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We believe that the Bible has God for
its author; salvation for its end; and
truth, without any mixture of error,
for its matter and that all Scripture is
totally true and trustworthy. To review
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CONTENTS

Word from the Editors.....	02
About the Authors.....	03
How to Use.....	04

UNIT 1: GOD THE CREATOR

SUGGESTED FOR
THE WEEK OF

September 6	Session 1: In the Beginning, God.....	06
September 13	Session 2: In God's Image.....	16
September 20	Session 3: Human Rebellion.....	26
September 27	Session 4: The Spread of Sin.....	36
October 4	Session 5: The Creator Destroys and Redeems.....	46
October 11	Session 6: The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil....	56

UNIT 2: GOD THE COVENANT-MAKER

October 18	Session 7: God's Covenant with Abraham.....	66
October 25	Session 8: The Testing of Abraham.....	76
November 1	Session 9: God Reaffirms the Covenant.....	86
November 8	Session 10: God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family.....	96
November 15	Session 11: The God Who Gives New Names.....	106
November 22	Session 12: The God Who Uses Suffering.....	116
November 29	Session 13: God Is Faithful to His Covenant.....	126

FROM THE EDITORS



ED STETZER

General Editor
The Gospel Project
President, LifeWay
Research

“The Story Begins”—sounds epic, doesn’t it? As if you are about to embark on a great journey; as if from this moment forward, things will never be the same. I, for one, hope that is true, because we are not about to dive into a study of some ancient work that is dead but into the living Word of God. This isn’t just any story; this is the story that God Himself has been telling since the beginning of time.

The Gospel Project Chronological is going to take us through the storyline of Scripture in three years. From the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation, we will see that God’s Word is not a series of disconnected writings and stories but one grand narrative with a beginning, an eternal end, and a purpose—to reveal Jesus Christ as God’s Son, our Savior and Lord.

In the Old Testament, Jesus is the promised One; in the New Testament, He has come and will come again. All of life and all of history revolve around this One to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). And to those who are called by His name, this is our mission—our part of the story—to proclaim to the whole world Jesus as Lord, the Savior of all who believe in Him, that they would hear and give glory to the Creator of all.



TREVIN WAX

Managing Editor
The Gospel Project
Author of multiple
books, including *Gospel-
Centered Teaching*,
Counterfeit Gospels, and
*Clear Winter Nights: A
Young Man’s Journey into
Truth, Doubt, and What
Comes After*

For a story to be great, it must include a great beginning. The story of the Bible, which tells the true story of our world, is no exception.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God the Creator in all His majesty and goodness as He spins the world into motion and lavishes His image-bearers with love. We have an “inciting incident” that introduces conflict into this good world, as the first humans raise their fists in defiance toward their loving Father and bring havoc into this peaceful paradise. But even here, we have a promise—God will make things right again. God will cover His people’s sins and crush their adversary. The rest of Genesis shows how even though sin spread throughout the world, God remained faithful to His promise to Eve, His promise to Noah, and His promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

The Book of Genesis is a glorious and earthy tale of rebellion and redemption, of sin and salvation, of failings and faith. Here is a book that shows us who we are in our sin and who God is in His grace. May this study lead you to express gratitude for God’s love toward you and then extend His love to everyone who inhabits this world He has promised to restore.

AUTHORS



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HOW TO USE

▶ INTRO

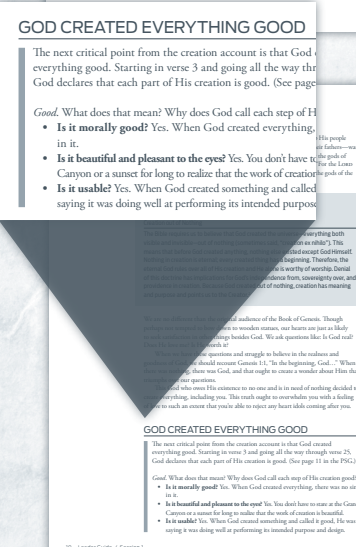
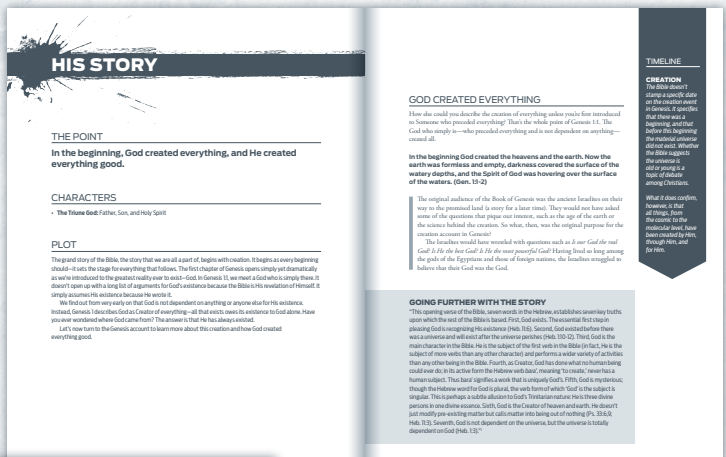
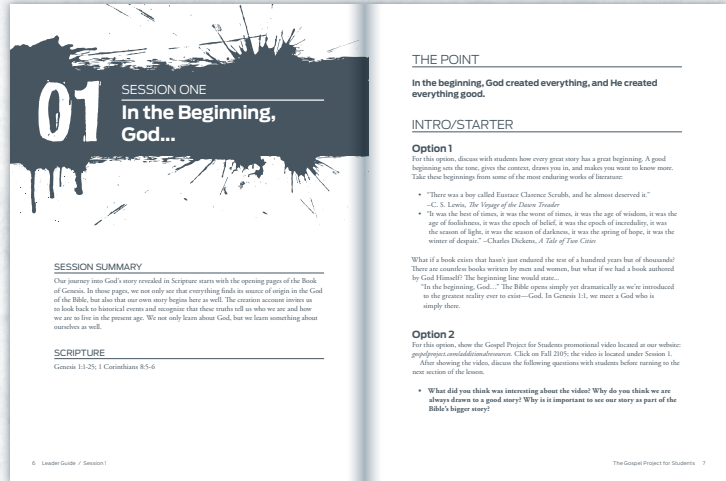
The two introductory pages begin with a summary that provides a brief overview of the session, including a list of Scriptures. The main point is also listed here, as well as two introductory options to choose from to begin the session.

▶ HIS STORY

The five His Story pages contain the main teaching material for each session. This section follows the storyline of the Bible, focusing on what God has done in redemptive history throughout the pages of Scripture. The first page restates the main point that is to be emphasized throughout the session and is followed by an overview of the main characters. There is also an introductory plot that serves as a transitional entryway to the main part of the session that begins on the following page.

In addition to these, there are other things to notice throughout the His Story section:

- **Personal Study Guide:** Any time you see a vertical bar in the His Story section, it indicates that the material can also be found in the student's personal study guide.
- **Timeline:** Each session features a timeline of events that corresponds to the timeline located in the student's personal study guide.
- **Going Further With The Story:** Most sessions will include at least one of these. They contain additional material that allows leaders to go deeper into the biblical story. It is up to the leader's discretion whether he or she would like to utilize this material in any way. One can simply bypass this option, however, and not miss anything vital to the session.



THIS STUDY

- **Essential Doctrines:** Each session will also contain an essential doctrine that directly relates to the Bible study material. The essential doctrine is also located in the student's personal study guide, though in an abbreviated format.
- **Christ Connection:** Each session will end with a direct look at how the content studied connects with Christ, emphasizing to students how all of Scripture is pointing to Him. The material in the Christ Connection will also be provided in the student's personal study guide.

▶ YOUR STORY

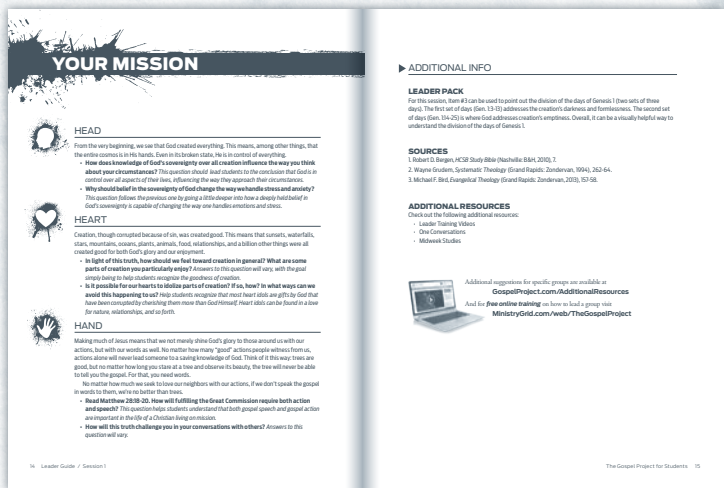
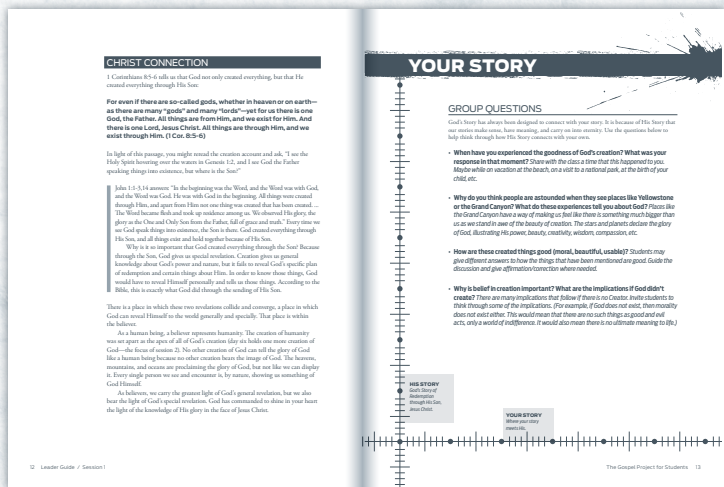
The Your Story section is designed to connect what God has done in the past to students' lives today by introducing group discussion questions that highlight how God's Story connects with their story. There are lead-ins with each question in the Leader Guide to help the leader walk students through each question.

▶ YOUR MISSION

The Your Mission section is designed to show how God's Story is capable of creating lasting transformation into how we think, feel, and live from day to day. By doing so, we emphasize to students that every session goes beyond mere Bible study to a calling to be on mission with God.

