

BEGINNINGS

Understanding the Book of Genesis
(Part 2)

GENESIS

Life Hope & Truth



WHY STUDY THE BOOK OF GENESIS?

The book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible. But its place as the first of 66 books that make up the Bible is not by happenstance. Its common name—Genesis—is a Greek word that means “beginning” or “origins.” The Hebrew title of the book is *Bereshith*, which is drawn from the opening words—*in the beginning*. As the book of beginnings, Genesis truly is one of the most foundational books in the entire Bible.

This amazing book not only contains some of the best-known stories of the Bible, it also contains *answers*. Many of the mysteries of the universe are revealed in the opening pages of the book of Genesis. Unfortunately, it is almost unanimously rejected by secular historians and scientists. But if you accept the premise that the entire Bible is the inspired Word of God—the revelation of truth by the Creator of all things—you have to accept that He is the only being who could possibly write a book that contains these answers (2 Timothy 3:16).

Though Genesis is not solely a book of science, biology, anthropology or history, it contains the origins and answers that all of those fields study. But it does not just provide the origins of the world around us; it reveals spiritual truths that go beyond *what* God created. It reveals *why*.

As the book of foundations, it provides the foundation to many truths revealed throughout the rest of the Bible. For instance, in just the first three chapters we learn the identity of the Creator God, His nature, how He brought the physical universe into existence, why mankind is

so different from the animal kingdom, the origin of marriage, and the cause for all evil and suffering in the world. These just scratch the surface of all that is revealed in this book.

Because this book is so important to understanding the Bible, we have prepared this special publication. The purpose of this study guide is to help you understand this extraordinary book—both its contents and how it fits into the rest of the Bible. Every commentary note will provide multiple scriptures that will unlock the deep meanings contained in the book. You will find that by understanding the book of Genesis, you will gain a more thorough understanding of the entire Bible. And, likewise, the rest of the Bible will help you gain a more thorough understanding of the book of Genesis.

This study guide will take you chronologically through Genesis by highlighting the key verses in the text. Often, one verse will be used to explain an entire section or chapter. We recommend using this as a complement to your personal study of the book. As you read through the book on your own, use the commentary notes on the selected scripture to understand the contents more deeply. You’ll find it helpful to look up and read on your own the many reference scriptures provided in the notes.

As Part 2, this study guide begins in Genesis chapter 12. (For commentary on chapters 1-11 of Genesis, see [Beginnings: Understanding the Book of Genesis, Part 1](#).)

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

- Chapters 1-2:** Prehistory and the creation of the universe and humankind.
- Chapters 3-4:** Sin enters humanity.
- Chapter 5:** Genealogy of Adam.
- Chapter 6:** The corruption of the antediluvian (pre-Flood) world.
- Chapters 7-9:** God instructs Noah to build an ark. The Flood and Noachian Covenant.
- Chapter 10:** The origin of nations and peoples descended from Noah.
- Chapter 11:** The Tower of Babel. Mankind spreads throughout the earth.
- Chapter 12:** God begins working with Abram to start a special nation.
- Chapters 13-26:** Abraham's life and the birth of Ishmael and Isaac.
- Chapters 27-35:** The life of Jacob.
- Chapter 36:** Genealogy of Esau.
- Chapters 37-47:** The life of Joseph.
- Chapter 38:** Judah and Tamar incident (inset).
- Chapter 48:** Blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh.
- Chapter 49:** Prophecies for the descendants of Jacob's sons.
- Chapter 50:** The death of Jacob and Joseph.

GENESIS 12: GOD CALLS ABRAM TO START A SPECIAL NATION

GET OUT OF YOUR COUNTRY

Genesis 12:1: "Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.'"

God directly commanded Abram to leave his homeland. Note that this is the command that resulted in what we read in Genesis 11:31. The command was given to Abram at Ur of the Chaldeans and resulted in Abram's household—including his father (Terah) and nephew (Lot)—leaving Ur and traveling north to Haran en route to the land of Canaan.

The city of Haran was a natural stopping point. The name *Haran* means "crossroads" (*New Bible Dictionary*, p. 453). Perhaps it gained this name because it was a major trading city that was located at the crossroads of three major regions—Syria (to the southwest), Assyria (to the east) and Mesopotamia (to the southeast). Haran would have been a bustling center with many cultures and religions represented.

This verse introduces a promise that God would make to Abram that was dependent on Abram faithfully obeying this simple command—to leave his homeland and go to the land where God would lead him.

The book of Hebrews shows that God was testing Abram (or Abraham, as he was later called) on two key elements of his character: *faith* and *obedience*. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

Would Abram have the faith necessary to trust a God he had never seen to lead him to a place he had never seen? Essentially, Abram had to decide if he would trust and rely on what he could not see with his eyes.

This is one of the major reasons Abram is called "the father of all those who believe" (Romans 4:11). His life is a model for Christians today to follow. Like Abram, who believed and obeyed God through *faith*, Christians today are also called to follow a God they have never seen and to move toward a Kingdom they have never experienced (Hebrews 11:6). Christians today do not receive an

Key Concepts to Know

- Why Abram was told to leave
- Faith
- Obedience
- Coming out of this world

audible command from God; they are expected to follow His direction in the Word of God—the Bible (Matthew 4:4).

But God’s command to “get out of your country” also teaches another vital lesson.

The society in which Abram grew up (Ur of the Chaldeans) was a society characterized by Babylonian paganism. Ur was particularly known for worship of the moon god. In order to truly follow God, Abram had to leave this culture and relocate to the place God would lead him. He had to go to an environment where he could better practice faith in and worship of the true God.

In this, Abram’s life is a type of the Christian’s life today. No, Christians are not called to geographically leave their homeland. But Christians are called to come out of this world *spiritually*. When a person commits to following God in faith, he or she must *spiritually* leave this world and its ways, while physically operating within it (John 17:14-15).

Here are three important points to keep in mind as we strive to leave this world:

- **Truth makes us different.** Jesus Christ revealed that Christians are to be *sanctified*—set apart—by truth. Truth is defined as the entire revelation of God through His Word (John 17:17).
- **Coming out of the world begins in the mind.** The apostle Paul revealed that not being “conformed to this world” begins by being “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2).
- **Go out, and come in.** God does not merely call us out of the world around us. Abram *went out* of Ur to *come into* the Promised Land. Christians are called out of the world to pursue the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). But there is another step along the way. God wants His people to journey to the Kingdom of God *together*. That is why Jesus Christ founded the **Church of God** (Matthew 16:18).

To learn more about Abram’s faith, read “[The Faith of Abraham](#).”

Questions:

1. **Where did Abram travel to after God commanded him to leave his homeland?**
 2. **What two elements of Abram’s character was God testing when He commanded him to leave his homeland?**
 3. **What lesson can Christians learn today from Abram’s example of leaving his homeland?**
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A GREAT NATION AND A BLESSING

Genesis 12:2-3: “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

We now are introduced to two promises God made about Abram’s descendants:

1. **A promise of national greatness.**
2. **A promise of grace through the Messiah.**

Key Concepts to Know

- **Promise of national greatness**
- **Promise of spiritual blessings**

Let’s first focus on the first promise. Abram is told that *if* he follows God, he will become the progenitor of “a great nation.” This is the promise that an important physical nation would descend from Abram (later, Abraham).

Notice the characteristics of this “great nation”:

- It would be blessed.
- It would have a great name.
- It would be a blessing to other nations.

These characteristics describe a powerful nation. As the book of Genesis progresses, God adds more details to this promise of a great nation. Some of the further details include:

- A population that would be “as the dust of the earth” (Genesis 13:16).
- Many nations (not just one) and kings would descend from Abraham (17:5-6).
- The national promises would be fulfilled through Abraham’s future son Isaac (21:12). Isaac would then pass these blessings on to his son Jacob (27:27-29). Jacob would then pass them along to his sons.
- The national promises would include strategic possessions that would allow Abraham’s descendants to control “the gate of their enemies” (22:17).
- The primary physical blessings would be split between two nations—the descendants of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (48:14-20; 49:22-26).
- There would be many other nations (the descendants of Jacob’s 11 other sons) who would also receive blessings through Abraham (49:1-28).

Later in this study guide we will discuss how these promises provide keys to identifying the modern descendants of Abraham.

The second aspect of this blessing was: “And in you [Abram] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Though the national blessings would provide some blessings for other nations as well, this blessing has a much broader fulfillment. There would be a specific blessing that would come through Abram that wouldn't just affect his descendants, but would bless all peoples of the earth.

This blessing is restated in Genesis 22:18 with one important detail added: "In your *seed* all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (emphasis added throughout).

What—or who—is this "seed" of Abraham that would bless all peoples? The answer is found in Galatians 3:16: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ."

Jesus Christ, who was physically a descendant of Abram, was the Seed through whom all the earth would be blessed. The spiritual blessings that have come to the world through Jesus Christ include:

- Grace and forgiveness of sin (Acts 13:38; Romans 3:24; 5:15-17; Titus 2:11).
- The extension of the spiritual blessings of Abram to all peoples (Galatians 3:28-29).
- The opportunity for all peoples to receive salvation in the Kingdom of God (1 Thessalonians 5:9; 2 Timothy 2:10; Hebrews 5:9).
- The future defeat of the enemy of all people—Satan the devil (Genesis 3:15; Romans 16:20).

The study of the promises to Abraham is a large topic. To learn more, read "[How the Blessings of Abraham Came to the United States](#)" and "[God's Promise to Abraham](#)."

Questions:

1. What are the two elements of the blessing God gave Abram in Genesis 12:2-3?
 2. Through which of Abram's descendants were the promises of national greatness to be fulfilled?
 3. Through whom were the spiritual promises to be fulfilled?
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ABRAM DEPARTS

Genesis 12:4-5: "So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan."

Abram left Ur of the Chaldeans because God commanded him to leave his homeland and journey to "a land

that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). His caravan stopped and stayed in Haran for a number of years. After the death of Abram's father, Terah, Abram left Haran to continue his journey to the land to which God was leading him—Canaan.

Don't read over this simple statement: "Abram departed."

This was an act of great faith and obedience. At the age of 75, Abram was well-established in life, yet he was willing to relocate to a land completely unknown to him with God's promise that he would become the father of a great nation via his descendants. This alone, if viewed physically, would seem impossible. Abram and his wife had no children, and the Scripture explains that Sarai was "barren" (unable to have children—Genesis 11:30).

Put yourself in Abram's shoes. What if you were told to leave your familiar surroundings to travel to an unknown destination with no knowledge of where you were going and what you would encounter along the way?

The book of Hebrews describes Abraham's amazing example of faith this way: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

Abram's journey to Canaan

Genesis 12:5 gives us a broader perspective of Abram's relocation to the land to which God was leading him. Abram was not a lone, nomadic wanderer, but was actually a successful man who had attained a respectable level of wealth.

With his caravan, Abram left Haran and headed southwest to the land of Canaan. This geographical area (presently consisting of much of the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories) was inhabited by the Canaanites, descendants of Noah's son Ham (Genesis 9:18; 10:15-19). The Canaanites were a pagan people who worshipped the false god Baal, and their religious and cultural practices

Key Concepts to Know

- Abram's faith to leave his homeland
- The Canaanites
- Abram's sojourn in Egypt and deception of Pharaoh

would prove to be a continual problem for the descendants of Abram who did not obey God's command to rid the land of idolatry.

A hint of the religious practices of the Canaanites is found in Genesis 12:6, which refers to "the terebinth tree of Moreh." This was apparently a tree worshipped by the Canaanites and used as an oracle for guidance.

Trees were commonly used as objects of worship in ancient pagan religions. A remnant of these ancient customs remains in the modern **Christmas** tree tradition.

After Abram arrived in Canaan, God appeared to him once again and reconfirmed His promises. In response to his encounter with God, Abram built an altar and (for the first recorded time) engaged in formal worship of the true God.

We are given little detail about Abram's first sojourn in Canaan. We see that a famine in Canaan (verse 10) caused Abram to head south through the Negev desert to Egypt.

The remainder of Genesis 12 tells of Abram's encounter with the Egyptian Pharaoh. When Abram's caravan approached Egypt, Abram became concerned that Sarai's beauty would attract the attention of the Egyptians and result in his being killed to get to her (verses 11-12). Instead of trusting God, Abram asked Sarai to portray herself as his sister, not his wife. He believed the Egyptians wouldn't threaten him if they thought Sarai was merely his sister.

Though Sarai was his wife, she was also his half-sister—the daughter of Terah through another mother (Genesis 20:12).

Abram's intention to deceive was a sin. The account clearly shows the negative consequences of that deception (Genesis 12:17-20).

The Bible stands apart from other religious documents because it presents *both* the triumphs and failures of the men and women with whom God was working. To learn more about the purpose of Old Testament accounts of the strengths and weaknesses of the people with whom God worked, study 1 Corinthians 10:1-13.

Questions:

1. How old was Abram when he left his homeland?
 2. Who occupied the land God was giving Abram's descendants, and what were they noted for?
 3. What mistake did Abram make while he sojourned in Egypt?
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GENESIS 13: ABRAM AND LOT

ABRAM AND LOT SEPARATE

Genesis 13:8: "So Abram said to Lot, 'Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren.'"

After the incident in Egypt, Abram's caravan left Egypt and moved back northeast to the land of Canaan.

We are given this key description of Abram's caravan: "Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (Genesis 13:2).

Both Abram and Lot had become so prosperous that they could not live side by side in the land of Canaan. We are told that "the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together" (verse 6). Apparently, a lack of sufficient grazing land for their livestock led to conflict between the servants of Abram and Lot (verse 7). It became necessary for them to separate.

Abram's way of dealing with this issue holds keys to helping us handle conflicts with other people.

Abram's first step was to honestly and respectfully discuss the problem. He said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren" (verse 8).

He then proposed a solution to the conflict: "Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left" (verse 9).

The result was that Lot chose the best land (verses 10-12), while Abram ended up with the land that was less desirable (verse 12).

Here are lessons we can learn from how Abram handled this situation:

- **Abram's first priority was peace.** As the older person in the family, Abram could have "pulled rank" on Lot and dealt with the issue in a manner that would have benefited his needs first. Instead, he dealt with the issue in a way that made peace the priority. Jesus Christ taught that being a "peacemaker" (Matthew 5:9) is an essential characteristic of a true Christian. We are to "pursue peace with all people" (Hebrews 12:14).

Key Concepts to Know

- Abram and Lot separate
- Principles of peacemaking

- **Abram used gentle words to prevent an escalation of the issue.** Abram’s words to Lot were not harsh and confrontational. They were gentle and kind. He emphasized that they were family and that strife should not exist between family members, and he offered a solution that minimized the chance of the conflict escalating. Christians are expected to demonstrate gentleness and patience when dealing with other people (2 Timothy 2:24; Titus 3:2; Romans 12:18).
- **Abram was willing to take a loss for the sake of peace.** Abram’s solution for bringing peace involved giving Lot first choice of where to settle. Lot, taking advantage of Abram’s kindness, jumped at the opportunity to take the best land for himself. Abram had to take the less fertile land because of his offer to maintain peace. One of the aspects of godly wisdom is being “willing to yield” (James 3:17). Sometimes it is necessary for us to take a personal loss—in other words, sacrifice—for the sake of having peace with others. (Caution: This does not mean one should endure abuse in a relationship such as marriage in order to maintain peace. Abuse is never acceptable behavior.)

Recommended reading: Luke 6:31; Ephesians 4; 1 Thessalonians 5:13.

To learn more about making peace in your life, read [“The Way of Peace.”](#)

Questions:

1. Why did Abram and Lot decide to separate?
 2. What can we learn about maintaining peace with others from how Abram handled the separation with Lot?
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LOT SETTLES NEAR SODOM

Genesis 13:12: “Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent even as far as Sodom.”

This verse tells us the locations where each man settled: Abram settled in a rural area, while Lot lived near the cities on the plain of the Jordan River.

But there was a problem with the location Lot chose to be his home. It was near the city of Sodom. The men of

Sodom were “exceedingly wicked and sinful against the LORD” (Genesis 13:13).

The Bible gives more detail about the specific problems that existed among Sodom’s population:

- There were no restraints on sexual activity; the people were driven by unbridled sexual lust and homosexuality (Genesis 19:4-5; Jude 1:7).
- They were characterized by selfishness, laziness and lack of concern for others (Ezekiel 16:49).
- They openly displayed their sin with no sense of shame (Isaiah 3:9).

These sins were obviously well known at the

time, but it seems Lot ignored them because he looked at the physical advantages of living in that area. It seems he minimized the danger of living among and spending time with people living this lifestyle. We will soon see the negative consequences of this decision (2 Peter 2:8).

The point for us to learn is that we cannot draw close to people who flagrantly sin and think we will be unaffected. This can apply to where we choose to live, but the modern application primarily refers to wisely choosing those with whom we spend our time. The apostle Paul provided this guidance: “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Christians must not make the same mistake as Lot did and think they will be unaffected by a sinful environment. While we must still live in a world that is polluted with sin, we can choose how and with whom we will spend our time (John 17:15; 2 Peter 2:20; Ephesians 5:11).

