. The apostles, like their Master, they begin their ministry in Jerusalem, sharing the Gospel of the King with Jews from all over the world (Acts 2). Soon the Gospel spreads to Judea and then to Samaria, as multitudes outside Jerusalem are drawn into the Church (Acts 8). After the conversion of Paul (Acts 9), he and the other Christian leaders take the Gospel of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth, moving outward through Asia Minor, Greece, and all the way to the heart of Roman Empire, the capital city of Rome itself (Acts 28:31).

Thus, at the end of Acts, this universal kingdom, which began with the mustard seed of Jesus' life, is now firmly rooted in Rome under the leadership of Peter and Paul. Its branches have extended throughout the known world, through the witness of the apostles and those men

they appointed to succeed them to gather all nations into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Indeed, God's third promise to Abraham for a worldwide family is now being fulfilled through Jesus Christ and the Church He established.

12. The Church is, in a certain sense, God's plan from the beginning (see CCC 759). How does viewing the Church as the means by which God wants to bless the whole human family change the way you view it? And what does it mean for you, personally, to be included in this mission of the Church? How are you called to extend this blessing to others?

Allow the group to discuss.

13. We are now at the end of our study on salvation history. What did you think? What have you learned? How has God worked in your life throughout this study? What are you still pondering? And what are some next steps you hope to take in your understanding of the Scriptures and God's plan for your life?

Allow the group to discuss.

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