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

The final page of each session points leaders to additional resources that can be used in conjunction with each study. The resources listed, such as teaching tips videos and One Conversations, are designed to help leaders prepare for each session. There is also information about the leader pack posters that can be used with each session.





01

SESSION ONE

In the Beginning, God...

SESSION SUMMARY

Our journey into God's story revealed in Scripture starts with the opening pages of the Book of Genesis. In those pages, we not only see that everything finds its source of origin in the God of the Bible, but also that our own story begins here as well. The creation account invites us to look back to historical events and recognize that these truths tell us who we are and how we are to live in the present age. We not only learn about God, but we learn something about ourselves as well.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 1:1-25; 1 Corinthians 8:5-6

THE POINT

In the beginning, God created everything, and He created everything good.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

For this option, discuss with students how every great story has a great beginning. A good beginning sets the tone, gives the context, draws you in, and makes you want to know more. Take these beginnings from some of the most enduring works of literature:

- “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”
–C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
- “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” –Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

What if a book exists that hasn’t just endured the test of a hundred years but of thousands? There are countless books written by men and women, but what if we had a book authored by God Himself? The beginning line would state...

“In the beginning, God...” The Bible opens simply yet dramatically as we’re introduced to the greatest reality ever to exist—God. In Genesis 1:1, we meet a God who is simply there.

Option 2

For this option, show the Gospel Project Chronological promotional video located at our website: gospelproject.com/additionalresources. Click on Fall 2015; the video is located under Session 1.

After showing the video, discuss the following questions with students before turning to the next section of the lesson.

- **What did you think was interesting about the video? Why do you think we are always drawn to a good story? Why is it important to see our story as part of the Bible’s bigger story?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

In the beginning, God created everything, and He created everything good.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

PLOT

The grand story of the Bible, the story that we are all a part of, begins with creation. It begins as every beginning should—it sets the stage for everything that follows. The first chapter of Genesis opens simply yet dramatically as we're introduced to the greatest reality ever to exist—God. In Genesis 1:1, we meet a God who is simply there. It doesn't open up with a long list of arguments for God's existence because the Bible is His revelation of Himself. It simply assumes His existence because He wrote it.

We find out from very early on that God is not dependent on anything or anyone else for His existence. Instead, Genesis 1 describes God as Creator of everything—all that exists owes its existence to God alone. Have you ever wondered where God came from? The answer is that He has always existed.

Let's now turn to the Genesis account to learn more about this creation and how God created everything good.

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING

How else could you describe the creation of everything unless you're first introduced to Someone who preceded everything? That's the whole point of Genesis 1:1. The God who simply is—who preceded everything and is not dependent on anything—created all.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:1-2)

The original audience of the Book of Genesis was the ancient Israelites on their way to the promised land (a story for a later time). They would not have asked some of the questions that pique our interest, such as the age of the earth or the science behind the creation. So what, then, was the original purpose for the creation account in Genesis?

The Israelites would have wrestled with questions such as *Is our God the real God? Is He the best God? Is He the most powerful God?* Having lived so long among the gods of the Egyptians and those of foreign nations, the Israelites struggled to believe that their God was the God.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

"This opening verse of the Bible, seven words in the Hebrew, establishes seven key truths upon which the rest of the Bible is based. First, God exists. The essential first step in pleasing God is recognizing His existence (Heb. 11:6). Second, God existed before there was a universe and will exist after the universe perishes (Heb. 1:10-12). Third, God is the main character in the Bible. He is the subject of the first verb in the Bible (in fact, He is the subject of more verbs than any other character) and performs a wider variety of activities than any other being in the Bible. Fourth, as Creator, God has done what no human being could ever do; in its active form the Hebrew verb *bara'*, meaning 'to create,' never has a human subject. Thus *bara'* signifies a work that is uniquely God's. Fifth, God is mysterious; though the Hebrew word for God is plural, the verb form of which 'God' is the subject is singular. This is perhaps a subtle allusion to God's Trinitarian nature: He is three divine persons in one divine essence. Sixth, God is the Creator of heaven and earth. He doesn't just modify pre-existing matter but calls matter into being out of nothing (Ps. 33:6,9; Heb. 11:3). Seventh, God is not dependent on the universe, but the universe is totally dependent on God (Heb. 1:3)."¹

TIMELINE

CREATION

The Bible doesn't stamp a specific date on the creation event in Genesis. It specifies that there was a beginning, and that before this beginning the material universe did not exist. Whether the Bible suggests the universe is old or young is a topic of debate among Christians.

What it does confirm, however, is that all things, from the cosmic to the molecular level, have been created by Him, through Him, and for Him.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

To remedy such wandering hearts, God wrote Genesis 1:1 to help His people understand that the God of their bedtime stories—the God of their fathers—was the very same God who created the world. The God of Israel, not the gods of the Canaanites or the Philistines, was the Creator of everything. “For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (Ps. 96:4-5).

Don't forget to mention the 99 Essential Doctrines throughout your studies. There is an abbreviated form of each doctrine in the personal study guide.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Creation out of Nothing

The Bible requires us to believe that God created the universe—everything both visible and invisible—out of nothing (sometimes said, “creation ex nihilo”). This means that before God created anything, nothing else existed except God Himself. Nothing in creation is eternal; every created thing has a beginning. Therefore, the eternal God rules over all of His creation and He alone is worthy of worship. Denial of this doctrine has implications for God’s independence from, sovereignty over, and providence in creation. Because God created out of nothing, creation has meaning and purpose and points us to the Creator.²

We are no different than the original audience of the Book of Genesis. Though perhaps not tempted to bow down to wooden statues, our hearts are just as likely to seek satisfaction in other things besides God. We ask questions like: *Is God real? Does He love me? Is He worth it?*

When we have these questions and struggle to believe in the realness and goodness of God, we should recount Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God...” When there was nothing, there was God, and that ought to create a wonder about Him that triumphs over our questions.

This God who owes His existence to no one and is in need of nothing decided to create everything, including you. This truth ought to overwhelm you with a feeling of love to such an extent that you’re able to reject any heart idols coming after you.

Whenever you see PSG page numbers listed, it indicates that there is a section in the personal study guide for students to interact with.

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING GOOD

The next critical point from the creation account is that God created everything good. Starting in verse 3 and going all the way through verse 25, God declares that each part of His creation is good. (See page 11 in the PSG.)

Good. What does that mean? Why does God call each step of His creation good?

- **Is it morally good?** Yes. When God created everything, there was no sin in it.
- **Is it beautiful and pleasant to the eyes?** Yes. You don’t have to stare at the Grand Canyon or a sunset for long to realize that the work of creation is beautiful.
- **Is it usable?** Yes. When God created something and called it good, He was saying it was doing well at performing its intended purpose and design.

The purpose and design of creation is to declare God’s glory and proclaim the work of His hands (Ps. 19:1) and to reveal things about God that are invisible to us, such as His eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20). Because of creation, we can clearly see and understand these things.

Think about it this way: if someone we had never met walked into the room, there would be certain things we could know about him even if he just stood silently before us. Without him actually “revealing” himself to us by speaking, we could look at him and make some accurate, general statements about him. Based on appearances, we might say he is approximately 6 feet tall, 180 pounds, strong, has brown hair and brown eyes, athletic, creative, etc. From appearances alone, our observations would be general, but still true.

But for us to really know him—to know his thoughts, character, intentions, and will—he would need to speak to us. He would need to tell us his likes/dislikes, his family background, his life experiences, etc. In other words, he would need to speak.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

The Goodness of Creation

In Genesis 1, God repeatedly affirmed that all of His creation was good, even “very good” (1:31). It is good, in God’s judgment, because He created it for a purpose that it fulfilled—to reflect and display the good character of the Creator. Therefore, sin, evil, and rebellion should not be seen as intrinsic to the creation but rather an intrusion into the created realm. While the corruption of sin has marred and distorted the creation, it is still good in the hands of God and serves His purpose of proclaiming His glory in the world. God’s people should affirm and seek to preserve the goodness of God’s creation (2:15).³

It is quite stunning that we get to see the God of this universe begin the good work of revealing Himself. He reveals Himself in His creation, allowing humanity to know things about the Creator just by looking at creation—much like an artist leaves fingerprints on a work of art. He could have left us with this general knowledge. He didn’t have to speak or make Himself known, but He did, and He still does. In fact, one of God’s greatest acts of mercy toward the world and mankind is that He spoke.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Ever since these first six days, creation has been fulfilling its purpose such that everyone knows God. In fact, Romans 1 says that there is not a single person who doesn’t know God (v. 21). That’s good news, but there is also bad news.

Romans 1:18 says that even though everyone knows the truth about God, fallen humankind suppresses that truth in unrighteousness. No matter how good the mountains and the heavens are, no matter how plainly they display the truth about God’s glory, humanity will always suppress this knowledge and choose not to glorify God.

TIMELINE

BEARING GOD’S IMAGE

God creates man in His image, to reflect His likeness.

FALL

Sin enters the story and distorts God’s good creation.

CAIN AND ABEL

The depth of humanity’s fall is revealed in the heinous murder between two brothers.

NOAH

Judgment and graciousness are found in the flood.

TOWER OF BABEL

Humanity’s pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God’s glory will never be dethroned.

CHRIST CONNECTION

1 Corinthians 8:5-6 tells us that God not only created everything, but that He created everything through His Son:

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:5-6)

In light of this passage, you might reread the creation account and ask, “I see the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2, and I see God the Father speaking things into existence, but where is the Son?”

John 1:1-3,14 answers: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Every time we see God speak things into existence, the Son is there. God created everything through His Son, and all things exist and hold together because of His Son.

Why is it so important that God created everything through the Son? Because through the Son, God gives us special revelation. Creation gives us general knowledge about God’s power and nature, but it fails to reveal God’s specific plan of redemption and certain things about Him. In order to know those things, God would have to reveal Himself personally. According to the Bible, this is exactly what God did through the sending of His Son.

There is a place in which these two revelations collide and converge, a place in which God can reveal Himself to the world generally and specially. That place is within the believer.

As a human being, a believer represents humanity. The creation of humanity was set apart as the apex of all of God’s creation (day six holds one more creation of God—the focus of session 2). No other creation of God can tell the glory of God like a human being because no other creation bears the image of God. The heavens, mountains, and oceans are proclaiming the glory of God, but not like we can display it. Every single person we see and encounter is, by nature, showing us something of God Himself.