Recommended reading: Luke 22:40; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20; James 1:13-15; 1 John 2:15-17.

To learn more about how to avoid negative influences, read our article [“Temptation.”](#)

Key Concepts to Know

- Sodom’s reputation
- The dangers of living near open sinfulness

Questions:

1. Where did Lot decide to settle after he separated from Abram?
 2. What were the three major sins of the people who lived where Lot settled?
 3. What is the greatest spiritual danger of surrounding yourself with sinfulness?
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GENESIS 14: ABRAM AND THE MYSTERIOUS MAN OF SALEM

ABRAM AND MELCHIZEDEK

Genesis 14:18: “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High.”

Genesis 14 describes a battle between an army from Mesopotamia and some of the kings of the land of Canaan. We read that Lot was among those taken captive (verses 14-17). Abram took 318 of his servants and, in a surprise attack at night, defeated the invading army, recovering Lot, all the goods and all the people who had been taken captive.

After this daring rescue operation, we are introduced to an interesting person—Melchizedek.

Though we are not given many details about this

Man here in Genesis, we do learn five important things about Melchizedek:

- He served as “king of Salem.” Salem is a shortened form of Jerusalem (Psalm 76:2), but it’s also important to remember that the literal meaning of *salem* is peace. So, Melchizedek’s title could also be “the king of peace.”
- He “brought out bread and wine.” Could this have foreshadowed the Passover symbols later instituted by Jesus Christ in Matthew 26:26-29?
- He served as “the priest of God Most High.” A priest served as an intermediary between God and the people by officiating over sacrifices and offerings (Hebrews 8:3; 10:11).
- He blessed Abram (Genesis 14:19-20). Blessings ultimately come from God toward human beings (James 1:17).
- He received a tithe from Abram (Genesis 14:20). This shows us that Abram gave a tenth (a tithe) of the goods to Melchizedek.

Key Concepts to Know

- **Melchizedek, the Priest and King of Salem**
- **Melchizedek’s identity as the One who later came as Jesus Christ**
- **Role of High Priest**

It is obvious that Melchizedek was more than just a king over a geographical location in Canaan. Who was this mysterious individual?

The amazing identity of Melchizedek

Who was this mysterious individual named Melchizedek? In order to understand the full significance of Melchizedek, we have to go to the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews reveals that Melchizedek’s true identity was much more than a king over a city-state in Canaan.

In Hebrews 5:5 and 10 we learn that Jesus Christ is the High Priest of the New Covenant “according to the order of Melchizedek.” This means that Jesus Christ does not serve as a priest according to the human Aaronic order (Exodus 28:1). The point is that Christ serves as a priest according to a priestly order that is higher than any *human* order of priests.

This is our first clue that Melchizedek was more than a local king.

Additional details about Melchizedek found in Hebrews 7 include:

- Melchizedek’s name is translated as “king of righteousness” (verse 2). This shows us that Melchizedek was much more than a king and priest over a geographical location in Canaan. He was the King of *Righteousness* and *Peace*.
- Melchizedek had no physical parents or genealogy (verse 3).
- Melchizedek had neither “beginning of days nor end of life” (verse 3). This essentially tells us that Melchizedek was an *eternal being*. John 1:1-3 reveals that there are only two Beings who existed in the beginning (before the creation of everything, angelic or physical)—the Father and the Word (who became Jesus Christ).

The above points lead us to an amazing conclusion about the identity of Melchizedek: Melchizedek was the Being called “the Word” (John 1:1-3).

Melchizedek was Jesus Christ!

When Christians pray to the Father today, they pray *in the name* of Jesus Christ (John 14:14; 16:23-24; Hebrews 7:25). Christ now fills the role of High Priest—the Intercessor—of the New Covenant, according to the spiritual priestly order of Melchizedek.

Recommended reading: Hebrews 7.

To see more proof that Melchizedek was the One who later came as Jesus Christ, read our article “[Who Was Melchizedek?](#)”

Questions:

1. What was Melchizedek's title and what does it mean?
 2. What is the meaning of the name *Melchizedek*?
 3. What percentage of the goods did Abram give to Melchizedek?
 4. What does the book of Hebrews reveal about Jesus Christ's connection to the office of Melchizedek?
 5. When we put together all the information about Melchizedek, from Genesis and Hebrews, what do we discover about Melchizedek's identity?
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A TITHE OF ALL

Genesis 14:20: "And he gave him a tithe of all."

This is the first time that the word *tithe* is used in the Bible. The Hebrew word for tithe is *ma'aser*, which simply means "a tenth part" (*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*). So, to tithe is to give a *tenth* (or 10 percent). In ancient Israel's agrarian society, examples of tithing often included agricultural increase (Deuteronomy 14:22). Today since economic exchange is primarily accomplished through money, tithing is practiced by giving one-tenth of one's monetary income.

This practice was later codified as a law in Leviticus 27:30 and Numbers 18:21. This was the system God put in place to finance *His work on earth*. In the Old Testament, that *work* was the religious and sacrificial duties the Levitical priests performed for the nation of Israel.

Notice that in Leviticus 27:30 the tithe is referred to as "the LORD's. It is holy to the LORD." "Holy" means set

Key Concepts to Know

- The definition of tithing
- Purposes for tithing
- New Testament teaching on tithing

aside for sacred use, and so the tithe actually belongs to God. He has ownership of all tithes.

But the Bible reveals that tithing is much more than just a "flat tax" to fund the religious functions of an ancient nation. The book of Malachi reveals that tithing is a much deeper spiritual principle and is a part of a person's relationship with and responsibility toward God.

God told the people of Malachi's day that they had robbed Him, and their reply was: "In what way have we robbed You?" God answered that they had robbed Him in tithes and offerings.

"You are cursed with a curse, for *you have robbed Me*, even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this, ... if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:8-10).

Tithing is a means of worshipping the true God. To not tithe of one's income is equated with *stealing from God*. God promises to bless a person for faithfully tithing.

Tithing was reinforced by Jesus Christ in Matthew 23:23 as something a Christian *ought* to do. Today God's work is not done through Levitical priests, but instead by the ministers of Jesus Christ, who serves as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:11). The work of God continues to be funded by tithes and offerings (1 Corinthians 9:13-14 and Hebrews 7:1-12 strongly indicate this).

Tithing is a law of God and illustrates one of the ways that God expects His people to be living a life based on the principle of *give* (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Recommended reading: Proverbs 3:9-10; Matthew 6:1-4; Mark 12:41-44; Hebrews 7:1-2.

To learn more about the law of tithing, read our article "[Tithing: What Is It?](#)"

Questions:

1. What is the literal meaning of the word *tithe*?
 2. What was the purpose God used tithing for in ancient Israel?
 3. What does the Bible equate *not* tithing to?
 4. Why should Christians continue to tithe today?
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GENESIS 15: GOD PROMISES ABRAM AN HEIR

GOD'S SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE PROMISE

Genesis 15:5-6: "Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness."

After Abram freed Lot from captivity, we read of a conversation Abram had with God through a vision (Genesis 15:1). God reinforced to Abram that He would protect Abram and be his "reward." But Abram had questions. How could God start a nation from his descendants since he and his wife were aged and had no offspring (verses 2-3)?

God answered Abram and specifically assured him that "one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (verse 4).

Just having a child seemed totally outside the realm of possibility to Abram—but God then promised even more. He promised that the descendants that came from Abram's body would be innumerable like the stars in the sky!

Abram was faced with a choice. Would he believe that seemingly impossible promise? Would he trust and believe that God had the power to make it happen, despite the physical circumstances?

Abram chooses to believe in faith

Verse 6 reveals Abram's decision. *He believed God.*

Believing God when His promises seem impossible is called *faith*. **Faith** is a required element of a Christian's life.

The apostle Paul, in the New Testament, used this part of Abram's life as a vital lesson for Christians. Just as Abram believed through faith, so we must believe through faith. Those who demonstrate this same kind of faith are considered spiritual "sons of Abraham"

Key Concepts to Know

- Abram believes the impossible
- Faith
- The connection between faith and righteousness

(Galatians 3:7, 9). We are also told that Abram's faith made him a "friend of God" (James 2:23). Study Romans 4:3-6 and 9 to learn how Paul connected Abram's faith with true Christianity.

Righteousness is the state of being *right with God*. In other words, righteousness is being in line with God by demonstrating His perfect character. That can only come by:

- Believing that God is God and having faith that He *will* fulfill His promises (Hebrews 11:6).
- Repenting of the sins that separate us from His perfect character and being baptized (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38).
- Committing to live by His **commandments**, which define His righteousness (Psalm 119:172).

This verse—Genesis 15:6—teaches us that the process of becoming a righteous person begins with one simple requirement—belief in the true God.

Recommended reading: John 5:24; Galatians 3:6-9; Hebrews 11:8-12.

To learn more lessons about faithful Abram, read our article "[The Faith of Abraham](#)."

Questions:

1. Why did God's promise that Abram would have countless descendants seem impossible?
 2. What lesson does Abram's belief in God's seemingly impossible promise teach us?
 3. How is faith connected to righteousness?
-

THE FUTURE OF ABRAM AND HIS DESCENDANTS

Genesis 15:13, 15: "Then He said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. ... Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.'"

In the last reading, we read God's reaffirmation of His promise to Abram—that his descendants would be like the stars in number (Genesis 15:5). Abram believed that promise despite how unlikely it seemed (verse 6).

Here God revealed that His promise would not be fulfilled until after the descendants of Abram (later called "Israelites" after his grandson Israel) would be

“strangers in a land that is not theirs” for 400 years.

This is a prophecy that includes the sojourning of the descendants of Abram in Canaan and later Egypt. The

later chapters of the book of Genesis explain how the Israelites ended up in Egypt due to Joseph’s position and a famine in Canaan (Genesis 42-50). After the death of Joseph, a new pharaoh arose in Egypt who did not know and respect Joseph’s legacy and who enslaved the Israelites (Exodus 1:8-11).

The book of Exodus is the record of how Israel was delivered from Egypt through God’s servant Moses.

We can learn a very important lesson from this: God’s people often have to endure trials and sufferings before they can experience the fullness of God’s promises. God’s ultimate promise is eternal life in the Kingdom of God. The Bible teaches that “we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Abram to die before receiving the promises

Abram was then told that he would die “in peace” before his descendants would become a nation. Genesis 25:8 records his death.

This is another example of Abram demonstrating great faith and seeing beyond the “here and now.” Despite knowing he wouldn’t physically see the fulfillment of these promises, he continued to have faith in God and obey Him.

Hebrews 11 (commonly called “the Faith Chapter”) provides us more insight into the core motivation that drove Abraham to continue to be faithful to God: “For he [Abraham] waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (verse 10).

Abram’s focus was not just on the fulfillment of the physical promise of founding a nation, but ultimately on the greater promise of the Kingdom of God! Abraham, and the other faithful personalities of the Bible, “embraced” this vision and saw it “afar off” (Hebrews 11:13).

Christians through the centuries have realized that they would likely die before receiving the promise (Hebrews 9:27), but remained faithful to the vision of the Kingdom of God by continuing to live their lives “in holy conduct and godliness” (2 Peter 3:11).

Recommended reading: Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 6:33.

Key Concepts to Know

- The future of Abram’s descendants
- Abram to die before promises fulfilled

Questions:

1. What would happen to Abram’s descendants before God’s promises would be fulfilled?
 2. What lesson can we learn from Abram’s realization that he would not personally see the fulfillment of the promises in his lifetime?
-

GENESIS 16: ABRAM AND SARAI’S COMPROMISE

SARAI’S FAITHLESS SOLUTION AND THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

Genesis 16:1, 11: “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ... And the Angel of the LORD said to her: ‘Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction.’”

We are now introduced to the beginning of a sad twist that took place in the life of Abram. Abram believed God’s promises (Genesis 15:6), but his wife had doubts as to *how* God would fulfill the promise. Sarai was about 75 years old and had never been able to have a child, so the fulfillment of the promise through her seemed impossible.

Instead of having faith that God *could* and *would* work it out, Sarai began to try to work it out herself. Sarai had a maidservant named Hagar who helped tend to her needs.

Sarai then proposed that Abram “go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her” (Genesis 16:2). Sarai’s proposal was for Hagar to serve as a surrogate mother to carry a child for Sarai.

Key Concepts to Know

- Sarai’s doubt
- Hagar as a surrogate mother
- Ishmael
- The future of Ishmael’s descendants

The problem was that God never proposed—or needed—this to be the solution to Sarai’s infertility. This was a solution based on a lack of faith in God’s ability to perform a miracle. Unfortunately, Abram heeded Sarai’s suggestion and impregnated Hagar (verse 4).

The lesson for Christians today is that we must avoid taking situations into our own hands against God’s will. Christians *must* demonstrate faith when it comes to God’s promises and laws. The Bible teaches that “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

When Christians lack faith, instead of taking matters into their own hands, they should pray for more faith (Mark 9:24; Luke 17:5) and diligently study the Bible to understand the will of God (Romans 10:17).

Ishmael

Though a child, named Ishmael, was born to Abram through Hagar, God did not intend to fulfill His promises to Abram through Sarai’s solution. God’s intention was to provide Abram and Sarai a child through a miracle.

After Hagar conceived, Sarai “dealt harshly” with her (Genesis 16:6). The Bible shows that the [marriage covenant](#) is intended to be between one husband and one wife, and anything else brings negative results.

Because of Sarai’s mistreatment, Hagar fled to the wilderness. The “Angel of the LORD” found her there and commanded her to return to Sarai. He then encouraged her by telling her that Ishmael would live and would have a “multitude” of descendants (verse 10)—forming a “great nation” (Genesis 17:20).

Ishmael would be “a wild man” and would often be involved in conflict (Genesis 16:12). The descendants of Ishmael can be identified as many of the Arab peoples today, and they have experienced a long history of conflict.

Today many of the descendants of Ishmael are united through the religion of Islam. Psalm 83 describes an Arab confederacy united against Israel. Ishmael’s descendants will likely be a part of the final “king of the South” prophesied in Daniel 11:40. To learn more about Ishmael’s descendants in prophecy, read our informative article “[The King of the South](#).”

The God Who Sees

After God commanded Hagar to return to Sarai and assured her that her son would live and have descendants, she described God as *the God Who Sees*: “Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-

God-Who-Sees; for she said, ‘Have I also here seen Him who sees me?’” (Genesis 16:13).

This is unique because Hagar is the only person in the Bible who gives a name to God (*El Roi*). God typically revealed names and titles *to* His servants.

This name reveals an essential element of [God’s power](#)—His omniscience. In other words, God is able to see and know everything that is happening. God has the power and ability to look “to the ends of the earth, and [see] under the whole heavens” (Job 28:24). The Bible reveals that “the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

This doesn’t just show us an ability of God; it reveals a vital part of His character: *God deeply cares for His people*.

Recommended reading: Study these scriptures to learn more about God’s concern for His people—especially when they face difficult circumstances: Psalms 46:1; 91:7; Nahum 1:7; Romans 8:35.

Questions:

1. What solution did Sarai propose in order for Abram to have a child to fulfill what God had promised him?
 2. What was the problem with Sarai’s idea?
 3. Who are the descendants of Ishmael today?
 4. What name did Hagar use to describe God?
-

GENESIS 17: ABRAM’S NEW NAME

A NEW NAME, A NEW SIGN AND A NEW SON

Genesis 17:5, 10, 16: “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. ... This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants

Key Concepts to Know

- Abram becomes Abraham
- Circumcision of the flesh
- Circumcision of the heart
- Sarah to have a son

after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised. ... And I will bless her [Sarah] and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her."

God changed Abram's name to Abraham to represent what would be done through him because of God's promises.

His original name, Abram, means "exalted father" in Hebrew. His new name, Abraham, means "father of a multitude" (*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*).

Abraham's name now represented how he was being used by God—as the beginning of a nation with whom God would work. We also read that his wife Sarai's name was changed to Sarah (verse 15).

Abraham and Sarah were not the only people whose names were changed by God. Others include Jacob (changed to Israel), Simon (to Peter) and Saul (to Paul). The Bible also reveals that true Christians will bear a "new name" when they enter the family of God (Revelation 3:12).

The sign of circumcision

In Genesis 17:10 we are introduced to the *sign*—the physical act denoting one's participation—of the covenant God made with Abraham. The sign was that all of Abraham's male descendants would undergo circumcision, which is the removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ. Circumcision was an act of obedience to identify Abraham's descendants and others who came into the community of Israel (Exodus 12:48).

This sign represented what God truly wanted from Abraham's descendants: faithfulness to God down to their innermost being—their hearts. Under the Old Covenant, however, this desire of God could never be fulfilled by a physical act.

Later in the Bible, God reveals the spiritual principle that circumcision under the Old Covenant foreshadowed: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your hearts" (Jeremiah 4:4).

Under the New Covenant, "he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Romans 2:29). The sign of entrance into the New Covenant is baptism (Acts 22:16; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21).

To learn more about the meaning of circumcision, read "Circumcision: Change in God's Law?"