As believers, we carry the greatest light of God’s general revelation, but we also bear the light of God’s special revelation. God has commanded to shine in your heart the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **When have you experienced the goodness of God's creation? What was your response in that moment?** *Share with the class a time that this happened to you. Maybe while on vacation at the beach, on a visit to a national park, at the birth of your child, etc.*
- **Why do you think people are astounded when they see places like Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon? What do these experiences tell you about God?** *Places like the Grand Canyon have a way of making us feel like there is something much bigger than us as we stand in awe of the beauty of creation. The stars and planets declare the glory of God, illustrating His power, beauty, creativity, wisdom, compassion, etc.*
- **How are these created things good (moral, beautiful, usable)?** *Students may give different answers to how the things that have been mentioned are good. Guide the discussion and give affirmation/correction where needed.*
- **Why is belief in creation important? What are the implications if God didn't create?** *There are many implications that follow if there is no Creator. Invite students to think through some of the implications. (For example, if God does not exist, then morality does not exist either. This would mean that there are no such things as good and evil acts, only a world of indifference. It would also mean there is no ultimate meaning to life.)*

HIS STORY
*God's Story of
Redemption
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.*

YOUR STORY
*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

From the very beginning, we see that God created everything. This means, among other things, that the entire cosmos is in His hands. Even in its broken state, He is in control of everything.

- **How does knowledge of God's sovereignty over all creation influence the way you think about your circumstances?** *This question should lead students to the conclusion that God is in control over all aspects of their lives, influencing the way they approach their circumstances.*
- **Why should belief in the sovereignty of God change the way we handle stress and anxiety?** *This question follows the previous one by going a little further into how a deeply held belief in God's sovereignty is capable of changing the way one handles emotions and stress.*



HEART

Creation, though corrupted because of sin, was created good. This means that sunsets, waterfalls, stars, mountains, oceans, plants, animals, food, relationships, and a billion other things were all created good for both God's glory and our enjoyment.

- **In light of this truth, how should we feel toward creation in general? What are some parts of creation you particularly enjoy?** *Answers to this question will vary, with the goal simply being to help students recognize the goodness of creation.*
- **Is it possible for our hearts to idolize parts of creation? If so, how? In what ways can we avoid this happening to us?** *Help students recognize that most heart idols are gifts from God that we have corrupted by cherishing them more than God Himself. Heart idols can be found in a love for nature, relationships, and so forth.*



HANDS

Making much of Jesus means that we not merely shine God's glory to those around us with our actions, but with our words as well. No matter how many "good" actions people witness from us, actions alone will never lead someone to a saving knowledge of God. Think of it this way: trees are good, but no matter how long you stare at a tree and observe its beauty, the tree will never be able to tell you the gospel. For that, you need words.

No matter how much we seek to love our neighbors with our actions, if we don't speak the gospel in words to them, we're no better than trees.

- **Read Matthew 28:18-20. How will fulfilling the Great Commission require both action and speech?** *This question helps students understand that both gospel speech and gospel action are important in the life of a Christian living on mission.*
- **How will this truth challenge you in your conversations with others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, point out item #2 to the students. Item #2 portrays several key Old Testament figures that students will come into contact with as they move through the Book of Genesis.

SOURCES

1. Robert D. Bergen, *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 7.
2. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 262-64.
3. Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 157-58.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

Don't forget to check out these additional resources to help equip you for each session.

02

SESSION TWO

In God's Image

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will explore the biblical truth that God created humans in His image with the purpose of glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever. By looking at the creation story of our first parents, Adam and Eve, we will learn that some of the ways we reflect God is by ruling wisely over the world, relating rightly to Him and to others, and reflecting His goodness in our work and rest.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 1:26-2:25

THE POINT

God created humanity in His image.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Prior to the session, attach a large sheet of paper to a focal wall and label it “Relationships.” As students arrive, provide markers and direct them to record (by writing or drawing simple illustrations) various relationships that impact their lives.

After everyone has had a chance to record their responses, review the relationships listed. Call for clarification of any that may be unclear. Follow up by asking the following questions:

- **How would you describe the importance of these relationships in your life? Of the relationships listed, which are the most important to you? Why?**

After students have had time to answer, attach another blank, large sheet of paper over the first, then ask the following question:

- **What impact would it have on your life if these relationships did not exist? Explain.**

Option 2

Prior to the session, make a list of items that come in pairs or often go together. Some examples might include: peanut butter and jelly, burger and fries, bread and butter, Batman and Robin, (a pair of) scissors, (a pair of) pants, and so forth.

Lead students in a game of charades using the list, instructing students go up two at a time (e.g., two students must act out burger and fries). Following the game, challenge students to guess the charade theme. Announce that the theme was pairs; they all related! Today’s lesson, too, will be about things that relate to one another.

You can use this activity to explain to students that many great things come in relationships.

- **How hard it would be for one hand to clap or one lip to whistle? or to have a sandwich with only one piece of bread (not folded in half)?**

Emphasize that we need relationships with God, with one another, and with the world!

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God created humanity in His image.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Adam and Eve:** the first humans created

PLOT

In the previous session, we saw how God begins the story of the world by looking at the creation event. We saw that in the first three days of creation, God dealt with the formlessness by giving boundaries, separating, and organizing in order to make the heavens, the seas, and the earth. Then, in the second set of three days, God dealt with the emptiness of the world by filling the spheres that He created in the first three days. He filled the expanse with the sun, moon, and stars, He filled the earth with vegetation, and He filled the seas and the dry land with living creatures.

Our story picks up where we left off, moving toward the climactic scene where God creates something in a new and unique way—the creation of humanity. Mankind was created in God’s image, a unique characteristic from all other parts of creation.

- **What does it mean to be created in God’s image?**
- **What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “created in God’s image”?**
- **Do you think we still bear God’s image today, even in our sinful state?**

(Allow students a moment to respond. These questions can be found on p. 16 in the PSG.)

Let’s find the answers to our questions by digging into the creation account of humanity in Genesis 1-2.

TIMELINE

BEARING GOD'S IMAGE

God creates humanity in His image to reflect His likeness.

THE FALL

Sin enters the story and distorts God's good creation.

CAIN AND ABEL

The depth of humanity's fall is revealed in the heinous murder between two brothers.

TO REFLECT GOD MEANS TO RULE WISELY

When we talk about being created in God's image, most people assume this means God must look like us in a physical sense—He must have two arms, two legs, and be slightly taller than average. However, the Bible teaches that God is Spirit, and so it must mean something beyond human physical features.

As the story of the creation of man and woman unfolds, we begin to see what being created in God's image entails. For starters, God calls Adam and Eve to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth. His command for humans to fill and subdue the earth is an invitation to bear His image—to reflect Him by doing what He has just done in creating the heavens and the earth. Just as He filled the world with stars, vegetation, and living creatures, we are called to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with life. And just as He brought order from chaos in separating the land from the seas, we are called to subdue the world in such a way that brings harmony and accord.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Gen. 1:26-31)

In this passage, we see that God is the ruler, and bearing His image means that we too must rule. But to reflect Him properly, we must rule wisely. Unfortunately, because of our sinfulness we tend to either worship creation or abuse it, to hold it up as if it were a god or to trample it as if it has no value. God's call to care for creation, however, should lead us to worship Him for the good things He has given us, not to worship the good things themselves.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

When we take a piece of land and garden/farm it, or preserve it so it can produce its peculiar life-splendors, when we take fabric and make a piece of clothing, when we push a broom to clean up a place, when we use technology to harness the forces of electricity, when we take an unformed, naïve human mind and teach it a subject, when we take unprocessed material and turn it into a poignant work of art, when we take undifferentiated tones and pitches (noise) and separate them out and arrange them to create music, (even when we pass a comb through our hair)—whenever we bring order out of chaos, whenever we draw out creative potential, whenever we elaborate and ‘unfold’ creation further than where it was when we found it—we are continuing God’s work of creative, cultural development.¹

TO REFLECT GOD MEANS TO RELATE

Not only do we reflect God through the wise ruling of His world, but we also reflect God through our relationships—both with Him and with others.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen. 2:4-9)

To bear God’s image means to have a relationship with Him. Our image-bearing started when God created us. The account in Genesis shows how powerful a scene this was—when God’s face was toward us, when He breathed into the first man the breath of life. Just as a mirror best reflects an image when the mirror is directly in front of the object, we reflect God’s image best when we are in close relationship with Him.

To bear God’s image doesn’t point only to the relationship we have with God; we also have a relationship with one another. God created us “male and female.” The God who exists in community—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—created human beings to live in community as well. Genesis 2 continues:

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen. 2:22-24)

After multiple statements of God seeing that His work was “good” and then “very good,” comes the first moment when something is described as “not good.” We were not created to bear God’s image on our own or to have an isolated relationship with God. We reflect God best when we are in community with one another—relating to others in love and grace. Thus, reflecting God’s image means we are to relate rightly to Him and to others.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The human alone, of all of the creatures, knows and is consciously related to God. The portrayals of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden suggest that God and they customarily communed together. Humans were not created merely to be a work of art, statues displaying God’s creativity and wisdom, but to fulfill God’s special intention for them. It is significant that both in the Old Testament law (the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20) and in Jesus’ statement of the two great commandments (Matt. 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:26-27), the thrust of God’s will for humans concerns relationship to God and to other humans.²

TO REFLECT GOD MEANS TO WORK AND REST

Reflecting God also goes beyond our relationships and is seen in the rhythms of our everyday activities and rest. First, we see the creation of “work” in Genesis 2:15:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Gen. 2:15)

A lot of people have wrongly assumed that the command to work was a result of man’s sinning and rebelling against God. But the creation narrative shows us that God created work for man as part of His good world. Work is just as beautiful as the sunset, and just as purposeful as the rain.

Work isn’t something that God gave man as a curse after the fall into sin; the toil of work is what came with sin, but work itself is designed to give us fulfillment and provide us an environment to reflect God.

Work didn’t come as a result of the fall, and work isn’t just something we do in order to make money. When viewed rightly, our work can reflect God. But not only does our work reflect God, our resting does as well. In fact, God commands us to rest.

TIMELINE

NOAH

Judgment and graciousness are found in the flood.

TOWER OF BABEL

Humanity’s pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God’s glory will never be dethroned.

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. (Gen 2:1-3)

God did not rest because He needed it, as if He were tired or worn out. He gave us an example of rest to show that even though we are unlike any other creature in that we are the most “like” God, we are not God. There is an unbridgeable difference between God and us. And one of the most critical ways that we can reflect Him to the world is by showing that we are not God.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Image of God in Humanity

Some theologians believe “the image of God” refers to our mirroring of God’s attributes: our nature models God’s nature. Others believe we see the “image of God” in what human beings do. Still others believe the “image of God” concerns our relationships with God and with others. In Jesus we see the true image of God. He perfectly mirrors God’s attributes, fulfills God’s will, and enjoys a perfect relationship with the Father.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Bearing God’s image—it is a daunting task. How are you doing at reflecting God’s image? At wisely ruling the world? At relating with Him and others? At reflecting Him properly through the rhythms of your everyday activities and rest? What would the world conclude about God by looking at His image that you’re reflecting?

Here’s the bad news: It’s no small sin for you to fail at properly reflecting God to the world. An assault on God’s image is an assault on God Himself. When you fail to properly reflect His image to the world, you are telling the world lies about God and what He’s like.

But here’s the glorious good news: Jesus came to be the perfect image of the invisible God. He is the only One who rules wisely over the world. He upholds all things by His power, and all of creation awaits in eager anticipation for His return. He is the only One who perfectly relates to God and others and can restore our broken relationships with God and others. He not only has a face-to-face relationship with God, but His face is the very face of God. And because of Jesus’ good work on our behalf—His perfect life, death in our place, and glorious resurrection—we are invited into His rest. No longer striving for salvation but resting in His finished work.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What comes to mind when you think of humanity being made “in the image of God”?** Responses to this question will vary. Point students to their responses to the earlier question about being created in God's image (p. 16, PSG), and how they would answer that question differently now having gone through this session.
- **When was the last time you thought of fish, birds, or even worms as living creatures that God has entrusted to you to care for?** More than likely, most students haven't seen the different parts of creation in this way. Instead of seeing themselves as stewards of God's creation, they see themselves as merely consumers. As you discuss this question with students, direct the conversation toward helping them see their responsibility among creation.
- **In what ways can your life demonstrate the priority of your relationship with God? What are some signs that your relationship with God is not your priority?** Because there are several different types of responses to these questions, allow students the time and freedom to think about their responses in light of the session. Answers may vary from how one responds to sin within his or her life to living out God's Word in one's life.
- **In what ways does our culture diminish the value of work? How have you diminished the idea of work in your own life? How can you correct this?** Explain to students that work is used here in a broad sense, referring to anything from everyday school work and household chores to a summer part-time job. The goal is to get students thinking biblically about work, helping them see that work is sacred, valuable, and should be done unto the Lord.

HIS STORY

God's Story of
Redemption
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story
meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The fact that God created humanity in His image means that each individual person on planet earth, no matter how big, how small, or the color of their skin, possesses inherent worth, value, and dignity.

- **How should the doctrine of humans being created in God's image influence the way we think about others?** *Regardless of ethnicity, gender, cultural differences, or even sinful actions, the image of God in humanity causes us to see others as possessing something unique that gives each person dignity and value.*
- **Why is it important to note that humanity has a special place among creation because we were created in God's image? What are the dangers of not affirming this?** *This gets to the heart of many debates within our culture regarding human life, such as abortion, euthanasia, and so forth. Since humanity was created in God's image and is unique among the rest of creation, this truth should significantly influence the way we approach those topics.*



HEART

The reality of God creating humanity in His image not only means that we see other people in a different light, but it also influences the way we feel toward others who bear the same image, both Christians and non-Christians.

- **How should the doctrine of humans being created in God's image influence the way we feel about others, both Christians and non-Christians?** *At the very least, it should cause us to feel a certain respect and compassion for them given that they, too, are image bearers of God.*
- **Why should we be grieved when we see image bearers of God living in a way that is contrary to the way God intended?** *Primarily, it should grieve us because that is not the way humanity was intended to live.*



HANDS

As we learned throughout this session, bearing God's image is a tangible reality that shows up in our day-to-day lives. Not only does it show up in our relationships, but it also shows up in the way we steward the earth God has given us, as well as in the way we work and rest. No matter how old they are, everyone works (home, school, sports, etc.), everyone rests, and everyone contributes, for good or bad, to the little corner of this planet God where has placed them.

- **How will you begin to treat friends, family members, and even strangers differently based upon the truth that they are created in God's image?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways you can begin to reflect God by being a better steward of the world He has given us?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, point out item #1 to students, which displays all of the essential doctrines that will be covered over the course of the Fall 2015 study,

SOURCES

1. Timothy J. Keller, *What were we put in the world to do?* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2006), 25-26.
2. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, 3rd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 467-68.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



03

SESSION THREE

Human Rebellion

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will look at humanity's "fall into sin." We will see that our rebellion against God begins by distrusting the goodness of His Word. Sin ruptures our relationship with God and with others, and then leads to devastating consequences in the world around us. Only God can save us from our sin and its consequences and empower us to battle sin as we live in His kingdom.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 3:1-24

THE POINT

Sin corrupts the goodness of God's creation.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

In the previous sessions we learned that once God created the world, He created human beings, male and female, in His image. But after preparing a place for both Adam and Eve to enjoy, we witness in this session that a rebellion would take place, and as a result, God would exile them from the garden of Eden.

- **What if Adam and Eve had never sinned when they lived in the garden of Eden?**

Challenge students to really think about this. While they're thinking, encourage them to refer to the specific curses God placed on Adam and Eve after they disobeyed (Gen. 3:16-19).

Option 2

Separate students into three-person teams. Each team will need at least one boy and one girl. Assign each student one of three roles: talk show host, Adam, and Eve. Lead the talk show host (radio or TV) to prepare some questions to interview Adam and Eve. Instruct Adam and Eve to study the passages from today's session to prepare to answer the host's questions. (They should not work on these together.)

Allow students a few minutes to conduct their interviews. After each team has had the opportunity to present, discuss some of the highlights of the story as mentioned through the interviews.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Sin corrupts the goodness of God's creation.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Adam and Eve:** the first humans created by God in His image
- **Satan:** disguised as the serpent in the garden

PLOT

In the previous sessions we learned that God created the world and human beings, male and female, in His image. As a Father providing good things for His children, God gave Adam and Eve a good world to take care of and enjoy. Everything He made—sun, moon, stars, sea creatures, birds, trees, and fruit—all of it was good and all of it was for them. More importantly, God gave Himself in relationship and fellowship to the first people.

All was good, and all was well! In fact, as we've seen, God overlooked all that He had made and declared it to be "very good." It's hard to gain an accurate picture of this time given that the world we now know is not the way it was intended to be. But in the first two chapters of the Bible, things were exactly as they were meant to be. That is, until sin enters the stage in human history.

So what went wrong? What happened in the garden that would forever shape the world and humanity as we know them today? Let's turn to Genesis 3 and see exactly what happened and the damage sin caused to the good work of creation.

SIN LEADS TO A DISTRUST OF GOD'S WORD

As we begin to read the opening verses in chapter 3, we see that a drastic change is about to take place between humanity's relationship with their Creator. And at the heart of this change lies an issue of trust—trusting the goodness of God and His Word.

As we are about to see, human rebellion leads us to distrust the goodness of God's Word. This is at the heart of human sinfulness, so it's no surprise that Satan (disguised as a serpent) chose this line of temptation in the garden of Eden. Let's read:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Gen. 3:1-7)

The serpent begins by introducing doubt. Did God really say...? He's not denying what God has said, of course, but he is making God's Word up for debate. Are you serious? Did He really, truly say that to you?

Notice also how the serpent twists God's Word. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat from any tree except one, but the serpent changes the prohibition: "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?"

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Sin as Rebellion

Because the Bible portrays people as responsible beings, expected to respond in faith and obedience to God's revelation, the Bible often portrays sin in terms of defiance and rebellion toward God the King. Isaiah 1:2 is one of many passages that describes sin in terms of rebellion against God: "I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against Me." Seen in this light, sin is personal and willful disobedience, the raising of a clinched fist toward the One who made us.

TIMELINE

THE FALL

Sin enters the story and distorts God's good creation.

CAIN AND ABEL

The depth of humanity's fall is revealed in the heinous murder between two brothers.

NOAH

Judgment and graciousness are found in the flood.

The serpent didn't first attack with a statement, but with a question. His goal was to lead Adam and Eve to doubt God's goodness. He followed the question with an outright lie: "You will not surely die." Sin begins with doubting God's goodness and ends with denying God's Word.

- **Of course, Adam and Eve aren't the only people who have doubted the goodness and truthfulness of God and His Word. When have you ever questioned the truthfulness of God's Word?** (*p. 22, PSG*)

In the end, the serpent wanted Adam and Eve to think they were missing out and that God was withholding happiness from them. And so Eve took the fruit, and Adam followed.

This was a simple act of disobedience that carried with it unimaginable consequences. What happened in the garden was not merely a mistake; it was a rebellion.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

"Sin lives in a costume; that's why it's so hard to recognize. The fact that sin looks so good is one of the things that makes it so bad. In order for it to do its evil work, it must present itself as something that is anything but evil. Life in a fallen world is like attending the ultimate masquerade party. Impatient yelling wears the costume of a zeal for truth. Lust can masquerade as a love for beauty. Gossip does its evil work by living in the costume of concern and prayer. Craving for power and control wears the mask of biblical leadership. Fear of man gets dressed up as a servant heart. The pride of always being right masquerades as a love for biblical wisdom. Evil simply doesn't present itself as evil, which is part of its draw. You'll never understand sin's sleight of hand until you acknowledge that the DNA of sin is deception. Now, what this means personally is that as sinners we are all very committed and gifted self-swindlers. ... We're all too skilled at looking at our own wrong and seeing good."¹

SIN LEADS TO BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD AND OTHERS

The fallout from Adam and Eve's sin began immediately. Their eyes were opened. Their rebellion caused them to have a new consciousness of their nakedness. Shame entered God's good world. The first couple realized that they were naked, and so they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that

you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" he man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Gen. 3:8-16)

Adam and Eve felt clothed before they exchanged the goodness of God's Word for lies. They had God's favor; they were unashamed, secure, and provided for. But when they questioned and doubted the goodness of God, they brought shame into our world. And with this favor gone, they felt naked.

Before their sin, Adam and Eve felt no shame, there was nothing to hide, and they could be completely vulnerable before God and with each other in complete safety. There were fully known and fully loved.

And even now, we long to be known and loved. But shame has infected all of our relationships. This is why you wonder: *What if someone I deeply care for learned how I really am on the inside? What if they knew the secret thoughts running through my mind every day? Would they still love me? Would they abandon me?*

God created us to be fully known and fully loved. But in our fallen state, we've convinced ourselves that the only way we can be loved is if we're not fully known. We believe it would be impossible for anyone to know the depths of who we are and still love us. That's why we hide.