How God would fulfill His promise to Abraham

After God changed the name of Abraham's wife to Sarah, He revealed *how* He would fulfill the promise of making Abraham the father of many peoples: He would miraculously enable Sarah to become pregnant.

"Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (Genesis 17:17). Abraham still hoped that his son Ishmael would be used to fulfill the promise (verse 18).

But God doesn't operate based on human ideas of how things should be done. He declared, "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:19).

This account holds a lesson for us. We must come to the point where we understand that:

- God's way of thinking is higher and greater than ours (Isaiah 55:9).
- We should not try to enforce our way of thinking on God—but allow God to reveal His will to us (Proverbs 3:5-6).
- Acting on God's will benefits us (Psalm 37:5; Romans 8:28).

Recommended reading: Study these scriptures to learn more about trusting God in our lives: Joshua 1:9; Psalms 28:7; 46:10; 1 Peter 5:7.

Questions:

1. What did Abram's new name, Abraham, mean?
 2. What spiritual lesson did the physical act of circumcision prefigure?
 3. How did God reveal He would fulfill His promise to Abraham?
-

GENESIS 19: THE SINS AND PUNISHMENT OF SODOM

THE SINS OF SODOM

Genesis 19:4: "Now before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter, surrounded the house."

This chapter begins with two angels entering Sodom to rescue Lot. Even though it appears Lot had no idea who they were or why they were in Sodom, he invited them to come to his home to have dinner and a place to rest. We see that Lot was very hospitable, as Christians should be (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2).

Key Concepts to Know

- Sodomites attempt to assault the visiting angels
- Homosexuality
- The many sins of Sodom
- Abraham's attempt to save Sodom

But these two visitors were quickly noticed by the town's inhabitants. This verse shows the level of Sodom's depravity, as men from every quarter of the city surrounded Lot's home and demanded he hand over the visitors so they could "know them carnally" (Genesis 19:5). The men living in Sodom wanted to have sexual relations with the men visiting Sodom. Both young and old men wanted to take turns raping these total strangers.

Homosexuality is a sin and an abomination to God (Leviticus 20:13). An abomination is something that is morally vile and disgusting.

God intended sexual relations to be only within marriage between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24). This marital relationship has deep meaning in God's plan (Ephesians 5:31-32; Revelation 19:7). To abuse this intimacy demeans God's plan and purpose for [sex and marriage](#).

However, sexual immorality was not the only sin of Sodom. Ezekiel 16:49-50 lists six iniquities God saw when He visited the city. In addition to sexual abominations were pride, fullness of food, abundance of idleness, abusing the poor and needy, and haughtiness. All of these sins led God to destroy Sodom (Jude 1:7; 2 Peter 2:6).

There is another important lesson to be learned from this incident. In Genesis 19:8 Lot offered his two virgin daughters to the perverted crowd. Why?

Some have stated that part of the culture of the time was to consider any guests under your roof as more important than one's family members. If this was the case, was Lot justified in God's eyes for offering his daughters? No.

What we learn about Lot here is that he had become so acclimated to the society around him, his righteousness had been compromised. The preceding chapters show how Lot moved first *toward* Sodom, then *near* Sodom and finally *into* Sodom. The more Christians get involved in

the world, the more the world will become part of us and the further we will drift from God's standards.

Lot may have thought it was okay to offer his daughters, but this was not what God wanted Lot to do. The angels, instead of allowing Lot to offer his daughters for the men to ravage, struck the men with blindness (Genesis 19:11).

Would God destroy the righteous also?

Immediately preceding this incident, we read an interesting account of these angels and the Lord (the One who became [Jesus Christ](#), see John 1) visiting Abraham and informing him of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-33). Abraham, who was concerned about Lot and his family, tried to bargain with God to spare the city for Lot's sake: "And Abraham came near and said, 'Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?'" (Genesis 18:23).

Abraham started by asking God if He would spare Sodom if there were 50 righteous people there, and he worked his way down to 10. God told Abraham that *if* He found even as few as 10 righteous people, He would spare the city.

In a similar way, at the time of the end, God will prevent total annihilation of all human life for the sake of His little flock (Matthew 24:22).

But, as we shall see, there weren't even 10 righteous people in Sodom.

Recommended reading: To learn more about God's definition of sexual sin, read Leviticus 18 and 1 Corinthians 6.

To learn more about what led to Sodom's downfall, be sure to read "[The New Morality and an Old City](#)" and "[Shades of Sodom and Gomorrah](#)."

Questions:

1. What did the men of Sodom attempt to do to Lot's visitors?
 2. Other than homosexuality, what sins does the Bible say Sodom was guilty of?
 3. When the Lord visited Abraham, what did He reveal would happen to Sodom?
-

LOT AND HIS FAMILY FLEE SODOM

Genesis 19:12: "Then the men said to Lot, 'Have you anyone else here? Son-in-law, your sons, your daughters,

and whomever you have in the city—take them out of this place!”

The two angels had struck with blindness those who attempted to rape them. Now these messengers of God told Lot to get his family *out* before they destroyed Sodom.

Just as Lot was warned to flee from the coming judgment of God, we, too, have been warned to come out of the world so we don't have to suffer the *wrath of God* (Revelation 18:4).

Yet Lot lingered.

Remember, it was still night when the angels told Lot to get his family together and leave. It was early in the morning when the angels finally took hold of the hands of Lot, his wife and their two daughters to get them out of the city (Genesis 19:16).

The angels revealed why it was necessary for Lot to go out immediately: “For we will destroy this place, because the outcry against them has grown great before the face of the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it” (Genesis 19:13).

When sinful behavior is not punished immediately, some think that it must be acceptable (Ecclesiastes 8:11). But God clearly says that judgment will come, even for evil things done in secret (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

God had heard, had seen and now had made the righteous judgment to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He chose to destroy these cities for at least two important reasons:

1. The entire cities were corrupt. If everyone was destroyed, then that lifestyle would not be taught to their children and future generations. In an instant, the problem would end. God will resurrect the inhabitants of Sodom and give them an opportunity to repent (Matthew 10:15).
2. This would be an example to the rest of mankind (Jude 1:7; 2 Peter 2:6). Our need to fear God is emphasized by what happened to those who openly mocked Him.

Just as destruction by fire and brimstone was God's righteous judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, the prophesied events of the Day of the Lord will be God's righteous judgment on this present world.

To learn more about God's coming judgment on our sinful world, study Matthew 24:29; Joel 2:30-31; Revelation 6:12-16.

Don't look back!

As the angels were instructing Lot and his family to flee, they warned them: “Do not look behind you” (verse 17). This signified that they were to totally *leave* Sodom, down to their hearts. They could not look back toward the way of life Sodom represented. But, as they were fleeing, Lot's wife made a grave mistake: *She looked back* (verse 26). Because of this, she became a pillar of salt.

Why did Lot's wife look back? Because, though she was leaving physically, her heart was still in Sodom. A couple of thousand years later, Jesus Christ warned us to *remember* Lot's wife (Luke 17:32).

Christians must be willing to forsake everything in order to follow Him (Luke 14:33)—including our family members, if need be (verse 26). By looking back, Lot's wife showed that she wasn't willing to forsake all in order to obey God. Maybe she didn't really count the cost and only hastily decided to leave Sodom.

Christ tells us that we have to *count the cost* before we decide to follow Him (verse 28). Once we decide to follow Christ, we are to move forward and *never* look back (Luke 9:62).

Recommended reading: To learn more about the need to fully come out of this world and its ways, read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; John 17:15; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15-17.

To learn more about God's coming judgment on our world, read “[What Is the Day of the Lord?](#)”

Key Concepts to Know

- **Lot warned to flee Sodom**
- **Coming out of this world**
- **Why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah**
- **The Day of the Lord**
- **The lesson of Lot's wife**

Questions:

1. **What did the visitors tell Lot and his family to do?**
 2. **As Lot and his family were leaving, what were they explicitly warned not to do?**
 3. **What did Lot's wife do and what was the consequence?**
 4. **What lesson can Christians learn from Lot's wife?**
-

GENESIS 21: THE BIRTH OF THE SON OF PROMISE

THE SON OF PROMISE

Genesis 21:2: “For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.”

Both Abraham and Sarah had laughed at the prospect of a child being born to a couple their age. They had thought that they could attain an

heir through Sarah’s bondwoman Hagar. In fact, Abraham had pleaded that Ishmael (his son through Hagar) might be considered his legitimate heir (Genesis 17:18).

But God fulfilled His promise in His own time, in the way He intended. Abraham and Sarah had to *wait* for God to provide the true son who would inherit their physical possessions and be the heir of the promises God made to Abraham: “For in Isaac your seed shall be called” (Genesis 21:12).

God kept His promise to Abraham exactly as He said He would, with no need for humanly devised shortcuts or solutions. Isaac, the son of promise, was miraculously born to a 90-year-old woman—obviously well past the normal age of childbearing—and a 100-year-old man.

This is an important lesson for Christians. We are told to wait patiently for God (Psalm 37:7; James 5:7). This means fighting off feelings such as “God has forgotten about me” or “the circumstances are too hard for God to act.” Such feelings can lead to our falling into the same trap that Abraham and Sarah did—trying to bring about God’s will in our own way.

After Isaac’s birth, Sarah became annoyed at the presence of Hagar and Ishmael. It reached a boiling point when she witnessed Ishmael “scoffing”—possibly at the young Isaac (Genesis 21:9). Sarah used this event to urge her husband to “cast out” Hagar and Ishmael, since it was clear Ishmael would not be Abraham’s heir (verse 10).

Abraham was displeased with the idea, but God confirmed to Abraham that Isaac would carry on his line—though He also promised that Ishmael’s descendants would

Key Concepts to Know

- Isaac becomes heir to the promises
- Hagar and Ishmael cast out
- Ishmael to become a nation

become a nation (verse 13). Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with bread and a skin of water.

Hagar and her teenage son, Ishmael, soon ran out of water and food in the harsh heat of the desert (likely the Negev desert to the south of Canaan). Resigned to their seemingly hopeless situation, Hagar placed Ishmael under some shrubs as he was slowly dying from thirst and starvation. She sat a short distance away so she would not have to witness his death (verse 16).

But God proved once again to be “The God Who Sees.”

As she was weeping, God intervened and spoke to her. He comforted and assured her that Ishmael would live and father “a great nation” (verse 18). God then miraculously provided water—saving their lives (verse 19).

God is a merciful and loving Father who sees and hears everything (Genesis 16:13). When we face dire circumstances, we should call on God in faith, knowing that He can and will hear us. Intervention may not always come the way we would want or expect. But it will be what God knows we need (in this case, water and hope for a future).

Consider these scriptures that reinforce this truth: Deuteronomy 3:22; Isaiah 41:10; 2 Kings 6:16.

God also assured Abraham that Ishmael’s descendants would become a nation (verse 13). The descendants of Ishmael are found among the Arab peoples today.

To learn more about the prophesied future of Ishmael’s descendants, read “[The King of the South](#).”

Questions:

1. How old was Sarah when she gave birth to Isaac?
 2. How did Sarah treat Hagar and Ishmael after the birth of Isaac?
 3. After God intervened to save Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, what did God prophesy would become of Ishmael’s descendants?
-

GENESIS 22: ABRAHAM FACES HIS GREATEST TEST

A TEST OF FAITH

Genesis 22:2: “Then He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of

Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

Try to imagine for a moment that you are Abraham. God has faithfully kept His promise to provide a son, Isaac. He is to be the heir through whom God will fulfill the promises He made years earlier.

Now, imagine being told to take that “son of promise”—and *kill him* with your own hands as a sacrifice to God. That is what God asked Abraham to do.

Though God never tempts us to sin, He does test our faith (James 1:3). Faith can be easy when our lives are operating smoothly. Faith, however, is most vital when things are difficult.

We can speculate about the turmoil that existed in Abraham’s mind as he wrestled with this command, but all we are told is what he did: “So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22:3).

Seemingly without any protest or questioning, Abraham immediately complied with God’s command.

He had faith that God knew what He was doing and would provide him with understanding in time. Notice Abraham’s statement as he left his men with Isaac: “Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and *we* will come back to you” (verse 5).

Why did Abraham say *we* would return when he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac?

We find the answer given centuries later in the book of Hebrews. Abraham believed “God was able to raise him [Isaac] up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense” (Hebrews 11:19).

God had given Abraham a son when it was a physical impossibility, so Abraham knew that the same God could give his son life a second time. He might not have known exactly *how*, but he maintained an absolute faith in God’s ability to fulfill the promises *through Isaac* (Genesis 17:19). Whatever might happen on Mount Moriah, Abraham faithfully trusted that he would be returning *with* his son.

Key Concepts to Know

- **God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac**
- **Abraham’s faith in God’s ability to resurrect the dead**
- **How Abraham proved his faithful obedience to God**

“Heartrending” probably doesn’t do justice to describe the internal anguish Abraham experienced as he lifted his knife to kill Isaac. Here is what happened:

“Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ So he said, ‘Here I am.’ And He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me’”(Genesis 22:10-12).

God had tested Abraham’s obedience and faith, and he had passed the test!

There are times in life when God wants to see what matters most to us. Is God most important? Or is something else? Abraham’s obedience to God even when faced with giving up the son he loved more than life itself is a powerful reminder about our need to put God first in our life.

(Note that what God asked Abraham to do prefigured what God Himself did in giving His Son. It was a one-time test for the one God would make the father of the faithful, not something God would ask any other parent to do.)

Study Jesus Christ’s words in Luke 14:26-33 to see the level of sacrifice Christ expects from His people—they must be willing to “forsake all” to be a disciple of Jesus Christ (Luke 14:33).

Sometimes this means obeying God, even if we may not fully understand the *why* of everything He commands. The Bible teaches that “a good understanding have all those who do His commandments” (Psalm 111:10). We gain understanding through obedience.

Recommended reading: To learn more about the importance of faithful obedience to God, read Deuteronomy 4:39-40; John 14:15; James 1:22-25.

To learn more about this test of Abraham’s faith, read [“God Tests Abraham’s Faith.”](#)

Questions:

1. **What surprising command did God give Abraham?**
 2. **How did Abraham respond to this difficult command?**
 3. **As Abraham was about to obey this command, how did he demonstrate faith in God’s promise to fulfill the promises through Isaac?**
 4. **What is one lesson we can learn from the example of Abraham’s willingness to obey such a difficult command?**
-

THE BLESSINGS BECOME UNCONDITIONAL

Genesis 22:16-18: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.

In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

Abraham was willing to obey God even when it meant sacrificing the son for whom he had waited so long, and God responded with an incredible promise. First, God swore by the greatest authority of all—Himself—and promised that “multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Genesis 22:17).

This moment in history is significant. At this point, the physical blessings promised to Abraham became unconditional. No matter what decisions Abraham’s descendants would make in the future, they would inherit the physical blessings described in verse 17.

History (both biblical and secular) has borne witness to the fact that God fulfilled this promise through the nation of Israel—Abraham’s descendants. These promises were fulfilled (in part) in ancient times by the kingdom of Israel and (more fully) in modern times through the United States and the British peoples. The connection between Abraham’s descendants and these modern nations will be explained more thoroughly later in this study guide.

One of the interesting elements of these promises is that the descendants of Israel would “possess the gate of their enemies.” This blessing was fulfilled in strategic land and sea passages, such as the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar and Hong Kong, which have been controlled by the United States and

Britain (though many have been lost over time, also in fulfillment of prophecy).

The second part of the unconditional promise concerned blessings for *all nations*—not just Abraham’s descendants: “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

God began working with the nation of Israel, selecting them from among Abraham’s descendants to be His chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6). They were given the covenant promises that set the stage for a very specific Seed of Abraham—Jesus Christ, the Messiah. It was the life and death of Jesus Christ that blazed the trail for both Jew and gentile (people of *all nations*) to have the opportunity for eternal life in the family of God—easily the greatest blessing that anyone can or ever will receive!

The study of the 12 tribes of Israel also suggests that this scripture was in part fulfilled through the United States and Britain (the offspring of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim, respectively). These nations have at times been a “blessing” to the world. These two nations helped save the world from central European aggression through two world wars and have provided billions of dollars of relief aid to various peoples and nations.

In other ways they have also had negative influences on the world, but prophecy tells us that all 12 tribes will again be the source of a worldwide blessing when they become a model nation of God-fearing believers (Zechariah 8:23).

The study of the fulfillment of the physical blessings to Abraham is fascinating. To learn more, read [“God’s Promises to Abraham”](#) and [“Who Are the United States and Britain in Prophecy?”](#)

Key Concepts to Know

- God’s promises to Abraham become unconditional
- Physical blessings to Abraham’s descendants
- Spiritual blessings for all nations through Abraham

Questions:

1. What change was made to God’s promises after Abraham proved his faith by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac?
 2. What nations have received the blessings from God’s promises to Abraham?
 3. How was the promise that Abraham’s descendants would possess the “gate of their enemies” fulfilled in modern times?
 4. How have *all nations* been blessed through Abraham’s faithfulness?
-

GENESIS 25: ESAU AND JACOB

ISAAC PLEADS FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE, AND THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS

Genesis 25:21: “Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.”

We now move forward in the story of Abraham’s family to his son Isaac as an adult. Read Genesis 24 to see how Isaac and Rebekah came to be husband and wife.

Rebekah had the same problem Sarah had; she was barren—unable to have children. We’re told that Isaac pleaded with God in prayer for a child, and there’s no doubt those were *fervent* prayers (James 5:16).

Isaac and Rebekah learned the same lesson that Abraham and Sarah had learned years earlier—nothing is too hard for God. Rebekah was not able to have children for 20 long years. But when God enters the picture, the impossible becomes possible. It’s a lesson Jesus Christ would later repeat to His disciples: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

We must never rule out the ability—and the *desire*—of our great Creator to turn our impossibilities into realities. As the apostle James wrote, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17).

God loves to give His children good things—and we need to remember to ask (Matthew 7:11)! God wants us to communicate our needs, both big and small, in our daily prayers. In the model prayer, Jesus instructs us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11). In other words, we should ask God to provide for our daily needs. A lesson we can learn from Isaac is to be both *fervent* and *specific* in those requests to God.

We are not told how long or how many times Isaac prayed about this, but we are told that eventually God did intervene and bless them with not one, but *two* sons—twins.

Key Concepts to Know

- Isaac prays to God for a child
- Rebekah conceives twins
- The personalities of Esau and Jacob

Rebekah’s pregnancy was not an easy one. We are told “the children struggled together within her”—which caused her to worry about complications with the pregnancy (Genesis 25:22). But God told her that the struggle she felt inside her foreshadowed the future of these two boys and their descendants: “Two nations are in your womb, two people shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger” (verse 23).

As we will see, one nation (the younger brother who would receive the birthright blessings) would be stronger than the other.

The birth of Esau and Jacob

The first twin to be born was Esau—making him the firstborn and automatically the assumed inheritor of the physical blessings. Esau apparently was a unique infant, being born with hair covering his body. The name *Esau* sounds like the word for “hairy.” The second-born infant was named Jacob, meaning “supplanter.” This name foreshadowed the negative character traits that would characterize Jacob before he was renamed *Israel*.

We now fast-forward to the men Esau and Jacob became. Esau grew into a “skillful hunter.” He could be described as a rugged outdoorsman.

Jacob, on the other hand, is described as “a mild man.” He was not naturally rugged or drawn to the wild. Instead he herded sheep and goats. It is also possible that the phrase “dwelling in tents” refers to Jacob being an intellectual and more interested in learning (see *Soncino Books of the Bible*, comment on Genesis 25:27).

Unfortunately, a very unhealthy dynamic developed in this family. Isaac and Rebekah each had a favorite of the twins. Isaac preferred Esau (being drawn to Esau’s ruggedness and ability to hunt and prepare wild game), and Rebekah preferred Jacob (perhaps for his more intellectual and domestic nature). This dynamic caused major problems in the family, as we will see.

Questions:

1. How did Isaac deal with the infertility of his wife, Rebekah?
2. What was unique about Rebekah’s pregnancy?
3. What prophecy did God make about the future of the two sons in Rebekah’s womb?
4. What was one defining characteristic of Esau?

5. What was one defining characteristic of Jacob?

ESAU SELLS HIS BIRTHRIGHT

Genesis 25:33: “Then Jacob said, ‘Swear to me as of this day.’ So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.”

Jacob’s name meant “supplanter” (one who takes the place of another, often through an act of treachery). This account shows us how Jacob lived up to that name. Esau, the firstborn twin,

Key Concepts to Know

- **Jacob schemes to acquire Esau’s birthright**
- **Esau sells birthright for a bowl of stew**
- **Spiritual lessons from Esau’s decision**

would naturally have been the recipient of the birthright blessing from his father Isaac. But Jacob, who understood the value of the birthright more than Esau did, desired the birthright for himself and his descendants. Jacob schemed to get the birthright blessing from his brother.

One day Jacob was cooking a stew when Esau came in from the fields very hungry. He was so hungry that he felt physically weak and desired food immediately (verse 29). Jacob, seizing on Esau’s moment of weakness, offered to feed him the stew in return for Esau’s birthright blessing. Esau, being driven by his hunger and emotion, foolishly reasoned that he would die without Jacob’s stew—and what good would the birthright be to a dead man?

Esau then swore to sell his birthright to Jacob in return for the stew (verse 33). We are told that Esau “despised his birthright” (verse 34). This means that Esau did not place a high enough value on the birthright. He allowed his momentary hunger to cloud his judgment and did not think past the feeling in his belly to grasp the *value and magnitude* of what he was giving up and how it would affect his descendants. We will see that later in his life it had greater value to him (Genesis 27:38).

There are two lessons we can learn from Esau’s decision.

First, Esau’s mistake is a classic example of bad decision making. He made a knee-jerk decision based on how he felt *at the moment*. He was hungry and didn’t consider the long-term consequences of the deal he was making.

The Bible teaches that this approach to decision making is unwise. We can make bad decisions when we make

decisions hastily and “without knowledge”—or without fully contemplating all the consequences (Proverbs 19:2; 21:5). Before we make a big decision—and selling a birthright would definitely qualify as one—we should take time to think about the consequences, pray and seek wise counsel (Proverbs 15:22). Doing these things can prevent us from making a mistake like Esau did.

The second major lesson is found in the book of Hebrews. Esau serves as an example of someone who falls from God’s way and becomes bitter and spiritually defiled (Hebrews 12:15). We are warned not to be a “profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright” (verse 16).

The point for Christians today is that we must value our spiritual inheritance as the most precious thing in our lives and not give it up for anything. We are called to inherit the spiritual promises made to Abraham (Galatians 3:29). Our inheritance is eternal life in the Kingdom of God (Romans 8:17; Titus 3:7; James 2:5).

We should not regard anything as more valuable than that inheritance.

Recommended reading: Study these scriptures to learn how highly we are to value God’s calling and way of life: Matthew 6:33; Luke 14:26-27; Romans 14:17.

Questions:

1. **How did Jacob scheme to acquire Esau’s birthright?**
 2. **What was Esau’s reasoning for selling his most valuable possession to Jacob?**
 3. **What lesson can we learn about wise decision making from Esau’s mistake?**
 4. **What lesson can we learn about the Christian calling from Esau’s mistake?**
-

GENESIS 26: GOD’S LAW IS KEPT BEFORE SINAI

ABRAHAM KEEPS GOD’S LAWS

Genesis 26:5: “Because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.”

In the midst of reaffirming the physical blessings to Isaac, God made this important statement about Abraham. We learn that not only did Abraham

obey what God explicitly told Him to do (for example, leaving his homeland and being willing to sacrifice Isaac), but that he also obeyed God's commandments, statutes and laws.

This verse is especially significant because it shows that the laws of God existed long before they were given to Israel through Moses. Abraham lived more than 400 years before the time of Moses and the Exodus.

What is typically called the Mosaic law was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. The giving of the law is recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Some feel that this law was devised by Moses or only came into being at the time of Moses. The argument is that if the law was brought into existence thousands of years into human history at the time of Moses, then it is not a universal law and was *abolished* through Jesus Christ.

Genesis 26:5 shows that this argument is false.

The commandments, statutes and laws of God existed long before Moses. God simply used Moses to record and codify those laws for Israel when they agreed to the covenant (Exodus 19:8)—now known as the Old Covenant. God is the ultimate Lawgiver (Isaiah 33:22; James 4:12). To learn more about this, read our article "[What Is the Old Covenant?](#)"

There are several examples of people having knowledge of God's law prior to its codification on Mount Sinai. Two major examples are:

- Noah understood the laws about clean and unclean **meats** (Genesis 7:2). This law was later recorded in Leviticus 11.
- Joseph understood the commandment against adultery when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him (Genesis 39:7-9).

To discover more evidence that the laws of God were in effect long before Moses and Mount Sinai, read our informative article "[Were the 10 Commandments Around Before Moses?](#)"

Genesis 26 also records a famine that struck the land of Canaan during Isaac's life. Isaac took refuge from the

Key Concepts to Know

- **Abraham's obedience to God's laws**
- **Codification of the law on Mount Sinai**
- **Evidence the law was understood and kept before Mount Sinai**

famine in Gerar, an area within the land of the Philistines, under the rule of King Abimelech.

Isaac and Rebekah had an experience that was similar to what Abraham and Sarah experienced many years earlier (Genesis 20). Isaac feared for his life because the local men were attracted to Rebekah's beauty. So, like his father before him, Isaac presented Rebekah as his sister. Isaac and Rebekah pretended to be siblings until Abimelech saw them together romantically (Genesis 26:8) and the lie was discovered.

This account reinforces the point that God's servants make mistakes. God works through imperfect people, but He wants His people to strive toward perfection (Matthew 5:48).

Questions:

1. **What four specific things does this verse say Abraham obeyed?**
 2. **Why is it significant that Abraham was obeying God's laws many years before it was codified through Moses?**
 3. **What is another example of the law being kept before Moses?**
-

GENESIS 27: JACOB "SUPPLANTS" HIS BROTHER

JACOB RECEIVES THE BLESSINGS THROUGH DECEIT

Genesis 27:22: "So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, 'The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.'"

Isaac was very old by this time and thought he was near death. Bedridden and blind, Isaac decided it was now time for him to pass on the blessings to his firstborn son, Esau. He told Esau to prepare a meal of fresh game that he would enjoy and then afterward perform the ceremony to transfer the blessings to Esau.

But Rebekah, who preferred Jacob, schemed to have Jacob usurp Esau in receiving the blessing. Rebekah and

Jacob conspired to capitalize on Isaac's blindness to trick him into blessing Jacob. Rebekah would prepare meat in a way that was similar to how Esau cooked his game. Jacob

would wear Esau's clothing and cover himself in goat skins to simulate Esau's hairy body (verses 15-16).

When Jacob presented himself to Isaac as Esau, Isaac had his suspicions that something wasn't right (verses 20-24). But the taste of the food and the smell of his garments convinced him to ignore his doubts and accept that it was Esau. Isaac then bestowed upon Jacob the birthright **blessings**. Jacob's descendants would be blessed with:

- Great agricultural blessings (verse 28).
- Geopolitical dominance (verse 29).

This blessing ensured that the promises originally given to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) would continue through the line of Jacob (later renamed Israel)—and not Esau (Genesis 25:23).

Rebekah and Jacob should have waited patiently for God to work this out. Instead they lied and obtained the blessings through dishonesty and deceit (Genesis 27:24, 35-36). Jacob's character at this point in his life matched the meaning of his name, *supplanter*. Later in his life, Jacob would be the victim of similar trickery. To learn the importance of overcoming lying and deceit, read our article on [the Ninth Commandment](#).

Shortly after Jacob left Isaac's presence, the real Esau returned and came to Isaac (verses 30-31). The reality of the situation hit Isaac hard when he realized what had transpired. We are told he "trembled exceedingly" (verse 33). Once he recognized he'd been tricked and had given the birthright to the wrong son, he was very upset and disturbed. But he realized the blessing was irreversible. It is not an overstatement to say these few minutes changed the course of human history. Jacob's descendants would dominate Esau's and receive the immense physical blessings of the birthright (verse 37).

Esau became very emotional and begged for a blessing for his descendants. Isaac did bestow a blessing on Esau, but it was much inferior to the birthright blessing given to Jacob.

Key Concepts to Know

- **Rebekah and Jacob conspire to deceive Isaac**
- **Jacob receives the birthright blessing**
- **Esau receives a secondary blessing**

"See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck" (verses 39-40, New Revised Standard Version).

Esau's descendants would not receive the agricultural blessings given to Jacob, but would dwell in more arid climates, such as deserts. Isaac also prophesied that Esau's descendants (later called "Edom") would:

- Have a tendency toward violence.
- Would be perpetually less powerful than Jacob's descendants.
- Would occasionally achieve limited victories over Jacob's descendants (verse 40).

Esau's descendants would later intermarry with the offspring of Ishmael (Genesis 28:9). The descendants of these two men who lost the blessings to Isaac and Jacob would form the core of the Arab peoples who would dominate the lands surrounding Israel. Throughout biblical history, we read of tension between Israel and Edom (1 Kings 11:14-25; 2 Kings 8:20-22).

If you look at a map of the earth's major climate regions, many of the lands dominated by Ishmael's and Esau's descendants are arid or semiarid (Northern Africa and the Middle East)—fulfilling the prophecy in Genesis 27:39 (NRSV).

Bible prophecy reveals that the descendants of Esau will exist in the end time. They will likely be a part of an Arab/Muslim confederation known as "the king of the South" (Daniel 11:40-41; Psalm 83:4-8).

To learn more about the Arab nations in Bible prophecy, read our article "[The King of the South](#)."

Questions:

1. **What disability of Isaac did Rebekah and Jacob capitalize on to deceive Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing?**
 2. **What did Rebekah and Jacob do to cause Isaac to believe Jacob was actually Esau?**
 3. **What was Esau's reaction to learning he had lost the birthright blessing to Jacob? What did he ask Isaac for?**
 4. **What is one difference between the blessing given to Jacob and the blessing given to Esau?**
-

JACOB FLEES ESAU'S WRATH

Genesis 27:41: "So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, 'The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'"

Anger is a powerful emotion and can lead to sin (James 1:19-20).

Esau had reason to be angry.

His twin brother, with the help of their mother, Rebekah, had deceived their father, Isaac, into giving the birthright blessing to Jacob. Even though God intended the blessing to go to Jacob, the way Rebekah and Jacob handled it was deceptive and wrong.

Unfortunately, Esau didn't handle the situation the right way either, and he let his anger turn into a root of bitterness (Hebrews 12:15). When people allow *hatred* to develop in their hearts, they are guilty of the *spirit* of murder (Matthew 5:21-22; 1 John 3:15). This is why Christians must be vigilant to not let anger grow and fester in their minds (Ephesians 4:26). Anger can be disastrous in many ways. If we are angry, we must control it. And we must avoid others who routinely and consistently exhibit this powerful emotion that can rub off on us (Proverbs 22:24).

To learn more about the danger of anger, read "[What Does the Bible Say About Anger?](#)"

Esau decided to kill Jacob, but he was planning to wait until the death of Isaac. Rebekah found out about Esau's plan and sent Jacob away to stay with her brother Laban until Esau's anger had passed (Genesis 27:42-45).

Before Jacob left, Isaac repeated the fact that he would inherit the blessings originally promised to Abraham (see Genesis 28:3-4). Isaac reminded Jacob that it was through him that the promises God originally gave to his grandfather Abraham would be fulfilled.

Isaac and Rebekah also commanded Jacob to avoid marrying a Canaanite woman, but instead to find a wife from among the family of his uncle, Laban. Earlier in Genesis, we learn that Esau took Hittite wives (Genesis 26:34) who became "a grief of mind to Isaac and

Key Concepts to Know

- Esau's anger
- Jacob flees Canaan
- Principles of selecting a spouse

Rebekah" (verse 35). We are not given details about what they did to cause grief, but it's likely their morals and religion sharply conflicted with the morals and beliefs of Isaac's family and negatively affected Esau's character.

Years later, God commanded the Israelites to resist the temptation to marry wives from surrounding nations: "Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4).

This command was not about the ethnicity or race of these people, but was about their beliefs and morals. Jacob, through whom God would work to fulfill the promises, was expected to avoid this mistake. The lesson for us today is to be very careful to select a spouse who is morally and spiritually compatible with us (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

For insight into making wise marriage decisions, read "[5 Traits Women Should Look for in a Godly Man](#)" and "[5 Traits Men Should Look for in a Godly Woman](#)."

Questions:

1. Why are anger and hatred so spiritually dangerous?
 2. What was Jacob forced to do as a result of Esau's anger?
 3. What did Isaac and Rebekah command him to do (and not do) while he was gone?
-

GENESIS 28: GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO JACOB

JACOB SEES A LADDER LEADING TO HEAVEN

Genesis 28:12: "Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."

On his journey to visit his uncle Laban, Jacob stopped for the night at a place called Luz (verse 19). He slept outdoors, resting his head on a stone

Key Concepts to Know

- **Jacob's dream at Luz**
- **God reaffirms promises to Jacob**
- **Jacob partially answers God's call**
- **Jacob vows to tithe**

(verses 10-11). As he slept, Jacob was given a dream. He saw a ladder reaching into the heavens, and he saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder (verse 12).

Through this dream, God reaffirmed the promises to Jacob. "Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (verses 13-15, NRSV).

God also promised Jacob that He would be with him and bring him safely back from his journeys. God would fulfill His promises through Jacob. Christians should remember that God has made promises to us as well, and He will fulfill those promises if we remain faithful to Him (1 Peter 1:4).

After Jacob awoke, he was humbled by the experience and realized that something very special had transpired that night. We are told that "Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it" (Genesis 28:18). The pillar was a memorial to commemorate what God did at that location.