But it's not just our relationship with God that has been broken. Our relationship with others has been shattered as well. The expression of sheer joy and excitement we saw in the previous chapter when Adam first saw Eve ("This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh") has been transformed into blame and enmity.

From this point forward, human relationships of all types will experience brokenness to some degree. Abuse, manipulation, and enmity have replaced the paradise that once characterized human relationships within the garden. But as we will see soon, there is hope yet for humanity.

TIMELINE

TOWER OF BABEL

Humanity's pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God's glory will never be dethroned.

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Genesis 3:17-24 also reveals another relationship that has been distorted because of sin—the relationship between humanity and God's good creation. Thus, our rebelling against God not only corrupted our relationships with God and each other, but it also shattered the perfect peace of God's good world.

God called us to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). But now this task will come through a woman's pain and anguish (Gen. 3:16). God called us to subdue the earth. But now this task will come through toilsome work, fighting thorns and thistles. Only by the sweat of our brow will we be able to eat bread (Gen. 3:17-19). The work God gave us has been invaded by toil. The beauty of childbirth has been wracked with pain.

This passage ends with the reality of exile. God's good world has been marred by human sin, and we are now separated from the perfection of the garden. Yet as we will see in the Christ Connection, all hope for humanity is far from being lost forever.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Even though this story is a sad scene of fallenness and judgment, there is a thread of mercy. Before casting Adam and Eve out of paradise, God clothed them with animal skins. God provided the covering for Adam and Eve's nakedness.

Not only that, but in verse 15 God tells the serpent that the day is coming when a Son will be born through Eve, and even though the serpent will strike His heel, this Son of Eve will crush the serpent's head. A Savior will come, and the serpent will be defeated. The evil unleashed in the garden will be eradicated when the Son of Eve arrives.

God's initiative here points forward to His Son's atoning work, when through His own sacrifice, He will take away the guilt of our sin and cover our shame with His righteousness.

Because of sin, Adam and Eve were banished from paradise. Their sin separated them from God's presence with no way back in except through the angel's sword. But the day would come when the sword would fall on the Son of Eve on the cross. The Son would be banished by the Father so that we might be reunited. He would face the sword so that we could return from our exile.

When God's own Son was born into this world, He undid everything that went wrong in Genesis 3. He answered the question that Satan put in our hearts: "Is God good? Does He intend good for us? Can we trust Him?" He answered that question with the nails in His hands and a spear through His side—with His becoming sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Are you more likely to see your sin as a “mistake” or “failure” or as an act of rebellion? What is the difference and how does it impact our perspective?** *A rebellion is an active and willful action on the part of someone, not merely a passive failure on their behalf. While our sins are, in one sense, mistakes and failures, they are much more than that as well.*
- **What are the signs that our relationship with God has been broken? What are some ways we hide from God?** *Signs might include a lack of affection for God, a love for the things of this world, as well as actions and attitudes that are contrary to God and His Word. Allow students time to think of specific examples of what those might be, as well as ways we tend to hide our sins from God.*
- **Take a moment to list different ways we can see the brokenness of human relationships in our world. How does the gospel provide an answer for these realities?** *Students answers will vary with the first question, possibly ranging from divorce within the home to countries at war with one another. Look to the Christ Connection to help answer the second question, pointing to the fact that Christ is going to restore that which has been broken.*
- **How has sin affected the different spheres of society: family, government, church, the environment? How can we as Christians battle the effects of sin in these areas?** *Help students think through different examples where sin has taken place in these areas—broken families, corruption of government, etc. The goal is to help them see that sin's effects are far reaching, and that Christians should be vigilant about battling against sin in these areas.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The historical reality of the fall of humanity is essential to understanding ourselves and the world in which we live. It gets to the root of why things are the way they are—why brokenness and suffering plague both the human race and the world that we inhabit. Every worldview tries to explain why things have gone wrong, but only the Christian worldview gives the correct answer: we rebelled against our Creator long ago.

- **Why is it important to be able to make sense out of the brokenness of our world?** *Apart from the Bible explaining to us how and why the world became broken, we would be at a loss for rightly understanding why things are the way they are.*
- **How does the fall of Adam and Eve shed light on your own personal sins and temptations?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include: doubting God's Word, doubting that God wants what is best for us, and so forth.*



HEART

The fall of humanity into sin teaches that all things have been affected by the fall, including our very own hearts. Because of the fall, humans now have an inclination to the things that grieve the heart of God. And because our hearts have been affected, we are in need of new ones.

- **What is the connection between your heart and behavior?** *The heart, representing the center or essence of a person, is what leads to that person's behavior. Thus, if one has a covetous heart, that may result in the physical act of stealing. The heart is the root, where the behavior is the fruit of one's life.*
- **When it comes to resolving conflict in relationships, why is it important that both parties look inwardly, to their own hearts, to see how he or she might be sinning against the other person? Is this hard to do? Explain.** *Answers to this question will vary.*



HANDS

The fall of humanity forever altered the course of human history, disrupting our relationship with God, with others, and with the good world He created. Nevertheless, God is still at work to remake that which has been broken. As we've seen throughout this session, God is on a mission to restore what has been lost through His Son.

- **How might God use His people in the mission to restore all things to Himself?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How can you trust in God's Word this week? How might that affect different areas of your life?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, Items #4 and #5 can be used during group time. Item #4 can be used as either a visual illustration or even an object lesson to discuss the different relationships that have been affected by the Fall. Item #5 is an artistic poster referencing Gen. 3:15, the first signs of the gospel where God promises that a Seed will crush the head of the serpent.

SOURCES

1. Paul David Tripp, *Whiter Than Snow* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 32.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

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04

SESSION FOUR

The Spread of Sin

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we will see how sin spread from Adam and Eve to their descendants—Cain and Abel. Sin begins with evil desires that lead to actions against God and our neighbors, actions that deserve God's condemnation. Thankfully, God offers a merciful promise powerful enough to overcome our sin, and through His grace we are rescued.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 4:1-16,25-26

THE POINT

Sin spreads throughout the hearts and actions of people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Share the following scenario with students: You can feel your heart in your throat. Your mind is fixated, focused, and at the same time it seems like it's not working at all. Your conscience tells your wayward heart: "No! You shouldn't do what you're about to do!"

Perhaps you are with your friends and you feel a word of gossip churning in the pit of your stomach. Perhaps you are alone and feel the lure of a pornographic website. Perhaps you are angry, and even though you know it's wrong and hate when this happens, you can't stop the volcanic rage bubbling up inside of you.

State that whether it's sexual sin, gossip, lying, anger, stealing, or hidden sins like pride, covetousness, or idolatry of the heart, we all understand the luring and enticing power of sin. We know we should resist, but often we do it anyway.

Point out that the Bible exposes the ugliness of sin because the Bible magnifies the beauty of salvation. You see, when it comes to sin, we're never in danger of understanding our sin too much; we're always in danger of understanding our sin too little. A shallow diagnosis of a sickness doesn't lead to a cure; it leaves us with incomplete remedies that provide no hope of getting well.

- **What might be some “incomplete remedies” the world recommends for dealing with sins like anger, lust, or lying? What makes these remedies insufficient?**

Option 2

Separate students into groups. Instruct each group to select a law or command from the Bible, then share their commands with you before proceeding (to be sure each group has different commands). (Examples: Matt. 4:10; 5:16; 6:19; 7:1; Heb. 12:14; 13:2; etc.)

Challenge students to create a skit showing “the wrong way” and “the right way” to obey that command. In the “wrong way” skit, the student should still obey the command, but do it with a wrong heart. In the “right way” skit, the student should obey the command from a joyful and willing heart.

Invite groups to present their skits, keeping their commands secret. Then lead the rest of the students to guess which command the group acted out.

Discuss the differences and similarities between the two scenes. Did they look different or similar? If they looked similar, reinforce how religious deeds can often mask disobedience. If they looked different, talk about how our actions and behaviors flow from whatever state our heart is in, which is why it is important to never ignore what's going on inside of us.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Sin spreads throughout the hearts and actions of people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Cain:** first son born to Adam and Eve
- **Abel:** second son born to Adam and Eve

PLOT

In the previous session we saw how everything good God created in Genesis 1–2 was affected by the sinful choice of the first human beings. Instead of believing in God’s Word and living under God’s rule, Adam and Eve disobeyed and turned from God. It was a dismal turn of events from the joyful opening acts we saw in the first two chapters of Genesis. Yet even in the midst of this loss and despair, hope would be given in the promise of God to the man and the woman—the promise of One to come who would restore that which was lost and crush the head of the serpent.

Though Genesis 3 ended with the banishment of Adam and Eve for their rebellion, Genesis 4 opens with hope: Eve gives birth to two children and gives credit to “the LORD’s help.” As we read, don’t miss the hopeful note at the beginning of this chapter—that God has started to fulfill His promise to give a son to Eve who would defeat the serpent.

And the hope that this promise would be fulfilled was all the more pressing as we see sin spread like cancer through the first family of the human race. Let’s take a look.

TIMELINE

CAIN AND ABEL

The depth of humanity's fall is revealed in the heinous murder between two brothers.

NOAH

Judgment and graciousness are found in the flood.

TOWER OF BABEL

Humanity's pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God's glory will never be dethroned.

SIN BEGINS WITH THE HEART

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (Gen. 4:1-7)

In this passage, we see that sin is not something that can be contained. It's not a disease that stayed only in the heart of Adam and Eve; it was passed on. The lie that slithered into the hearts of Adam and Eve slithered into the hearts of their children.

We see the spread of sin in the story of Cain's jealousy. Both sons offered sacrifices to God from their respective areas of work—Cain gave produce and Abel gave some of his flock—but God only accepted the sacrifice of Abel. Why? We find the answer in Hebrews 11:4: "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts."

Abel's offering was accepted by God because he offered it in faith. When Cain realized that his offering was rejected, something started brewing in his heart, something dark and consuming. He was well on the way to following in his parents' footsteps.

- **Invite students to spend a few moments identifying a number of sinful actions as you list them on the board or a large sheet of paper. Then identify the sinful desires that precede them.**
- **Why is it important to consider sinful desires of the heart, not just sinful actions, in our battle against sin? (p. 28, PSG)**

It is important to note that before Cain ever acted on the evil desires brewing in his heart, God showed up and spoke truth into his life. God's grace preceded Cain's sin, offering a way out of the temptation.