Various legends connect this stone with the Stone of Destiny (the stone over which the kings of England have been coronated). To learn more, read pages 51-52 of our booklet *The United States, Britain and the Commonwealth in Prophecy*.

Jacob answers God's call *partially*

Jacob then made the following vow: "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, *then* the LORD shall be my God" (verses 20-21). Up to this point, Jacob did not truly follow God. His most prominent character trait was trickery and deceit. There is no evidence that He had a deep relationship with God prior to this moment.

Though Jacob did not fully commit to a relationship with God at this point, he did come closer, stating that God would be his personal God *if* he made it back to his homeland safely. Though this was a positive turning point in Jacob's life, we must realize that our relationship with God should never be based on an *if*.

Our response to God's calling should never be dependent on His doing something physical to help us. Instead, we must act based on **faith** (Ephesians 2:8-9; Colossians 2:12; James 2:22). The example of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego facing Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace is more instructive for us. They declared they would *obey* God regardless of whether He decided to protect them or not (Daniel 3:17-18).

Jacob then made another vow: "And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely *give a tenth* to You" (Genesis 28:22). Jacob committed to giving a tenth—or a *tithe*—of his future earnings to God. Tithing is a law and a means of showing honor to God for the blessings He gives (Proverbs 3:9-10). It is a way of giving back a small portion to God from what He already owns (Isaiah 66:1-2).

To read more about tithing and the blessing it brings, read our article "[Tithing: What Is It?](#)"

Questions:

1. **What vision was Jacob given in the dream he had at Luz?**
 2. **What was Jacob's condition for fully following God?**
 3. **What did Jacob promise to do with the wealth he would gather in the future?**
-

GENESIS 29: THE "SUPPLANTER" GETS TRICKED

JACOB AND A TALE OF TWO DAUGHTERS

Genesis 29:16: "Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel."

When Jacob finally made it to his uncle's land, he immediately met Laban's younger daughter, Rachel. Jacob was smitten. His feelings were so strong that he offered

to work seven years to receive her hand in marriage. Imagine waiting seven years for the woman or man of your dreams! Yet it is recorded that it seemed like only a few days to Jacob (verse 20)!

But we also learn that Laban had an older daughter named Leah. Leah was not as attractive as Rachel (verse 17).

After seven years of waiting, Jacob finally married—but Laban tricked him by giving him his oldest daughter, Leah. How did Jacob fall for marrying the wrong woman? Perhaps she had a veil on. And remember, in those times there wasn't electric lighting, so Jacob would not have been able to see well in a dark tent.

Laban justified his deceitful trick by reasoning that their custom was for the eldest daughter to marry first.

Of course, he could have informed Jacob of this custom before the wedding night—but it was his intention to trick his nephew into

staying and working longer. A week later Laban allowed Jacob to marry Rachel—the woman he had wanted to marry in the first place—if Jacob agreed to work for him *another* seven years.

Jacob, the trickster, learned the lesson of “what goes around comes around.” He had tricked close family members to get what he wanted and was now the victim of the same behavior from his uncle. The Bible teaches that “whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7). This helped Jacob change his character as he developed a relationship with God.

Jacob spent 14 years of his life working for Laban to be able to marry both of his daughters. We are told that Laban wanted Jacob to stay and work because he clearly saw that “the LORD has blessed me for your sake” (Genesis 30:27).

Not surprisingly, friction quickly developed among the three who were now forming a household. God saw that Leah was unloved by Jacob, so He blessed her with four children (Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah) while Rachel was unable to conceive. This caused envy and tension between the two sisters.

Polygamy causes serious problems. Though some argue from the patriarch's example that polygamy was permitted

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob falls in love with Rachel
- Laban tricks Jacob
- The problems of polygamy
- Children born to Leah and Rachel

THE 12 SONS OF ISRAEL (JACOB)

Sons of Leah

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun

Sons of Rachel

Joseph, Benjamin

Sons of Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid)

Dan, Naphtali

Sons of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid)

Gad, Asher

in the Bible, they ignore the fact that nearly every example of polygamy in the Bible is negative and full of tension, drama and bitterness. God's standard was, and always has been, that marriage is a union between *one* husband and *one* wife (Genesis 2:24).

It is interesting to note that Leah, not the more loved Rachel, was the mother of both Judah and Levi. Judah would become the forefather of the Davidic line of kings—which was promised to last forever (Jeremiah 33:17). Levi would become the forefather of the priests who would serve in the temple (Numbers 1:50). Rachel would eventually conceive two sons—Joseph and Benjamin (Genesis 30:24; 35:18). See the chart of the sons born to Leah, Rachel and their two handmaidens.

To learn God's standards for marriage, read “[What Is Marriage?](#)”

Questions:

1. What was Jacob willing to do in return for Rachel's hand in marriage?
 2. What did Jacob discover had happened when he woke up the morning after his wedding night?
 3. What is the irony of what Laban did to Jacob?
 4. What lesson do we learn about polygamy from Jacob's family and other examples in the Bible?
-

GENESIS 31: JACOB FLEES FROM LABAN

JACOB DECIDES TO GO HOME

Genesis 31:17-18: “Then Jacob rose, and set his sons and his wives on camels. And he carried away all his livestock and all his possessions which he had gained, his acquired livestock which he had gained in Padan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.”

Jacob had served Laban for 20 years. For a number of reasons, it was time for him to move on and return to his homeland, Canaan. Laban’s attitude had turned very negative

toward him, and Laban’s sons were also beginning to resent Jacob’s success and prosperity. Even when given the worst of the flocks as a wage, somehow Jacob’s animals reproduced more than the animals of his uncle’s household. Of course, God had promised to bless Jacob—and was fulfilling that promise. Unfortunately, success often results in resentment and jealousy in others who are less successful.

Jacob, wanting to avoid a confrontation with his uncle, left secretly with his family, flocks and possessions (verse 20). When Laban heard of Jacob’s departure, he pursued and overtook him. But before Laban faced his nephew, God warned him in a dream to do no harm to Jacob (verse 24)—a command that Laban, to his credit, heeded.

God is aware of the bad situations we sometimes find ourselves in. Despite the circumstances, Jacob had done what was right and worked hard. Jacob felt that Laban had underpaid him for his labor (verse 7).

A lesson we can learn from Jacob’s decision to flee is that it is appropriate to remove ourselves from abusive situations. Though the Bible teaches patience and that sometimes we have to take an undeserved wrong, God

Key Concepts to Know

- **Jacob flees secretly from Laban**
- **Rachel steals her father’s idols**
- **Jacob and Laban part peacefully**

doesn’t require us to subject ourselves to constant abuse—whether it is financial, physical or emotional.

Rachel’s mistake

As Jacob was fleeing Laban, his wife Rachel secretly stole Laban’s household idols (verse 19). Jacob was totally unaware that she had done this. When Laban caught up with Jacob’s caravan, he confronted him about the missing idols: “But why did you steal my gods?” (verse 30). This was probably a legitimate question on his part. He had lived and worked alongside Jacob for many years and knew Jacob had no interest in idolatry and wasn’t a thief. So, he was probably legitimately perplexed that the idols would come up missing at the same time Jacob fled.

Based on the archaeological find of tablets from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Nuzi, some researchers think that these household idols might have been connected with inheritance rights, and Rachel’s theft might have been a misguided attempt to enable Jacob to secure her father’s property.

Whether or not that might be the case, Jacob was so confident that no one in his household would have done such a thing that he allowed Laban to search through his possessions. Jacob said if he found someone with the idols, that person would be put to death (verse 32). But Rachel was able to hide the idols from Laban (verse 34).

Hopefully Rachel later spiritually matured and disposed of the household idols. Genesis 35:4 describes a time when Jacob confiscated and buried “all the household gods” of his family and those who lived with them.

After dealing with the controversy of the missing idols, Jacob and Laban made a covenant and parted peacefully. Jacob was able to move forward toward his homeland without any worries about Laban causing further problems for him.

To learn about the danger of idolatry today, read “[Idolatry—Then and Now](#).”

Questions:

1. **How many years did Jacob live with and work for Laban?**
 2. **What caused Laban’s sons to be resentful of Jacob?**
 3. **What did Rachel do before she left for Canaan?**
-

GENESIS 32: WRESTLING WITH GOD

JACOB PREPARES TO MEET ESAU

Genesis 32:11: “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children.”

After making a peace covenant with Laban, Jacob and his family continued on toward his homeland of Canaan. Twenty years earlier Esau had plotted to murder him (Genesis 27:41). Though Jacob knew God had promised to protect him and bless his descendants, he still feared what might happen. He knew he had to use wisdom to return home safely and protect his family from Esau and his men.

Jacob first sent emissaries to Canaan to communicate his coming and to try to gauge his brother's intentions (Genesis 32:3). The news he received was distressing: Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men! In Jacob's mind, this was a small army led by Esau with the potential to massacre Jacob, his family and servants. How did he respond to this threat?

First, he divided his family and servants into two groups, and he separated them from each other in preparation for his brother's arrival (verses 7-8). His reasoning was that if Esau attacked the first group he came to, the second group could escape and half of Jacob's caravan would survive.

Second, he turned to God in prayer for protection (verses 9-12). This is evidence of a more spiritually mature Jacob than the man we read about in chapters 25-27. In his younger days, he achieved his goals through trickery and deception. Now he had learned the importance of seeking God's blessings and protection through prayer.

When faced with potential dangers and difficulties in life, this is what mature Christians should do: get on our knees and ask for God's help, claiming His promises of

Key Concepts to Know

- **Jacob's fear of Esau**
- **Jacob asks for God's protection but prepares for the worst**
- **Jacob prepares gifts for Esau**

protection. No matter what the circumstance we face, we should remember there is nothing too hard for God to deal with (Jeremiah 32:27). For another example of taking our fears and difficulties to God, read Hezekiah's example in 2 Kings 19.

Third, Jacob prepared several large gifts of his flocks and possessions that would be presented to Esau consecutively as he approached him. Three groups of servants would space themselves some distance apart from each other and present these gifts to Esau, explaining they were from “your servant Jacob” (Genesis 32:18). It seems Jacob was making a peace offering to Esau—in effect saying, “I know I've wronged you, and I want to make it right.”

Jacob's approach was noble. He could have prepared his family and servants to potentially battle Esau, but he didn't. Instead, he fought the potential wrath and violence with kindness.

We learn from the Proverbs that “a gift in secret pacifies anger” (Proverbs 21:14). Acts of kindness toward perceived enemies are often a key to building peaceful relationships. Jesus Christ taught: “love your enemies, do good” (Luke 6:35). If individuals or nations today practiced this simple principle toward each other—treating each other with kindness—most of man's relationship issues could be solved.

Having prayed to God and taken wise, proactive steps toward a peaceful meeting with Esau, Jacob removed his family even farther from the situation in order to ensure their safety (Genesis 32:22-23).

After sending his family over a brook, Jacob was left alone for the night before his meeting with Esau. But something else would happen that night. He would be confronted by a Stranger—a confrontation that would change his life.

Questions:

1. **What did Jacob fear would happen when he saw Esau again after 20 years?**
 2. **What were two physical preparations Jacob made for his reunion with his brother?**
 3. **How did Jacob spiritually prepare for the reunion?**
 4. **What lesson about resolving conflicts can we learn from Jacob's preparation of gifts for his brother?**
-

A SUPERNATURAL WRESTLING MATCH

Genesis 32:24: “Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day.”

That night, something unique happened to Jacob. Seemingly out of nowhere, a Man appeared and wrestled with him. This struggle lasted for several hours until the early morning hours.

After seeing Jacob’s determination to fight, the Man touched his hip and moved it out of the socket (verse 25). But, amazingly, even after having his hip dislocated, Jacob refused to let the Man go “unless You bless me!” (verse 26).

Who was this Man who wrestled with Jacob?

The evidence is clear that this Man was the One who later came as Jesus Christ, known as *the Word* (John 1:1-3). We are told Jacob saw God “face to

face” (verse 30). We know this couldn’t be God the Father, since Christ said *no man* has seen or heard the Father (John 5:37). Hosea 12:3-4 states that Jacob struggled with God and prevailed. Yes, the Word (Jesus Christ) appeared in human form, as He did other times in the Old Testament. To learn more about the preexistence of Jesus Christ, read “[Jesus Christ Was the God of the Old Testament](#).”

Jacob becomes Israel

The Man then did something unexpected—He gave Jacob a new name. No longer would his name be *Jacob*, meaning “supplanter.” He wouldn’t be characterized by manipulation and deceit anymore—he would now be named *Israel*, meaning “prevailer” or “overcomer with God.” He told Jacob that his name was being changed because “you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). After the name change, the Man blessed the newly named Israel and then vanished. Though He doesn’t change our name in this physical life, God promises to give His people a new name in the future (Revelation 2:17).

Esau and Jacob reunite

After struggling with God throughout the night, the next day Jacob was reunited with his brother after a

20-year separation. Jacob was limping due to having his hip dislocated (Genesis 32:31). This likely reinforced Jacob’s need for total faith in God to make the meeting go well—because if Esau had attacked him, Jacob in his weakened state would have had no chance against his older brother.

But all his fears were quickly laid to rest when Esau met him. “But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (Genesis 33:4).

Unexpectedly, Esau set the example in this story. Sometime before meeting Jacob in Genesis 33, Esau forgave his brother. Jacob had not yet asked for forgiveness, but his brother gave it anyway, freely and of his own volition. Esau made the choice to let go of a deep-seated grudge that would have otherwise consumed him.

Of course, Jacob had prayed for favor with Esau (Genesis 32:9-12). But it’s also possible that Esau, during the time of his brother’s absence, came to understand a fundamental truth of human nature: *Even if some people don’t ask for forgiveness for their actions, it can be to our benefit to forgive them.* We can choose to angrily cling to past injustices, or we can choose to forgive and move on with our lives.

We are then told that Jacob bought a plot of land in Canaan near the city of Shechem (in what was later northern Israel, near Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal). There he built an altar to God and named it “El Elohe Israel” (meaning “God, the God of Israel”). This is a detail that is easy to read over, but it is the first time Jacob (Israel) refers to God as *his* God. Before, he referred to God as “the God of my father” (Genesis 31:42; 32:9). Now, God is *his* God.

To learn more about the important concept of forgiveness, read our article “[How to Forgive](#).”

Key Concepts to Know

- **Jacob wrestles with God**
- **Jacob’s name changed to Israel**
- **The emotional reunion of Esau and Jacob**

Questions:

1. **Who was the Man who wrestled with Jacob all night?**
 2. **What did He do after Jacob requested a blessing?**
 3. **How did He end the wrestling match with Jacob?**
 4. **How did the reunion between the two brothers go?**
-

GENESIS 34: THE DINAH INCIDENT

HOW GOD VIEWS “THE DINAH INCIDENT”

Genesis 34:25: “Now it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, each took his sword and came boldly upon the city and killed all the males.”

The story begins when Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, was sexually violated by Shechem the Hivite, a prince in the land of Canaan.

Shechem, who apparently was smitten with Dinah, proceeded to seek Dinah’s hand in marriage by asking for Jacob’s permission.

Jacob’s sons were outraged by Shechem’s actions toward their sister. They were determined to prevent the marriage and exact revenge on the Hivites for Shechem’s sin. Dinah’s brothers “spoke deceitfully” to Shechem, saying that they would agree to the marriage only if all the males of the city would become circumcised (verses 13-15).

Shechem agreed, and all the males of the city were circumcised so he could marry Dinah. Three days later, when they were still in pain from the procedure in a sensitive area of the human anatomy, Simeon and Levi rushed in and “boldly” slaughtered the city’s helpless men (verse 25).

This is the only scripture in the King James Version of the Bible where the Hebrew word *betach* is translated “boldly.” It is translated “safely” 17 times and “carelessly” three times—so it might be more accurate to say that Simeon and Levi went on their premeditated killing spree without having to fear for their personal safety.

God doesn’t explicitly respond to the brothers’ actions in this passage of the Bible, but other scriptures command us, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16) and “‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Hebrews 10:30). Jacob’s sons were guilty of both speaking deceitfully *and* violently taking vengeance into their own hands—actions God condemns.

Key Concepts to Know

- Shechem rapes Dinah
- Shechem’s marriage proposal
- Simeon and Levi deceptively attack

As we have pointed out throughout this study guide, the Bible does not “whitewash” the people it covers. What Simeon and Levi did was wrong. Yes, Shechem’s actions were wrong and sinful—but the correct response wasn’t deceiving both him and his people and slaughtering them in cold blood.

To read more about how God views Simeon and Levi’s actions, see our articles “[Lying vs. Telling the Truth](#)” and “[Jesus Christ Taught Peace and Nonviolence](#).”

Questions:

1. What did Shechem ask to do after he violated Dinah?
2. What did the brothers require in order for Shechem to marry Dinah?
3. What did Simeon and Levi do to the Hivites?

GENESIS 35: JACOB MOVES AGAIN

JACOB RETURNS TO BETHEL

Genesis 35:1: “Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there.’”

After the Dinah incident, Jacob and his family were commanded to “go up to Bethel” (verse 1). This was the location south of Shechem where God had revealed Himself to Jacob years earlier through the dream of the ladder ascending to heaven. As they were leaving, Jacob reminded his household, “Put away the foreign gods” (verse 2).

Jacob’s command would prove to be almost prophetic, as these five simple words would highlight a perpetual weakness of his descendants throughout their history. Israel would continually find itself drawn to the deities and worship practices of surrounding nations.

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob’s household moves south
- Jacob confronts idolatry
- Rachel’s and Isaac’s deaths
- Reuben’s sin

Unfortunately, the Israelites would never truly give up their idolatry addiction and would ultimately be carried off into captivity because of this sin (Ezekiel 6:9).

God's people today (spiritual Israel) face a similar challenge. Carved images may have declined in popularity, but believers must contend with an ever-growing pantheon of false gods. These gods include one's employment, electronics, entertainment, money and many other distractions of modern life. The New Testament writers continually warn Christians to come out of world and be *different* (John 17:15; Romans 12:2; 2 Timothy 2:4; Revelation 18:4).

To discover more about battling idolatry today, read our article "[Idolatry—Then and Now](#)."

Happenings in Bethel

Jacob finally returned to Bethel and built an altar to the true God (Genesis 35:7). Then God appeared to Jacob once again, reinforcing his name change from Jacob to Israel and adding more details to the promises his descendants would receive in the future: "I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body" (verse 11).

This is the first time the recorded promises included the detail that "a nation and a company of nations" would come from Jacob. Later, we will read that these specific blessings were passed on to Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:19). We will cover those promises in detail in a future reading.

The rest of the chapter tells of three other significant events that happened after Jacob returned to Bethel.

First, Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, died giving birth to her second child, whom Jacob named Benjamin (meaning "son of my right hand"). Rachel was buried on the way to Ephrath, a town later known as Bethlehem. The site of Rachel's grave was still being used as a landmark hundreds of years later (1 Samuel 10:2). To this day, there is a site in the modern state of Israel known as the Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch (though whether or not it is the genuine tomb of the biblical Rachel is disputed).

Second, Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son through Leah, committed a serious sin by having sex with Bilhah (one of Jacob's concubines, through whom Jacob had two sons, Dan and Naphtali). This was a very serious sexual sin (Deuteronomy 22:30; 1 Corinthians 5:1).

This had significant historical consequences. Reuben, as Jacob's firstborn, was in line to be the recipient of the birthright blessings. But because of this sin, he did

not receive those blessings: "Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel—he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright" (1 Chronicles 5:1).

Third, Isaac died shortly after Jacob returned to the area at the age of 180 years. The chapter ends with the two former rivals, Esau and Jacob, coming together to bury and honor their beloved father.

Questions:

1. What problem did Jacob address that would continue to plague his descendants throughout their history?
 2. What new detail about the blessings to Jacob's descendants did God reveal at Bethel?
 3. What was the major historical consequence of Reuben's sexual sin with Bilhah?
-

GENESIS 37: JOSEPH— JACOB'S FAVORITE SON

PLAYING FAVORITES

Genesis 37:3: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors."

As we begin Genesis 37, the focus of Genesis shifts to the life of Joseph. Like Jacob, Joseph lived an exciting life—filled with

trials, twists and turns. Joseph's story begins when he is a young man who at times lacked discretion and wisdom.

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph
- Joseph's dreams
- The brothers' anger

But over the course of his life he became one of the wisest, most powerful men in the world.

There are a lot of families in the Bible who've had problems—and the family of Jacob (Israel) was no exception. Joseph was Jacob's favorite child, born of his favorite wife (Genesis 29:30; 30:22-24). We are told that Jacob “made him a tunic of many colors.” In a time when color dyes were expensive and precious, a gift like a multicolored coat made it abundantly clear to everyone that Jacob played favorites, and Joseph was the favorite.

The striking coat became a symbol of this favoritism to Joseph's brothers. It is referred to four more times in this chapter (Genesis 37:23, 31, 32, 33).

This blatant favoritism led to some serious fissures within Jacob's family. We are told his brothers “hated him” (verse 5).

This account should be a lesson to parents. Even though each child will have his or her own unique needs, a parent should never favor one child over another. The New Testament instructs parents, “Do not provoke your children to wrath” (Ephesians 6:4). Obvious favoritism of one child is a prime way to provoke children to anger. For more tips on successful parenting, read our article “[Parenting Advice](#).”

Joseph and his amazing prophetic dreams

The tensions grew worse when Joseph began having dreams and sharing them with his brothers. The two dreams described in Genesis 37 essentially had the same message.

In the first dream, there were sheaves of wheat in a field—each representing one of Jacob's sons. The sheaf representing Joseph “arose and also stood upright,” while all the other sheaves “bowed down” to his (verse 7). In the second dream Joseph saw the sun, moon and 11 stars bowing down to him (verse 9).

Young Joseph unwisely shared his dreams with his family with disastrous results. These dreams seemed so outrageous that they disturbed even Jacob, who kept the potential implications in mind for a long time (verse 11).

These dreams were not meaningless. As we will see as we progress through the Joseph narratives, they were prophecies of Joseph's future and the future of his descendants. Joseph would ultimately rise to prominence over his brothers as a high-ranking official in the Egyptian government, and his brothers would literally bow before him (Genesis 42:6). And the ultimate fulfillment of these dreams would be thousands of years later when Joseph's descendants would rise to world prominence. We will learn more about these promises in a future reading.

To learn more about dreams in the Bible, read “[Interpretation of Dreams](#).”

Questions:

1. What did Jacob give to Joseph that symbolized his preference for him?
 2. What principle of parenting did Jacob ignore?
 3. Why did Joseph's dreams anger his brothers?
-

THE BROTHERS' JEALOUSY LEADS TO VIOLENCE

Genesis 37:23: “So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him.”

Joseph's dreams were apparently the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Though his brothers already resented him, his dreams of rising above them resulted in seething anger. We read that “his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem” (verse 12). Joseph was apparently exempt from this job, staying home with his father.

Unfortunately for Joseph, his father sent him out to check on his older brothers when their anger had reached a murderous

level (verses 13-14). When they saw their brightly dressed brother coming from a distance, they “conspired against him to kill him” (verse 18).

The brothers originally intended to murder Joseph as soon as he arrived. But those plans changed when Reuben, the oldest, intervened and convinced them to throw Joseph into a pit instead. Reuben's intention was to rescue him later (verse 22).

Then a band of Ishmaelite merchants passed through the area. Judah proposed that Joseph could be sold as a slave—giving them some money to divide among themselves. They also reasoned that doing that wouldn't be as bad as if they murdered him (verse 27). Unfortunately, human beings have a proclivity toward

Key Concepts to Know

- The brothers conspire against Joseph
- Joseph sold into slavery
- The brothers deceive Jacob

reasoning in a way that makes them feel better about their own sins (Proverbs 14:12).

This occurred while Reuben was gone (Genesis 37:29-30). He knew that, as the oldest brother, he was ultimately responsible for what went on there, so he made the unfortunate decision to be complicit in the brothers' conspiracy going forward.

Joseph, formerly the privileged son of Jacob, was now heading to Egypt as a slave. It's hard to imagine the emotions he must have felt as he lost his freedom and his family in one day. His life—and the history of his people—would never be the same.

The brothers deceive their father

After selling Joseph, the brothers now faced the most immediate consequence of their actions: What would they tell their father?

At this point they had essentially two options:

- They could repent of their sin and immediately begin searching for Joseph to bring him home.
- They could make up a story that explained Joseph's disappearance and *lie* to their father.

Unfortunately, the brothers chose the latter.

We read that they “took Joseph's tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood. Then they sent the tunic of many colors, and they brought it to their father and said, ‘We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?’” (verses 31-32).

Their method of deception was very cunning. Instead of lying directly to their father, they presented him with the bloodied tunic and allowed him to form his own conclusion: “It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces” (verse 33).

There are two major lessons we can learn from this tragic account:

- The dangerous, progressive nature of sin. The sad reality is that sin begets sin. The sin of jealousy led the brothers to anger. Anger led to hatred. Hatred led to a plot to murder. Their plan to murder was abated by coveting a monetary payment for Joseph. Covetousness led to selling their brother into slavery. The accumulation of these sins led to the brothers' willful deception of their father.

The lesson for Christians today is to stop the progression of sin as early as possible (1 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 5:16; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-9).

- Silence can be sin. It is interesting that Reuben, who intended to save Joseph, participated in the deception. He was guilty not only of participating

in the lie, but of not doing what he knew was right—often called a *sin of omission* (James 4:17).

To overcome sin, we must repent. For an explanation of *how* to repent, read our article “[How to Repent](#).”

Questions:

1. What were the brothers' first two plans to get rid of Joseph?
 2. What did they ultimately decide to do to him?
 3. What role did Reuben play in the plot against Joseph?
 4. How did the brothers deceive their father?
-

GENESIS 38: JUDAH AND TAMAR

JUDAH AND TAMAR: A LESSON IN HYPOCRISY

Genesis 38:8: “And Judah said to Onan, ‘Go in to your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother.’”

Genesis 38 is an inset chapter that breaks from the narrative of Joseph's life.

We learn about a troubling incident in the life of Judah that apparently occurred around the same time (verse 1).

Key Concepts to Know

- Judah's sons don't provide an heir
- Onan's sin
- Tamar tricks Judah
- The birth of Perez and Zerah

We read that Judah took a Canaanite woman named Shua to be his wife and had three sons with her: Er, Onan and Shelah. The oldest son, Er, married a woman named Tamar. The line of Judah was to continue through this union. Unfortunately, Er was sinful and died before having a child with his wife. According to the ancient law of levirate marriage, the next son was then supposed to father a child with the widow. The child would be

considered the legal heir of the deceased firstborn and continue the family line (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

Onan, the second son, had sex with Tamar but rebelliously prevented her from conceiving a child for Er. This resulted in Onan's death. Judah then promised Tamar that she would marry his third son, Shelah, when he reached an appropriate age. That was a promise Judah never kept.

In her desperation, Tamar concocted a plan and disguised herself as a prostitute and lured Judah into hiring her for sex. He had no idea he was sleeping with his own daughter-in-law. Since Judah had nothing to pay her with at the moment, he offered her his signet and cord as a pledge for the payment of her sexual services.

Months later, when Judah discovered Tamar had become pregnant out of wedlock, he was angered and intended to execute her. What followed was probably the most embarrassing and humbling moment of Judah's life! Tamar presented the signet and the cord, revealing that her father-in-law was himself the father. Judah realized his error and sin and allowed her and the twins she carried to live (Genesis 38:26). Tamar gave birth to two boys, Perez and Zerah (verses 29-30).

A major lesson illustrated by this account is *hypocrisy*. Judah was about to kill Tamar for a sin he was equally guilty of. It took being confronted with his own sin to stop his hypocrisy.

Later we will read the example of Joseph, which stands in stark contrast to his brother's hypocrisy. In private, Joseph would be tempted to commit adultery with his master's wife, but he maintained his integrity by fleeing from the sin (Genesis 39:11-12).

Study these verses to learn more about Christ's teaching on hypocrisy: Matthew 23:25-28; Luke 12:1-3; John 8:1-12; Romans 2:21-24.

But does this story have another purpose? Yes. This story is included in the Genesis narrative to show how the line of Judah was preserved. Because of the death of his two sons, Judah's line was at risk of ending. Had Judah's line ended, the promises God planned to fulfill through Judah—mainly the coming of the Messiah—would not have been fulfilled as God intended (Genesis 49:8-12). Jesus Christ came through the line of Perez—the firstborn twin (Matthew 1:3).

Though Judah and Tamar's actions were far from an ideal way for the line to be carried forward, God still was able to use this circumstance to fulfill His plan. This is a theme we see throughout the book of Genesis: God can and will work out His plan despite the mistakes of human beings.

What about Onan's attempt at birth control? Is it evidence that all contraception is sinful? No, that is not what we are to learn from this account. Read our article "[Is Birth Control Wrong?](#)"

Questions:

1. What did the law of levirate marriage say should happen if a man died without having an heir with his wife?
 2. What did Onan do that resulted in his death?
 3. How did Tamar finally have children to continue Judah's line?
 4. Why was it so important for Judah's line to continue?
-

GENESIS 39: JOSEPH BEHIND BARS

JOSEPH IS SOLD TO POTIPHAR

Genesis 39:1: "Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there."

After being sold by his brothers, Joseph was taken to Egypt and purchased by a prominent Egyptian named Potiphar (some commentators translate the title "captain of the guard" as "chief of the executioners").

It is important that we understand the geographical and historical context. The land of Canaan, where the family of Jacob was residing when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, was located on a strategic trade route.

Canaan linked the two most commercially developed civilizations of the ancient world—Mesopotamia and

Key Concepts to Know

- Joseph was sold to Potiphar
- Trade routes of the ancient world
- Joseph was promoted over Potiphar's household

Egypt. Traders would bring goods west and south from what is now Iraq to Egypt through the strip of land known as Canaan (and vice versa). Throughout its history, Israel was often caught in the crosshairs of international politics between Egypt and empires to its north and east (for example, the Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians).

This account shows that international slave trade was a component of the economy of the ancient world. It would take over 3,000 more years of human history before major nations began to outlaw the slave trade. It was not until 1981, nearly 3,700 years after Joseph was sold into slavery, that the small African nation of Mauritania became the last nation to [outlaw slavery](#). Sadly, in spite of that, millions are still enslaved today.

As we will see, the fact that Joseph was sold to Potiphar shows that God's hand was guiding Joseph's life—despite the awful circumstances he found himself in. As we have seen throughout the Genesis narratives, God can work through bad human decisions and difficult circumstances to fulfill His purpose.

Even though he was a slave, Joseph succeeded in an extraordinary way. We are told, “The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. ... Then he [Potiphar] made him [Joseph] overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. ... And he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate” (Genesis 39:2, 4, 6).

How did Joseph rise from a lowly foreign slave to the overseer of a prominent Egyptian's household? Some of the keys to Joseph's success were:

- He was a hard worker.
- He worked well with people.
- He had leadership and business skills, which he clearly demonstrated later in his life (Genesis 41:46-49, 55-57).

But the most important factor in Joseph's success was God's blessing. Potiphar noticed the positive results that came from Joseph's work and entrusted him with the day-to-day stewardship of his home. Joseph was much like David, who led Israel “according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands” (Psalm 78:72). Character and skills contribute to success in life.

Study the examples of other biblical people who excelled professionally through this combination of skills: Jacob, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego and Nehemiah.

A key lesson for Christians is the importance of developing the same [work ethic](#) Joseph had. The combination of hard work, the ability to work with other

people, tangible skills and seeking God's blessing can have similar positive effects on our professional lives.

To read more about the lessons of Joseph's success, read our blog post [“How ‘The Joseph Effect’ Can Affect Your Job.”](#)

Questions:

1. Who was Joseph sold to and what was his position in Egypt?
 2. Why were traders traveling through Canaan, the land where Joseph and his brothers lived?
 3. What position was Joseph promoted to?
 4. What key characteristics made Joseph successful in Potiphar's household?
-

JOSEPH FLEES SIN

Genesis 39:7: “And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, ‘Lie with me.’”

Potiphar had given Joseph charge of his entire household. He trusted his character and work ethic so much that he could leave him

unattended with no fears. But the same could not be said for Potiphar's wife.

Not only was Joseph a young man, he was also very “handsome in form and appearance” (Genesis 39:6). As days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, Potiphar's wife became very attracted to this Hebrew slave. We are told she “cast longing eyes on Joseph” (verse 7)—desiring him physically. Eventually she made a move to try to seduce him into an adulterous affair with her (verse 7).

But Joseph refused her advances because he knew it was dishonorable to sleep with the wife of his master (who deeply trusted him) and because it was *sin*—breaking God's law against adultery and fornication (verses 8-9).

Key Concepts to Know

- Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph
- Joseph resists temptation
- Joseph is falsely accused and thrown in prison

This is one of many accounts in the Bible that prove that God's law was in effect long before it was codified at Mount Sinai. Joseph had to know about God's law in order to dogmatically state that adultery was a "sin against God" (verse 9). To read more about this important topic, read our article "[Were the 10 Commandments Around Before Moses?](#)"

Yet, despite Joseph's rejection of her advances, Potiphar's wife continued to try to seduce Joseph "day by day" (verse 10). This may have gone on for weeks or months, but every time she made an advance toward him, Joseph steadfastly refused. He tried to avoid even being near her as a way to avoid the temptation (verse 10).

Joseph understood the principle Paul would write about hundreds of years later in 1 Corinthians 6:18: "Flee sexual immorality." **Fleeing** sexual temptation is vital when the temptation is in front of you, but it's even better if you flee the situation that can lead to the temptation. Jesus Christ's model prayer teaches us to pray: "And do not lead us into temptation" (Matthew 6:13). The point is that we shouldn't just avoid and resist the sin, we should also avoid situations that can lead to the temptation of sin.

Then one day Potiphar's wife found Joseph all alone "and caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me'" (verse 12). This time Joseph had to literally *run!* He fled so fast that he left his garment in her hands (verses 11-12).