This is because God takes sin seriously. He encouraged Cain to kill the sinful desire within him before it killed him. If we were to hurry through this story, we might miss the beauty of God's intervention. We might think that humanity is already a lost cause. But that's not what God is like. God is not indifferent to sin, because God is not indifferent to humanity. Love intervenes. And the intervention in this passage shows us that God cares deeply about each and every act of sin in this world. Every unjust act matters and will be accounted for. No good or evil deed escapes His notice.

God's counsel to Cain was to reject the temptation and to master the sinful desire. Do right by ruling over it! Don't obey its command!

Like Cain, we are well acquainted with the way these evil desires war against us and lead us to sinful actions. We, too, have ignored God's counsel on countless occasions. In our sinfulness, we reject that counsel—and so does Cain. Evil desires give birth to evil deeds.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Sin's Effects in the World

Sin does not only impact our relationship with God; it is also the root of our broken relationships with the people around us. Human sinfulness is the reason why the creation groans in anticipation for redemption and deliverance from its bondage to evil powers (Rom. 8:22). Sin has infected and redirected the social structures of society, leading to injustice and oppression. The distorting effects of sin are visible all around us, but the good news of the gospel is that the battle against these powers (Eph. 6:12) will be won through the work of Christ.

A SINFUL HEART LEADS TO SINFUL ACTIONS

Cain heard God's counsel to flee sin's temptation, but he didn't heed it. His rage gave birth to sin, and when sin was accomplished in his heart, it brought forth death.

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." (Gen. 4:8-12)

Cain committed the act he had contemplated, and he shed the blood of his innocent brother. Just as Satan waited to pounce on Cain like a roaring lion, Cain did so to Abel. Sin is when we do to others what the enemy does to us. It

begins with evil desires and then ends with evil actions toward others, actions that deserve God's condemnation.

But notice what happens next. Just as God came to counsel Cain before the sin, He comes to talk with him after the sin. God is offering Cain the opportunity to repent, "Where is Abel your brother? ... What have you done?"

Do these words sound familiar? After Adam and Eve sinned, God came with the question, "Where are you, Adam?" God knew exactly where Adam was, just as He knew exactly where Abel was. His questions were not offered in order to discover information, but as an invitation for Cain to respond with repentance.

The same is true with us. Whenever we sin, God doesn't first come with fierce accusations, but with a gentle invitation to repent. In the moment of temptation, God calls us to resist sin, and in the moment of sin, God gives us the opportunity to repent and turn back to Him. Unfortunately, in Cain's case, he didn't respond with repentance but with a lie ("I do not know") and a question ("Am I my brother's keeper?") that revealed the indifference of his hateful heart.

There's nothing in the passage that indicates Cain ever repented of his sin and received salvation. But everything in the passage points to a God who, in love, withheld the full extent of His just judgment toward Cain, at least for a time. God treated Cain better than he deserved.

The God who shows mercy is the God who will keep His promises. God promised a son to Eve who would crush the serpent's head. With Cain in rebellion and Abel dead, the situation seemed dire.

But God gave Adam and Eve another son named Seth. And through the lineage of Seth, four thousand years later, the promised Son of Eve would be born. And at the cross, blood would be shed once again, but this time the blood of the promised Son would not just be shed by sin; the blood would be shed for sin.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Although the only other humans mentioned thus far are his parents, Cain's fear of retaliation for the murder of Abel is understandable. Adam fathered many children during his 930 years (5:4-5), producing future generations that could exact revenge. That God marked to safeguard Cain does not contradict the divine provision of capital punishment (9:6). By this sign, God declares that the taking of life is His prerogative, in contrast to Cain's presumptuous murder of Abel!

TIMELINE

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Looking at Cain's story forces us to look at our own story. We may not have committed murder, but we have witnessed ourselves fail by sinning countless times. So what now? What do we do after we've traded God's counsel for the empty promises of sin? How do we prevent the guilt and shame of sin from paralyzing us from seeking God?

Hebrews 12:24 speaks to us of Jesus' blood in comparison to Abel's: "and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Abel's blood, the blood shed by sin, was crying out—crying out in angst because justice needed to be done. But Jesus' blood, the blood shed for sin, calmly speaks—and it speaks a better word than the blood of Abel because justice has now been served.

The promised mercy of God is what overcomes sin, and this is why we look to God for salvation and power in our mission. As Christians, we see ourselves in the person of Cain, but we also see ourselves in light of the cross. The cross is where God displayed the fullness of His justice by pouring out His wrath toward sin. The cross is where God displayed the fullness of His mercy by extending grace to us through His Son. And now, we seek to slow the spread of sin by pointing others to the God who forgives, transforms, and grants repentance.

If you're in Christ today, all of God's wrath against your sins has been poured out on Jesus at the cross. God faithfully kept the promise He made in Genesis 3 to send His Son to crush the head of the serpent. Through Christ our sins can be overcome.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Have you ever sensed God offering you a way out of temptation? What truths did God bring to your mind? What was the result?** *Answers will vary. You may want to help students stay on track by giving an example from your own life.*
- **Make a list of harmful things humans do to each other. Why does God care so much about how we treat other people?** *After giving various responses to the first question, help students understand that God cares how we treat others. Reasons might include: 1) people are created in His image, and 2) love and grace are reflective of how God relates to us.*
- **How do you respond when you recognize the sin in your own life?** *Some people, like Cain, respond to sin in their lives with regret—they are sorrowful over the consequences of their sin and/or of getting caught, but they are not repentant of the sin itself. Repentance involves not only recognizing and admitting that the sin was wrong, but also actively turning away from the sin and turning toward Christ.*
- **How does understanding God's forgiving heart help us live as a reflection of His love for others?** *When we rightly understand our sin and the forgiveness found in Christ, we become motivated to share His good news to those who need His love and forgiveness as well.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

This session helps us sense the weight of sin—its heinous nature, far-reaching extent, and the consequences it brings into our lives. Far from thinking that sin is a small thing or that it can be easily overcome through self-help strategies, we quickly learn that sin is not only toxic to the human soul, but it has infected all of us.

- **How has this session altered your perception of sin?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How might a right perspective on sin help us have a right understanding of God's grace?** *The point of this question is to help students realize that someone's understanding of sin will affect his or her appreciation of God's grace. If a person has a weak view of sin, then they will think little of God's grace. If they have a biblical view of sin and its horrific consequences, then God's grace is recognized for what it truly is—amazing.*



HEART

One of the most telling truths this session teaches is the fact that sin isn't merely a behavioral problem or environmental problem. Rather, sin is a heart problem. Because sin begins with polluted desires of the heart, Christians should look inward to the root of their behavior when addressing sin within their lives.

- **What happens when you only focus only on the behavioral aspect of sin and not on what is taking place within the heart?** *If we only focus on sinful behavior and never address our broken hearts, we can easily become like the Pharisees who tried to look good on the outside but were dead on the inside.*
- **What are some ways you can begin to practice looking at your own heart when it comes to understanding patterns of sin in your life?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include self-reflection (asking what is going on in my heart that would cause me to act this way or think this way).*



HANDS

Our world is still infected with sin and Christians still wrestle with the old sinful nature, but God calls us to be salt and light in the world around us. We are to proclaim Him who can reverse the effects of the fall and sin, and live like His people by loving others as ourselves.

- **How has this session challenged you to live differently, especially in your relationships with others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways you can be salt and light to others this week with your actions?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. Kenneth A. Mathews, in *The Apologetics Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 12, n. 4:12,16-17; n. 4:15.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
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05

SESSION FIVE

The Creator Destroys and Redeems

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we see how God responds to the rebelliousness of humanity. He grieves over the wickedness of the world even as He pronounces judgment on it. But in this righteous judgment, God shows favor to Noah and his family, saving them from a great flood and then commissioning them to fulfill His good intentions for humanity. Like Noah, we are saved from God's judgment and called to obey God as His redeemed people.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 6:5-22; 9:1-11

THE POINT

God judges sin and provides salvation to those who trust in Him.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Review the following information with students: So far in our study of Genesis, we've seen how God created the heavens and the earth, then moved on to His most precious creation—human beings made in His image. We watched how Adam and Eve sinned by choosing not to believe and trust the goodness of God's Word. We saw how sin became an epidemic, not something that could be quarantined in the hearts of our first parents. It was a sickness that spread to their children, and as it spread, it began to manifest itself in increasingly wicked ways.

As sin spread through the world, the human response to sin began to change. We went from shame to indifference to boasting. When Adam sinned, his response was: "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:10). Adam's response was shame and hiding. When Cain sinned and the Lord asked him where his brother Abel was, he replied: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). Cain's response was indifference.

Then, in Genesis 4:23-24, we see Lamech, the great great great grandson of Cain. After committing murder, his response was to celebrate his wickedness with song: "Lamech said to his wives: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.'" Lamech's response was boasting and entitlement.

- **Invite students to call out examples in our culture today where someone in the news has responded to their own wrongdoing in one of these three ways: shame, indifference, or boasting.**
- **Which of these seems to be the most common response to sin? Which is the appropriate response? Explain.**

Option 2

Invite students to identify physical features or personality traits they've inherited or have adapted from their parents. Remind students that all people inherited the problem of sin from Adam. But we have hope. Even though sin entered the world through one man, salvation also entered through one man—Jesus Christ.

- **Do you believe the work of Christ can overcome the sin in your life? Why or why not?**
- **How different would the world be if everyone lived each day knowing that Christ has given us victory over sin? Explain.**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God judges sin and provides salvation to those who trust in Him.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Noah and his family:** descendent of Adam through the line of Seth; a good and righteous man; father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth
- **The peoples of the earth**

PLOT

After the spread of sin and seeing how it led to one brother murdering another, the story continues to unfold by introducing us to one of the most well-known characters in the Bible—Noah. Now, most people in our culture, even if they haven't set foot inside a church, are familiar with the basic story line of Noah. For them, that would include an ark, pairs of animals, a colossal flood, and so forth. While these are certainly elements that come up in the story, what if there is more to it than that? What else can we learn about this event? What is God communicating about Himself through this time in history? What do we learn about ourselves through this? What does Noah have to do with Jesus?

Questions like these, and several others, are what take us to the story of Noah in this session. As we approach what may be somewhat of a familiar story, however, it would be helpful if you come to this story with fresh eyes and fresh ears, believing that there is perhaps more to it than we know.

TIMELINE

NOAH

Judgment and graciousness are found in the flood.

TOWER OF BABEL

Humanity's pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God's glory will never be dethroned.

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

GOD JUDGES WICKEDNESS

Sin spread wide and sin spread deep. By the time we get to Genesis 6, we may be wondering what God thinks about this situation and what He will do about it.