Now that she realized this Hebrew slave would never give in, she decided to destroy the man who (she felt) had scorned her. Holding the garment he left behind, she concocted a false story that Joseph had tried to rape her, only fleeing after she screamed for help (verses 13-15). When Potiphar heard this, he threw Joseph into prison (verses 19-20).

Imagine how Joseph must have felt at this point. If he had known what a roller coaster was, he might have described his life as one! Going from the privileged son of a wealthy man to a slave in a strange land, to the overseer of a wealthy Egyptian's entire household and now a prisoner again.

He could have begun to question whether his integrity was worth it, but he didn't. He continued to live the way he had before. He provides an excellent example of what the apostle Peter wrote hundreds of years later: "But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20).

How do we know he continued living this way? Because we read that it wasn't long before the keeper of the prison saw the same character and skills that Potiphar had noticed years earlier. We are told he "committed to

Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison. ... The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper" (Genesis 39:22-23).

To read more about the danger of sexual sins, read:

- "[Seventh Commandment: You Shall Not Commit Adultery.](#)"
- "[Lust: Satan's Daily Attack on Men, Part 1.](#)"
- "[Lust: Christian Men Fight Back, Part 2.](#)"

Questions:

1. How did Joseph respond to the advances of Potiphar's wife?
 2. After Joseph fled from her last proposition, what did Potiphar's wife do to Joseph?
 3. How was Joseph's time in prison similar to his experience in Potiphar's house?
-

GENESIS 40: THE BAKER AND BUTLER DREAM

GOD INTERPRETS DREAMS

Genesis 40:8: "And they said to him [Joseph], 'We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it.' So Joseph said to them, 'Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please.'"

Joseph was now a prisoner in an Egyptian dungeon. Yet, through God's favor, he had risen to a position of leadership within the prison (Genesis 39:21-23).

Meanwhile, sometime during Joseph's imprisonment, Pharaoh became angry with his chief butler and baker

Key Concepts to Know

- Pharaoh's butler and baker imprisoned
- The two men have dreams
- Joseph interprets the dreams

and had them imprisoned. The keeper of the prison put these two men in Joseph's care (Genesis 40:1-4).

One night, both men had disturbing dreams. Joseph noticed the next morning that they both looked upset and asked them why. (Here we see another example of his character: he genuinely cared for others.) They told him of their dreams and explained they didn't know of anyone who could interpret them. Joseph told them God could and asked them for the details of their dreams (verses 5-8).

The chief butler described his dream first. In his dream, he saw a vine that had three budding branches that produced impressive clusters of grapes. In the dream, he pressed the grapes and served the cup to Pharaoh (verses 9-11).

Through God's revelation, Joseph interpreted the dream. The three branches represented three days—within three days the butler would be released and restored to his position (verses 12-13). Joseph asked the butler to remember him when he was in Pharaoh's presence again (verses 14-15).

Upon hearing the good meaning of the butler's dream, the chief baker recounted his dream to Joseph. He dreamed that there were three white baskets on his head. The top basket was full of baked goods for the Pharaoh. But birds devoured the food while the basket was still on his head (verses 16-17).

Again, through God's revelation, Joseph told the baker that the three baskets represented three days—within those three days the baker would be hanged and the birds would eat the flesh from his corpse (verses 18-19).

The interpretation of the dreams provided by Joseph proved accurate. Within three days the chief butler was restored and the chief baker was hanged (verses 20-22).

But, perhaps in his relief and excitement to be restored to his position, the butler forgot to mention Joseph to Pharaoh (verse 23).

Unlike the butler, God did not forget Joseph. Likewise, we can be assured that God will fulfill His promise to never *leave or forsake* us (Deuteronomy 31:6).

In the next chapter we will see how God worked through these events to put Joseph in the place where he was needed at exactly the right time.

Even though God occasionally used dreams and visions to communicate with mankind in Old Testament and early New Testament times, He mainly communicates with His people today through His Bible and the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 1:1-2; John 14:26).

To learn more about God's use of dreams in biblical history, read "[Interpretation of Dreams](#)."

Questions:

1. What happened in the butler's dream? How did Joseph interpret it?
 2. What happened in the baker's dream? How did Joseph interpret it?
 3. What did Joseph ask the butler to do when he returned to work? Did he do it?
-

GENESIS 41: JOSEPH MEETS THE PHARAOH

JOSEPH CALLED TO PHARAOH'S COURT

Genesis 41:1: "Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream."

Chapter 41 begins two years after the chief butler had been restored to his position. Joseph was still in prison, possibly losing hope that he would ever be free again.

Then one night Pharaoh had a dream. In his dream he saw seven healthy and fat cows come out of the Nile to feed. Suddenly, seven sickly and scrawny cows followed and ate the healthy cows. The dream was so vivid that it awakened Pharaoh (verses 1-4). He managed to get back to sleep and then dreamed again.

This time Pharaoh dreamed about seven plump heads of grain that came up on one stalk. But suddenly, seven thin and damaged heads sprang up and devoured the seven good heads of grain.

Pharaoh tried to find an interpretation of the dreams through his magicians and wise men, but none could offer a reasonable interpretation of the dreams. This whole drama reminded the chief butler of Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams (verses 8-13).

Key Concepts to Know

- Pharaoh has two mysterious dreams
- Joseph interprets the dreams
- Joseph is freed and promoted

The butler's good word caused Pharaoh to call for Joseph. Before he came into Pharaoh's presence, he shaved, cleaned up and dressed in proper clothing (verse 14). Though this information may seem insignificant, it is actually an important historical detail. Hieroglyphics and art from ancient Egypt show that the Egyptians were very particular about grooming and hygiene.

Joseph then explained the meaning of the two dreams. Both dreams revealed that Egypt was entering seven years of agricultural abundance, when Egypt's staple crops, wheat and barley, would be abundant. But following those seven years, there would be seven years of severe famine (verses 17-32).

It is important to understand there were greater forces at work than just the long-range weather patterns in Egypt. Over the next 14 years, God would use His miraculous control of the weather to accomplish His purpose of bringing Israel into Egypt.

From slave to leader

Joseph told Pharaoh that the two dreams together meant that the coming boom times and famine were "established by God"—in other words, there was no avoiding them (verse 32). But Joseph didn't stop there. He advised Pharaoh to appoint a wise man over Egypt's agriculture and economy to oversee stockpiling reserves during the seven years of plenty. This would allow Egypt to survive during the seven years of famine (verses 33-36).

Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph's interpretation and counsel that he promoted him to the very position he recommended! In one day, Joseph went from being a prisoner to the second-highest ranking official in the Egyptian government (verses 37-44).

Along with this new job, Joseph was given a new Egyptian name (Zaphnath-Paaneah) and a priest's daughter in marriage (verse 45). Over the next seven years, the former slave and prisoner proved to be an effective administrator, stockpiling so much food that Egypt was able to easily survive the famine, with enough to sell to people from other countries (verses 48-49, 53-57).

Even though Joseph didn't fully understand it earlier, his entire life experience was preparing him for this responsibility. Before he could be exalted to this position, he had to learn humility. As a teenager, he flaunted his dreams in front of his brothers, helping create the animosity and jealousy that led to their selling him into slavery. Joseph learned humility and wisdom through his years of slavery and imprisonment.

Joseph's life provides many lessons that show us what God is doing in the lives of His people. Like Joseph, we often suffer in this life, but our sufferings are nothing compared to our future blessings (Romans 8:18). God will give us a new name, and we will be given in marriage as part of the Bride of Christ to reign with Him for all eternity (Revelation 2:17; 19:7; 1:6).

To learn more about the purpose of suffering in God's plan for us, read the article "Why Am I Suffering?"

Questions:

1. What happened to the healthy cows and plump heads of grain in Pharaoh's dreams?
 2. What was the interpretation of the dreams?
 3. What job was Joseph given in the Egyptian government?
-

GENESIS 42: FAMINE HITS CANAAN

JACOB'S SONS MEET ZAPHNATH-PAANEAH

Genesis 42:3: "So Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt."

The famine Joseph had warned about had finally come upon Egypt and the surrounding regions—reaching all the way to Canaan where his family lived. Jacob probably learned of the Egyptian surplus through traders traveling through Canaan and realized that in order for his family to survive, he would need to send his sons down to Egypt to buy grain (verse 2). So 10 of them (all except Benjamin) made the journey to Egypt.

Key Concepts to Know

- Famine strikes Egypt and Canaan
- Jacob sends his sons to buy grain in Egypt
- The brothers unknowingly meet Joseph
- Joseph tests his brothers

Before giving the instruction, Jacob asked, “Why do you look at one another?” We might say something today such as, “Don’t just stand there, do something!” They needed outside help and soon!

Two important points can be drawn from this example:

- It is helpful to address problems and issues quickly and not let them linger (Ephesians 5:15-16; Colossians 4:5).
- We shouldn’t feel as though we are too good for outside help (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

In the same way that Jacob knew he needed to take decisive action to find food, a Christian should realize that it is important to address problems quickly—especially spiritual problems that require we *change* some aspect of our lives.

An unsettling reunion

Shortly after the brothers arrived in Egypt, they found themselves in front of a man introduced as Zaphnath-Paaneah, “the governor over the land” (verse 6). They had no idea this man was the brother they had sold into slavery years earlier. But Joseph recognized them immediately.

It had been years since he had seen his brothers. The last time he had seen them was as he was being led away into slavery. Now they didn’t even know who he was—possibly due to the passing years, the Egyptian clothing he was wearing, and the fact that he was speaking Egyptian. As he stared down at his humbled brothers, Joseph probably dealt with mixed emotions of anger, sadness and affection all at the same time.

Then he remembered what he had dreamed years ago—the dreams that he would rise above his brothers (Genesis 37). He probably began to realize that what happened, happened for a reason bigger than any of them. But instead of revealing himself at that moment, Joseph decided to test the brothers first to see what kind of men they were now after all those years.

So he continued as Zaphnath-Paaneah and treated them harshly. When he heard where they were from, he accused them of being foreign spies against Egypt. The startled brothers told Joseph, “We are honest men” (verse 11). This was coming from 10 men who had hated and sold their own brother and then lied to their aged father about his fate.

After Joseph told them that he required one of them to stay confined in Egypt while the others returned home to get their youngest brother (Benjamin), the brothers began talking among themselves in their native tongue, believing that none of the Egyptians would understand them. They

discussed what they had done to Joseph years ago and how they were now experiencing the same distress they had inflicted on him. The principle of “what goes around, comes around” was now becoming very real to them.

Hearing this conversation had a deep emotional effect on Joseph, and he had to step away from them for some time to weep. Once he had composed himself, Joseph returned to them and imprisoned Simeon until they would return with Benjamin.

For more information on resolving relationship issues, read our material on [relationships](#).

Questions:

1. What did Jacob send his brothers to do? Why did he give them this task?
 2. What reasons may explain why the brothers didn’t recognize Joseph?
 3. What did Joseph accuse his brothers of being?
 4. What did Joseph require they do in order for him to release Simeon from prison?
-

GENESIS 43: BENJAMIN GOES TO EGYPT

WHATEVER HAPPENS, HAPPENS

Genesis 43:14: “And may God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release your other brother and Benjamin. If I am bereaved, I am bereaved!”

The brothers had returned from their strange encounter with the high-ranking official in Egypt. When they told their father about Simeon’s imprisonment and the need to take Benjamin back with them, Jacob’s answer was a resounding *no*. However, as the supply of grain they had brought back began to dwindle, Jacob asked them to return to Egypt to restock. The sons reminded him that they could not return without bringing Benjamin.

Facing the prospect of starvation, Jacob finally relented and allowed his youngest son to go to Egypt. His words on making this decision were interesting: “If I am

bereaved, I am bereaved” (verse 14). Jacob knew he had to allow Benjamin to go in order to save his family. He had resolved to do what had to be done and accept whatever consequences came as a result.

Queen Esther took a similar approach when she risked her life to save the Jewish people. She declared, “If I perish, I perish!” (Esther 4:16). Sometimes this approach is necessary in a Christian’s life. Making hard decisions that are the right thing to do sometimes requires faith to allow *whatever happens to happen*. To learn more about making right decisions based on faith, read our article “What Is Faith?”

It is interesting to note that it was Judah, one of the older brothers, who stepped up and personally guaranteed Benjamin would return home safely (Genesis 43:8-9). He was willing to take on full responsibility for his brother. Months earlier, when the brothers had first told their father about the need to take Benjamin to Egypt, it was Reuben who had stepped up to guarantee his safe return (Genesis 42:37-38).

When the brothers finally departed to return to the feared Zaphnath-Paaneah, they took with them various gifts to win his favor (Genesis 43:11-12). They wisely understood the principle of a proverb that would be penned years later: “A man’s gift makes room for him and brings him before great men” (Proverbs 18:16, New American Standard Bible).

When they arrived in Egypt, instead of being interrogated as spies again, they were invited into Joseph’s house, where a banquet was prepared for them. The brothers were still uncomfortable and feared the Egyptian governor would accuse them of stealing and enslave them (Genesis 43:18). After Simeon was brought out to them, they were offered water to wash their feet and their donkeys were fed, which was a sign that they were being treated as honored guests—not slaves.

Afterward, they shared a feast that must have been extremely awkward and confusing for the brothers. Why was a governor of Egypt, who months before had made serious accusations against them, now inviting them to his home for dinner?

Why was this man so interested in the well-being of their father (verse 27)? Why did he have to flee the room when

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob allows Benjamin to go to Egypt
- Judah takes responsibility
- The brothers attend an awkward feast

he met their youngest brother (verse 30)? Why did he invite them to this feast when Egyptians normally wouldn’t eat with Hebrews (verse 32)? Why and how did he know their birth order (verse 33)? Why did he give Benjamin a serving five times as big as everyone else’s (verse 34)?

They must have been puzzled, but were probably totally unprepared for what would happen next.

Questions:

1. What did the brothers have to remind Jacob of when he asked them to return to Egypt to buy more grain?
 2. What did Jacob finally decide to allow, and how did he approach this decision?
 3. What did Judah offer to reassure Jacob of his decision?
 4. What happened to the brothers when they arrived in Egypt?
-

GENESIS 44-45: JOSEPH TESTS HIS BROTHERS AND REVEALS HIMSELF

WHO HAS THE CUP?

Genesis 44:12: “So he searched. He began with the oldest and left off with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack.”

At first, things seemed to be getting better for the brothers. They had brought Benjamin to Egypt and instead of being accused as spies, Simeon was released from prison and they were all treated to a feast by the Egyptian governor. Now they had their sacks full of grain and were heading home.

Imagine their shock when a servant of the Egyptian overtook them and accused them of stealing a valuable silver cup. After the brothers thoroughly denied any wrongdoing, they offered to allow the official to search everyone’s sack. And there it was, found in the last sack of grain that was searched—Benjamin’s.

It must have been a surreal experience. Everything they knew about Benjamin would have convinced them it was

not possible that he would have committed such an audacious crime. But the evidence seemed undeniable.

Devastated, they returned to the city for their punishment (verse 13).

We know that all of this had been orchestrated by Joseph behind the scenes. He instructed his servant to plant the cup in Benjamin's bag while nobody was looking. Perhaps Joseph was arranging an excuse to keep Benjamin with him, or perhaps he was testing the brothers to see how they would react to the prospect of losing the last son of Rachel. This would be the ultimate test to see if they had truly changed from the hardened men who had contemplated murder and then sold their own brother into slavery.

What happened next helped Joseph to see that his brothers *had changed*. After he decreed that the 10 siblings could go home but the perpetrator of the theft would remain as his slave, Judah (who had personally guaranteed to Jacob that Benjamin would return safely) stepped up. He passionately recounted what had happened in the previous months and explained how precious this boy was and what the decree would do to his father.

He truthfully explained that his father had already experienced the loss of another beloved son and that losing Benjamin would be too much for him to bear. Judah then offered to take Benjamin's place because he would rather be a slave in Egypt than see the grief that the loss would cause Jacob.

Joseph now saw that his brothers had matured beyond the calloused disregard for their father and brother they had shown years before. They now showed sincere love and concern.

Apparently, the brothers had learned they were to be their brother's keeper—literally. To read more about how we are to care for and protect others, read "[Am I My Brother's Keeper?](#)"

Seeing Judah and the others' reaction to the situation, Joseph couldn't continue with the act he was playing. He cleared the room of everyone except his brothers and wept openly as he revealed to them the truth: "I am Joseph; does my father still live?" (Genesis 45:3).

Key Concepts to Know

- The brothers prepare to return home
- Benjamin is accused of stealing
- Judah pleads for Benjamin
- Joseph reveals his identity
- The power of forgiveness

The brothers were shocked and speechless. Words probably cannot describe the actual scene of this tearful family reunion.

Joseph made his forgiveness clear, reassuring them they had nothing to fear from him and that he now understood it was God who directed the events in order to preserve life (verse 5). It was through his being placed in Egypt that perhaps millions of human lives—including the family of Israel—were preserved from the famine. As we have pointed out throughout this study guide, a major theme of the book of Genesis is God's unseen hand guiding human events to fulfill His will.

This account shows an amazing example of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus Christ stated that we must forgive if we want to be forgiven (Matthew 6:14-15). Even if someone sins against us repeatedly, we are to forgive (Luke 17:4). When it comes to dealing with injustices and wrongs from other people, Joseph stands as one of history's towering examples of the power of forgiveness.

To learn more about the necessity and process of forgiving others, read our articles "[How to Forgive](#)" and "[Grudges](#)."

Questions:

1. What accusation was made against the brothers as they left Egypt?
 2. Why was Benjamin accused of committing this crime?
 3. What was the truth behind this accusation?
 4. What did Judah plead before Joseph?
 5. What is a major spiritual lesson we can learn from Joseph's example?
-

GENESIS 46-47: JACOB AND JOSEPH REUNITE

A TEARFUL REUNION

Genesis 46:29: "So Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to Goshen to meet his father Israel; and he presented himself to him, and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while."

When the brothers returned home and informed Jacob that his lost son was alive and ruling as

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob and Joseph are reunited
- Jacob's family settles in Goshen
- Joseph nationalizes Egypt

a governor in Egypt, he did not believe them at first. But then we are told “the spirit of Jacob their father revived” (Genesis 45:27). In other words, he went from being down and depressed to joyful and excited!

How many years had Jacob been grief-stricken by the loss of his favorite son? How many flashbacks did Jacob have to the fateful day when his sons had presented Joseph's bloodstained coat to him? How many tears had he shed, believing he would never see his son again?

And now, against all odds and every expectation, he was embarking on a trip to Egypt to see his beloved son face-to-face.

Jacob packed all his possessions and, along with about 70 members of his household, traveled to Egypt. Along the way, God communicated with him again and revealed that his offspring would become “a great nation” during their sojourn in Egypt (see Exodus 1:7).

Jacob continued southwest into Egypt to reunite with his son. Upon meeting his father, Joseph “fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while” (Genesis 46:29). They had not seen each other for over 20 years!

How many families have experienced Jacob's pain without ever having the chance to feel the joy of reunion? How many mothers and fathers have endured the indescribable pain of losing a child, but never had a reunion?

Not yet, at least.

Contained within the pages of God's Word is the promise of another reunion so incredible, so awesome, that Jacob and Joseph's tearful meeting will pale in comparison. Jacob only *believed* Joseph was dead, but there is coming a time when the truly dead “small and great” (Revelation 20:12) “who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29). Friends will be reunited with friends, husbands with wives, and parents with children!

Imagine a time when the long, tearful reunion shared between this father and son will be experienced by billions of people in every corner of the globe.

To learn more about the coming resurrections, download our booklet *The Last Enemy: What Really Happens After Death?*

After the tearful reunion, Joseph arranged for his family and their flocks to settle in Goshen, a tract of land located in the northeastern Nile Delta region of Egypt. There the children of Israel would settle and transform themselves from a large family into a nation.

Joseph nationalizes Egypt

Joseph continued serving as Egypt's governor after his family settled in the area. Genesis 47 tells us of his savvy leadership on behalf of the nation of Egypt. Unlike their government, the citizens had not prepared themselves for the famine. As the famine continued, Egyptians became dependent on the state for food. Joseph used this situation to strengthen the government he led—in modern terms, he nationalized Egyptian society.

After the currency failed, Joseph demanded the citizens' livestock in exchange for grain (verse 16). By doing this, the government controlled one of the major sources of production. When citizens no longer had livestock to sell, Joseph then began a program of selling grain for land (verse 20). By doing this, he brought the majority of the land under national control—“so the land became Pharaoh's” (verse 20). Joseph then imposed a type of feudal system where he granted citizens land to grow crops for themselves, but required 20 percent of their harvest be returned to the government.

Joseph became a very popular figure in Egypt because he saved thousands, maybe millions of lives, through his policies. But he also enlarged the powers of the position of Pharaoh. As the book of Exodus reveals, that power would become a curse to the Israelites after Joseph's death.

To learn how to manage your money according to biblical principles, read our articles “[Christian Budget](#)” and “[Hard Work](#).”

Questions:

1. What did God reveal to Jacob on his way to Egypt?
 2. What future event does the reunion between Jacob and Joseph foreshadow?
 3. What were two ways that Joseph used the famine to strengthen the power of the Egyptian state?
-

GENESIS 48: THE BIRTHRIGHT PASSES TO EPHRAIM AND MANASSEH

JACOB CROSSES HIS ARMS

Genesis 48:14: “Then Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on Ephraim’s head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, guiding his hands knowingly, for Manasseh was the firstborn.”

When Jacob was on his deathbed, Joseph and his sons Manasseh and Ephraim visited the ailing patriarch. This would not be just a farewell visit. Jacob was inspired to use this opportunity to pass on the birthright blessing. It was now being passed to Joseph (through his two sons)—bypassing his firstborn, Reuben (who had disqualified himself years earlier).

But, as we will see, this ceremony would be very different from the previous times the patriarchs passed it on. Instead

of passing it directly to his son Joseph, he instead adopted the two boys as his own (verse 5) and divided the material blessings of the birthright between them.

How this ceremony took place is fascinating.

Since Manasseh was the firstborn of the two brothers, Joseph had placed him on Jacob’s right side. The primary blessing was always given through the right hand (considered the hand of strength and dominance). The lesser blessing would be given to Ephraim by Jacob’s left hand. That’s how the blessings would have been given if Jacob had merely reached forward and blessed them. But he did something unexpected.

The patriarch stretched out his right hand to the boy on his left (Ephraim) and his left hand to the boy on his right (Manasseh). In other words, he crossed his arms. This wasn’t a mistake, but was the full intention of Jacob under the inspiration of God (verse 14).

Key Concepts to Know

- **Joseph and his sons visit Jacob on his deathbed**
- **Jacob adopts and blesses Ephraim and Manasseh**
- **The future of Ephraim and Manasseh are described**

Joseph was confused and tried to correct his father (verse 17). But Jacob assured him that this was intentional and proceeded to pass the blessings on to Ephraim and Manasseh.

The patriarch bestowed the following prophetic blessings on the brothers that would be fulfilled through their descendants years later:

- **Manasseh:** “He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great” (verse 19). Manasseh was to become *one* nation that would be great.
- **Ephraim:** “But truly his younger brother [Ephraim] shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations” (verse 19). Ephraim was not to be a great single nation, but would become a people who would form multiple nations.

Both of these future peoples would have similar characteristics because they both represented Joseph (Genesis 49:22-26), but they would be distinguished in one primary way: Manasseh would consolidate into one nation that would be extremely powerful. Ephraim would be spread among a multitude of nations that would have a combined strength that would be even greater than his brother nation.

Some believe these promises were fulfilled through the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh during the time of ancient Israel. But they were merely individual tribes among the 12 tribes and not nations or a multitude of nations. Genesis 49:1 provides a key clue to the timing of these blessings—they would be fulfilled in the “last days.” In other words, times that were relatively close to the end of the age.

Looking at the characteristics provided in this scripture and other places in Genesis, and comparing them with the historical record and the migrations of peoples, it is clear that these blessings to Joseph were fulfilled in the American and British peoples. The United States is the great single nation of Manasseh. The British peoples, spread throughout the world through an empire and later a commonwealth, represent Ephraim.

Jacob concluded this ceremony by declaring that Joseph (through Ephraim and Manasseh) would be receiving “one portion [of the blessing] above your brothers” (Genesis 48:22). The other sons of Jacob would also receive blessings, which we will explore in the next reading.

To learn more details about the fulfillment of these blessings promised over 3,500 years ago, download our booklet *The United States, Britain and the Commonwealth in Prophecy*.

Questions:

1. Why did Joseph and his sons visit Jacob?
 2. How did the way Jacob passed forward the blessing differ from how his grandfather and father passed on the blessing?
 3. What unusual thing did Jacob do at the beginning of the ceremony that Joseph tried to correct?
 4. What prophetic blessing did each boy receive?
-

GENESIS 49: JACOB GATHERS HIS SONS

JACOB PROPHECIES TO HIS SONS

Genesis 49:1: "And Jacob called his sons and said, 'Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days.'"

Genesis 49:1 begins a long, detailed prophecy spoken by Jacob. We are told that shortly before his death, he gathered his 12 sons together and prophesied what would "befall you in the last days" (verse 1). In the Bible "[last days](#)" refers to the time prior to Jesus Christ's return.

This tells us two important things about the descendants of Jacob's sons:

- They would continue to exist in distinct entities—nations. Many believe they exist today as the Jewish people. In reality, the Jews mainly represent three sons of Jacob: Judah, Levi and Benjamin.
- They would exist during the time prior to the return of Jesus Christ. This shows that they must exist today. In fact, [Revelation 7:4-8](#) also shows they will exist during the end times.

The prophecy shows specific national characteristics and future challenges that would distinguish Jacob's descendants. These national traits and characteristics provide clues to help identify them today. Many of the characteristics lead us to believe that descendants of these tribes are found in France, Israel, the Netherlands, Finland,

Ireland, Denmark, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Some of them were to be scattered throughout the other tribes—

making them harder to identify nationally (Genesis 49:7).

The easiest sons to identify in our modern world are the descendants of [Judah](#) (verses 8-12), who are the Jewish people found in the nation of Israel and scattered around the world, and the descendants of Joseph (verses 22-26), who are primarily found in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

View the chart on our page "[12 Tribes of Israel](#)" for a visual representation of the descendants of the 12 brothers today.

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob gathers his sons
- Jacob prophesies of each son's descendants
- Jacob describes Judah's and Joseph's future
- Jacob dies

Prophecies for Joseph's descendants

Space does not allow us to examine the prophecies to each son in depth. But we will look at the additional prophecies made to Joseph's progeny in verses 22-26.

Remember that Joseph was given a "portion" of blessings greater than the other brothers (Genesis 48:22). When identifying his descendants in the modern world, we look for nations that have been dominant in the following measurements of national power to a greater extent than other nations.

- **Colonization.** Joseph was prophesied to be "a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall" (Genesis 49:22). Joseph's descendants would be a people prone toward colonial expansion.
- **National enemies.** Joseph would be shot at by "archers" (verse 23). This indicates that other nations would be jealous and try to attack and destroy him.
- **Environmental and agricultural blessings.** Joseph would receive blessings "of heaven above" (rainfall and weather conditions conducive to agriculture), "of the deep that lies beneath" (natural resources) and "of the womb" (fertility and life span) (verse 25).
- **Separate from the other tribes.** Joseph's descendants would become two distinct peoples (Ephraim and Manasseh) but would be "separate from his brothers" (verse 26). This would be a geographic, cultural and linguistic separation.

None of these indicators were fulfilled by the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh during the days of ancient Israel. These were to be fulfilled in the “last days” (verse 1). All of these indicators, plus other biblical clues, lead us to the conclusion that the American and British peoples are the inheritors of the birthright blessings given to Joseph.

Manasseh is represented in the single nation of the United States. Ephraim is represented in the British Commonwealth nations (mainly the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand).

Shortly after Jacob finished this series of prophecies, he laid down in his bed and “breathed his last” (verse 33). And so ended the long, hard life of one of God’s faithful servants. Perhaps his greatest legacy can be summed up in the word *growth*. His life is a living testimony to the ability of a human being to transform his character with the help of God. This man, who started as a trickster, died as a humbled, honest and God-fearing man of faith (Hebrews 11:21).

To learn more about the prophecies found in Genesis 49, read pages 21-25 of our booklet *The United States, Britain and the Commonwealth in Prophecy*.

Questions:

1. Why did Jacob gather all his sons together?
2. What was the nature of the words he said to each son?
3. When did Jacob say these things would be fulfilled?
4. What modern nations have received the promises to Judah and Joseph

GENESIS 50: THE ROOTS OF EXODUS

CONCLUSION OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Genesis 50:24: “And Joseph said to his brethren, ‘I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’”

We now come to the concluding chapter of this epic book. In this chapter, we read what happened in the aftermath of Jacob’s death.

Immediately following his death, Joseph and his brothers mourned for their father (Genesis 50:1). Because Jacob’s wish was to be buried in the land of Canaan, Joseph received special permission from Pharaoh to leave Egypt temporarily to return to his homeland and bury his father with his family (verses 5-6, 13-14).

Interestingly, when the brothers returned to

Egypt from the burial, they feared that Joseph had only been showing kindness to them for the sake of their father. They feared that their powerful brother would kill them now that Jacob was no longer alive. They even tried to take preemptive measures to be at peace with him.

Joseph’s response to their fears was what we would expect of this great man of character: “Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (verses 19-20).

Joseph understood three important truths:

- Murder is a sin. At any time he could have easily killed his brothers in retribution for their treatment of him decades earlier. He had that power. But he understood the value of human life. It was not his place to determine when their lives would end. God, as the Creator of humankind, has the right to take a physical life. Joseph understood the principle of the law later codified as the [Sixth Commandment](#): “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).
- Forgiveness is powerful. As we covered in a previous reading, Joseph did one of the hardest things a human being can do—forgive someone who has deeply wronged you. Despite having the ability to jail, enslave or kill his brothers, Joseph chose forgiveness and reconciliation.
- God has a bigger plan for His people. Though the circumstances that took him to Egypt were tragically painful, the end result was the preservation of many human lives. Not only that, Joseph’s position gave the children of Israel a safe place to grow into a nation. Christians should always remember that “all things work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28).

Key Concepts to Know

- Jacob is buried
- Joseph reassures his brothers
- The death of Joseph
- The roots of the Exodus

Not only did Joseph preserve the lives of his brothers, but he was kind to them—promising to *provide* for them and their children (Genesis 50:21). Kindness is a core characteristic that should be at the heart of every Christian (Ephesians 4:32; 1 Corinthians 13:4; Luke 6:35).

The book of Genesis concludes with the end of Joseph's life. We are told he lived to the age of 110 years. He even had the blessing of seeing his great-great-grandchildren (Genesis 50:23).

Like his father, Joseph prophesied at the end of his life. He revealed that someday in the future, the children of Israel would leave Egypt and return to the land of Canaan. But that would not be for another 200-plus years—some of those being in captivity. The next book of the Bible, Exodus, records the history of the remarkable fulfillment of this prophecy—the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery!

To learn more about the Exodus, read “[Exodus](#)” and “[A Deeper Look at the 10 Plagues](#).”

Epilogue

This study guide has taken you on a journey through one of the most important books ever written. Genesis is the *foundational* book of the Bible. It not only reveals the beginnings of our world and nations, but it also introduces the plan of God that is expanded on throughout the remainder of the God's Word.

Throughout this study of the book of Genesis, we were introduced to some of the greatest themes of the Bible, such as:

- God as the creator and sustainer of all things.
- God as a family.
- God's plan for human beings.

- Satan, the archenemy of God and mankind.
- The first prophecy about Jesus Christ.
- Sin and its destructive consequences.
- God's justice.
- The lives of the men God worked through to build a nation.
- How a follower of God must endure trials, yet remain faithful and grow throughout them.
- Prophecies about the rise of future nations.

Genesis should whet our appetite to study the rest of God's Word. We encourage you to continue studying the Bible in depth. Throughout the rest of the Bible, you will read about the unfolding of God's plan, culminating in mankind being redeemed and brought back into the close relationship with God that was broken in the Garden of Eden.

Just as the book of Genesis began with a garden paradise and the offer of the tree of life to human beings, the final book of the Bible, Revelation, ends with God establishing a paradise on this earth and giving mankind “the right to the tree of life” (Revelation 22:14).

And that will just be ...

THE BEGINNING.

Read the following resources for aid in your study of God's Word:

- “[The Practical & Priceless Benefits of Bible Study](#).”
- The resources in our [Learning Center](#).
- Our [summaries of books of the Bible](#).
- Read the Bible through in a year with one of our [Bible Reading Programs](#).
- Subscribe to our free bimonthly magazine, *Discern*, for articles and columns that bring you unique insights into the Bible and your world.

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Author: Erik Jones

Contributing Writers: Eddie Foster, Tim Groves, Jeremy Lallier

Editorial Reviewers: Mike Bennett, David Treybig

Doctrine Committee: John Foster, Bruce Gore, Don Henson, David Johnson, Larry Neff

Copy Editor: Becky Bennett

Design: David Hicks

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LifeHopeandTruth.com exists to fill a critical void in this world: the lack of understanding about the purpose of life, the lack of realistic hope for a better future and the lack of truth!

Neither religion nor science has satisfactorily addressed these issues, so people today are of divided opinions, confused or, worst of all, don't care anymore. The ancient words of the prophet Isaiah ring so true today: "Truth is fallen in the street." Why? Is it because God was right when He warned that humans are inclined to reject Him and usually choose not to know Him?

We are here for people who are searching for answers, who are ready to prove all things or who are hungry for more than what they've been taught most of their lives about God, the Bible, the meaning of life and how to live. We want to help you truly understand the good news of the gospel and fulfill Jesus Christ's admonition to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."

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info@cogwa.org