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Gen 6:5-7)

Every thought was nothing but evil, we read. Imagine that kind of a world—a place where in every thought and deed people were in essence shouting at God: "I don't trust You! I don't believe You! I defy You!" Such is the essence of sin—a faithless defiance of God the Creator.

God's reaction was one of sorrow and grief. Consider the weight of the statement in verse 6. The Lord was grieved. He felt anguish in His heart. That word "grieved" in Hebrew means "toil, languish, agony, to be injured in feeling."

How can this word be used in connection with God? How can an infinitely powerful God who lacks in nothing be in toil, languish, or agony? How could He be injured in any way? The basis for this grief is love—love for the people He created. It's why, after reading in Genesis 3:7 about Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, God didn't simply step in and destroy them and the world in Genesis 3:8. He judged, but He judged with patience, longing to be in relationship again with His people.

- **This account in Genesis isn't the only time that God was grieved by His people. Challenge students to identify some other instances recorded in Scripture where God was grieved. How did He respond?**
- **What are some things that might grieve God today? In what ways does He still show patience to His people today? (p. 34, PSG)**

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

For the first time in the Bible, the Lord regretted something that He had made. However, His regret did not stem from something He had done wrong, but rather what humanity was doing wrong. The fact that people had become totally preoccupied with evil grieved Him in His heart, much as Israel's sin would later grieve Him (Ps. 78:40-41; Isa. 63:10).¹

God could have destroyed the world and all its inhabitants, but instead He chose to purge creation of its great wickedness. Yet, He would save one family. He chose not to give up on all humanity, not to turn His back and start over completely. Even though He knew Noah and his descendants would again disappoint Him, defy Him, and walk in faithlessness, God decided to preserve this remnant. Why? Because like a father who will not stop loving his children no matter how often they disobey, God bound His heart to His people.

What this simply means is that God loved us. He didn't have to love us, and He didn't need to, but in His great love, He extended grace to us. He is our Father, and He has tied His own joys with our joys, and He tied His own pains with our pains.

The flood story is certainly one of judgment—the declaration of a holy and righteous Judge against all that is evil. And yet, it is also one of grief—the tears of a loving Father who will not give up on His people.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God's Glory

The glory of God is His manifest work, the way He represents His perfect character through His activity. It also refers to His excellent reputation and is given as one of the reasons we are to praise His name. Another sense of the word is the inherent beauty of God, the unbearable brightness and beauty of His being as He radiates His own attributes and characteristics for all to witness. The Scriptures speak of humanity as having “fallen short” of God's glory (Rom. 3:23) because we have rejected the purpose for which God created us—to glorify Him.

GOD PROVIDES A WAY OF ESCAPE

We've seen that God was grieved by the sin of the world, and in His holy judgment, He decided to wipe everything off the face of the earth and start again. But here is where the story takes a turn. God demonstrated His commitment to humanity by choosing to preserve a righteous man's family.

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side.

Make it with lower, second, and third decks. For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you to keep them alive. Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up. It shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him. (Gen 6:8-22)

Take a look at verse 8 and then verse 18. Noah alone found favor in God's eyes, right? But then notice how it says that God would establish His covenant not with Noah alone but also with those who belong to him. Watch the progression: Noah received God's favor, was declared righteous, and then his family benefited from his righteousness. The same truth is reiterated in Genesis 7:1: "Then the LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation." Noah found favor. Noah was the only righteous one, yet Noah's family was saved.

There are two truths here we must not miss. First, grace precedes righteousness. It's no accident that the text specifies Noah receiving favor from the Lord before being declared righteous. Grace came first. It wasn't that Noah obeyed and that's why he was saved. It was that Noah received grace, and that's why he obeyed.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Through the story of the flood, we see the introduction to the gospel as salvation through judgment. What does this mean? While the entire world was looking up at God and rejecting Him, telling Him that they didn't trust Him, just as their parents before them did, Noah was building an ark. He was demonstrating with his life that he believed God. He had faith that God was going to do what He had said. And the waters of judgment did come.

Here's what I mean by salvation through judgment. The same water that swallowed everyone who didn't believe in the word of God actually lifted Noah up. As the waters increased, everyone else was pressed down and crushed. But at the same time, Noah and his family were lifted up and saved. The waters of judgment actually saved him; it was salvation through judgment. And Peter confirmed this for us later in the Bible: "when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water" (1 Pet. 3:20).

TIMELINE

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

The second truth is that the covenant God made with Noah benefited the members of his family. The righteousness of Noah was the foundation of the preservation of the rest of his family.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In the story of Noah, we see a pattern for how God is going to offer ultimate salvation. Jesus is the One in whom God was truly pleased, the One God truly favored. Though all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, though none are righteous, not even one, God offers us salvation based on the sole person of Jesus and His righteousness.

Remember, Noah's family was saved not on the basis of their righteousness but on the basis of Noah's righteousness. They were saved because they belonged to Noah. Likewise, we're not saved by our own works but by the work of Jesus alone, and we're saved only if we belong to Him.

However, where Noah could only save seven members of his family, God has given to Jesus people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. The family of Jesus will be so much larger than the family of Noah.

Just as Noah spent his life in faith building an ark while the world rejected his message (Heb. 11; 2 Pet. 2), we should spend our lives faithfully telling people about the coming judgment and the good news of salvation God has made possible for us through Jesus Christ. Just as Noah's story ends with a reaffirmation of God's covenant and a commissioning to follow God in obedience, so also our salvation is not an end in itself but what precedes our own obedience. God has commissioned us not only to be fruitful and multiply but also to take the good news of His merciful love to the rest of the world.

- **What does it mean to be commissioned to do something? Invite students to identify different ways people today are commissioned to carry out certain tasks, then share the following definition from *Merriam-Webster*: Commission: an act of entrusting or giving authority²**
- **Compare this definition to Matthew 28:19-20. List the actions all believers have been commissioned to carry out: make disciples, baptize, teach.**

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

For more of the story, read God's commissioning of Noah's family in Genesis 9:1-11. Compare this passage with the original mandate God gave to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:26-28, pointing out any similarities and differences.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **The Bible tells us that God grieved before His judgment took place. What does this tell us about His character and how He views sin in our lives?** *At the very least, it tells us that God is not a dispassionate judge waiting to punish us every time we mess up, but a loving Father who disciplines those He loves.*
- **Why is it important for us to recognize that God's grace must precede our obedience?** *If we think that obedience comes before grace, or that grace is the reward for being obedient, then we will have a works-based view of Christianity. On the other hand, if grace comes before obedience, we affirm with the Bible that we are incapable of rescuing ourselves, and that God's unmerited grace and mercy are actually what produce within us an obedient heart.*
- **What lessons can we learn from Noah's example of faithfulness?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **Noah is described in the New Testament as a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). In what ways does our mission to call people to repentance and faith resemble Noah's example?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



This session helps us to begin to see how and why it is important for God's grace and love to coexist with His judgment and righteous anger. Both of these characteristics are necessary, and together they reveal something deep to us about God's character.

- **Why is it important to stress both the grace and judgment of God when dealing with sin?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What would happen if you had one without the other?** *Either an unforgiving judge or a morally passive god who simply sweeps sin under the rug. Both of these fail to accurately represent the God of the Bible.*

HEART



Not only should our hearts be grieved over the fact that sin almost led, justifiably, to the entire destruction of the human race, but they should also be grieved over the fact that the God who judges sin also grieves because of sin's presence in our hearts. This was true not only back then, but even now. God is still grieved at the sight of the rebelliousness within us.

- **When was the last time you felt heartbroken over the sin in a friend's life? In your own life?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does the truth that God is grieved by our sin influence the way you deal with personal sin and temptation?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS



In a similar way that Noah was obedient to God, we too should follow in his footsteps. And as God commissioned Noah and his family, we too are commissioned with the task of preaching the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus. The flood didn't stop the sin-infected hearts of men from spreading—it was never meant to. Only the cross is capable of that type of healing, and that is the message we have been called to share.

- **What are some positive characteristics of Noah that we can emulate as we seek to live on mission for God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How has this session challenged you to be more faithful in sharing the gospel with others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. Robert D. Bergen, *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).
2. "Commission," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* [online], [cited 30 March 2014]. Available from the Internet: www.merriam-webster.com.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



06

SESSION SIX

The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we see humanity's propensity for inventing ways to build up our own prestige and bring honor to ourselves. As we build our kingdoms and lift up our own name, God sees our plans. He judges our attempts to increase our power, and in His judgment of our idolatrous desires, He shows mercy by slowing the spread of evil. And after He saves us, He gives us the mission of scattering throughout the world to praise the name of His Son.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 11:1-9

THE POINT

God judges and disrupts human attempts to thwart His glory.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever wished for a fresh start? A re-do at something? Perhaps you look at the school activities you're involved in and wish you had chosen something else. Perhaps it's something you did wrong, a moment when something you said or did really hurt someone and now you wish you could take it back. You wish you could go back in time. If only there were a "reset" button!

- **What event in your past do you wish you could change?**
- **What is a choice in your past you would make differently with hindsight?**

As we reenter the Genesis narrative, we see that God has essentially given humanity a "reset." We've seen how, through Adam and Eve's disobedience, sin entered the world for the first time. Their initial act of disobedience and distrust became a human predisposition in the hearts of their children, an inclination of a sinful nature, the desire to disobey and not trust God. We saw in the previous session how God grieved over the fallen state of humanity and then judged the world through the flood and showed grace to Noah and his family.

What if you were a part of Noah's family after the floodwaters had subsided? Perhaps you think that after witnessing such an intense display of God's judgment toward sin and His mercy in preserving your family, you'd make a new commitment to be obedient. Unfortunately, the next scene shows Noah drunk, the object of mockery from one of his sons. And generations later, sin extends to the point that people all over the world join together to create a tower that would reach the skies for the sake of their own glory.

Option 2

Prior to the session, gather two Lego® projects and place them on a table at the front of the room. Choose two volunteers to complete the projects. Provide the first student all the Legos needed for his or her project, still in the box with the instructions. Provide the other student all the Legos needed as well, but without the box and with instructions written in a language the student cannot read. When the first student completes his or her project, call time. Praise the first student for completing the project, then ask the second:

- **Did you want to complete your project first? Why or why not?**
- **In what ways were your plans for completing your project thwarted?**

Point out that God knows our motivation for everything we do. In today's session we will discover how God thwarted the plans of His people when they sought praise for themselves over Him.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God judges and disrupts human attempts to thwart His glory.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **The people of Babel:** generations following Noah

PLOT

As the Genesis account continues, we encounter an interesting narrative in what is commonly referred to as the Tower of Babel. By the time we reach this account in history, some time has passed since the judgment and mercy of the flood (discussed in the previous session), but like the time surrounding the flood, we continue to see that humanity is still broken from the inside out. There is still a sin problem because there is still a heart problem. Sin still remained in the heart of man after the flood. God knew this was the case, which is why the flood was only meant to slow down the progression of sin in the world.

As we approach this event in history, it is important to ask ourselves what the author would have us understand about God, ourselves, and the way we should live as we look back to this time. Stories like these are recorded for a purpose, and God would have us immerse ourselves into this time in biblical history to teach us something new, and perhaps something we've never thought about before.

GOD SEES THE PEOPLE'S PRIDEFUL PLANS

The descendants of Noah settled in the land of Shinar, and there they decided to build for themselves a city, and within that city a tower that would reach the sky. Watch how the story unfolds:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. (Gen. 11:1-5)

At first glance, we might think, *What's wrong with that? The world is filled with cities and skyscrapers. Why is there anything wrong with deciding to build this particular city and its tower?* But look carefully at how the author of Genesis tells the story.

"As people migrated from the east..." This geographical reference has a moral aspect to it. In journeying "from the east," the people turned their backs on the sunrise and went farther "east of Eden."¹ Some translations read "eastward," but the point is the same—the people were walking farther away from the garden of Eden.

"They said to one another..." Before taking on such a massive undertaking, there was no consulting God. They didn't share Noah's relationship with God, and they weren't interested in carrying out the task God gave Noah's descendants. In this situation, there's an utter absence of God in their minds.

"Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens." Sure, this seems like a major undertaking, but why does Genesis imply it was sacrilegious? Because the sky represented heaven, the place where God dwells. This reference ought to remind us of Genesis 3; it is another human attempt to become like God.

"Let us make a name for ourselves." The people wanted to build a city with a tower so high that they would make a name for themselves. Feel the arrogance of this statement. They stood in direct contrast to what we will see in Genesis 12, where God promised to give Abram a great name. Here in Genesis 11, the people wanted to achieve greatness for themselves.

"Lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." Wait a minute! Didn't God tell the people to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1)? Yes, and here's where we see humanity's blatant refusal to obey God's command to Noah and his descendants. Instead of giving God glory, they sought their own by huddling together to build their own kingdom, completely ignoring God's command.

TOWER OF BABEL

Humanity's pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God's glory will never be dethroned.

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

We see that these were not benign actions but humanity's attempt once again to cast aside God's goodness and choose for themselves what they define as good.

- **What are some instances in today's culture where people might try to make a name for themselves? (athletes, musicians, TV personalities, reporters, etc.)** (p. 40, PSG)
- **Is there anything wrong with wanting to take credit for our personal successes? Why or why not?** (p. 40, PSG)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The account of Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden (ch. 3) and the Tower of Babylon share many similarities in plot, vocabulary, and theme. Both show people acting with sinful pride to try to make themselves godlike, and both show God expelling sinners from their homes as punishment for their sin. The people's pride and ambition is expressed in three different ways: (1) the fivefold use of the first-person pronouns—us (twice), ourselves (twice), and we; (2) their desire to build ... a tower into the sky, thus giving them access to "the heavens," the domain of God; and (3) their attempt at self-glorification—let us make a name for ourselves. Because they did it to avoid being scattered over the face of the whole earth, all their efforts amounted to a rebellion against God and His command to fill the earth (9:1). In spite of their best efforts to elevate themselves to God's domain, the Lord still had to come down to look over the city and the tower. Human attempts to achieve glory, which belongs to God alone, always fall pitifully short.²

GOD JUDGES THEIR PRIDEFUL PLANS

Because God sees and because God cares, there will be judgment. We'll see in a moment what form this judgment would take for the people, but note first of all how the story describes God's action. These men were building something they hoped would reach the heavens, but it was merely a speck in the eyes of God, such a speck that He "came down to see" it (v. 5).

So God decided to judge the people in Shinar, not because He was threatened by their actions, but because He cared deeply about their hearts. He wanted to slow the spread of sin. Take a look:

And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." (Gen. 11:6-7)

The text informs us that God put an end to the building of this tower by confusing the people's language. He could have destroyed the tower, struck the builders with lightning, or caused a massive earthquake. Instead, He confused their languages so that their progress in this evil was stunted.

Yet there's an element of mercy in this act of judgment, and that's a theme we've seen again and again in Genesis.

Lead students to turn to the following sections in their Bibles and discuss the recurring themes they observe. (p. 41, PSG)

- **Genesis 3:** Because Adam and Eve sinned, they were judged and banished from paradise. But was this action only judgment? No. You see, God could have annihilated Adam and Eve right then and there, but instead, He showed them mercy. He sacrificed an animal in order to clothe them, and He promised that through the seed of Eve, a Messiah would be born who would crush the head of the serpent.
- **Genesis 4:** When Cain killed Abel, Cain was judged and forced to wander. But even here God showed an element of mercy. When Cain expressed his fear of being killed in vengeance, God placed upon him a mark of protection.
- **Genesis 6–9:** When the state of humanity was described as creating new evils with their every thought and intent, God brought judgment through the flood. But it wasn't just judgment; He saved a remnant of humanity in the ark.

God continues to show mercy to His children even today. Hebrews 12:5-11 tells us that God disciplines us when we sin, but the discipline is good because it is what proves we are His. The discipline is merciful because even if it isn't enjoyable at the time, it later yields the fruit of peace and righteousness.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Transcendent

God's transcendence refers to the fact that He is distinct from and independent of His created world. He is transcendent over us in regard to His greatness and power as well as His goodness and purity. The implication of this doctrine is that God is inherently superior to humanity; His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). When God saves us, He restores us so we can fulfill our human purpose; this does not mean that we become God or that distinctions between God and humanity are obliterated. Understanding God's transcendence evokes awe and wonder at His goodness and power.

GOD MERCIFULLY CAUSES THEIR PRIDEFUL PLANS TO FAIL

So how did God ultimately respond to the people's pride? He confused their language, and in merciful judgment, He caused humanity's idolatrous plans to fail.

So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called

TIMELINE

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth. (Gen. 11:8-9)

We must not pass over this story as if it were an obscure historical event with little relevance to our lives. The events of Genesis 11 provide a window into human thought and behavior. We too are a people who travel farther and farther “east of Eden,” turning our backs to God’s goodness. We are a people who often live with absolutely no thought of God in our minds. In making decisions big and small, “we say to each other,” but we don’t say to God. We’re content to live, act, speak, and make life’s decisions without ever consulting God.

Every day, we’re building something. And we’re tempted to build up our treasures in a way that communicates to the world that this is where we find our identity, our joy, and our life. The temptation to “make a name for ourselves” leads us to believe we are at the center of the universe and that we can accomplish salvation for ourselves. We can work our way up to the heavens; we can be like God, or so we think.

It’s good news that God causes idolatrous plans to fail. Time after time, the God who is committed to our good, the God who wants us to find our satisfaction in Him, will slowly strip away everything else in which we try to find joy. Perhaps you’ve spent years and years building a reputation that would reach to the heavens. What would it look like for God, in His mercy, to strip away some of the things in which you find your security?

When failure comes into our lives, we often interpret it as disaster, or a sign of God’s judgment. Genesis 11 reminds us that our plans often fail because they were our plans, not God’s plan. And God, in His goodness and grace, often causes these plans to fail. His goal is to turn us toward Himself. He wants us to see that nothing can satisfy us like He can. Without the failure of our idolatrous plans, we would continue on in our rejection of God without ever noticing that something was wrong.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In Genesis 11, God confused the language of those who sought to make known the greatness of their own name and of their own kingdom. Thousands of years later, at Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier so that His people would scatter across the world and make known the great name of His Son.

Not only that, but this theme of judgment combined with mercy found throughout Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament points to the cross of Jesus. The cross is the ultimate display of both God’s judgment and His mercy. At the cross, God fully poured out His wrath against our sin, but He also poured out the fullness of His mercy and grace when He let His own Son take the punishment for our sin.

As Christians, we have new and redeemed hearts. As a result, we are to accept the task the people of Babylon ignored and share the good news of God’s kingdom, accomplishing His mission and spreading His fame, not ours.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some ways people today, even Christians, seek to “make a name for ourselves”?** *Examples might include seeking approval from others through social media venues, athletic ability, and/or by making good grades, etc.*
- **Why might it be better for our plans to fail rather than have them succeed without God?** *Answers will vary, but have students consider the truth that apart from God, even the things we deem “successful” are ultimately very unsuccessful.*
- **What are some personal successes you’ve experience in life? Did you take all the credit for your success or did you glorify God? Explain.** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How has today’s study helped you recognize the importance of consulting God in the things you do and the decisions you make?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



God's actions toward the people of Babel help us to think once again about mercy and judgment going hand-in-hand. While confusing the languages and bringing disunity to the people was an act of judgment, it was simultaneously an act of mercy as well.

- **What surprises you about the action God took to stop the people's building plans?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **Do you see an element of mercy in God's judgment? Explain.** *Ultimately the merciful element is found in the fact that God didn't just leave the people alone, free to do whatever pleased them. Such unity in sinfulness would have resulted in even greater sin, which is why it was merciful that God confused their language.*

HEART



The story of the Tower of Babel reveals something about the human heart that is both not surprising and shocking at the same time. It is not surprising given that we have already seen some pretty evil things that have resulted because of the contamination of the human heart; yet in a sense it is quite shocking because hearing this story is like looking into a mirror—the pride one sees is all too familiar.

- **What are some questions we could ask ourselves that might help us identify whether we are seeking to make a name for ourselves or please God?** *Answers will vary, but may include some along the lines of: Why do I care so much about my grades? Why do I regularly post selfies online? Why is it so important that I get into this college? Etc.*
- **How can we tell if we are pursuing success apart from a relationship with God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS



The Tower of Babel warns us against the pride that all of humanity encounters in some form or fashion, seeking to place self before others and even God Himself. However, God is the center of this universe—not us—and there is joy in living out life day by day with that truth in mind.

- **What are some practical ways we can make sure we are working to advance God's kingdom instead of our own?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can pursue humility and fight pride in our personal lives?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include things like remembering the gospel, considering others as more important than oneself, putting the needs of others first, etc.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #6 can be used during group time. Item #6 is a poster displaying bricks, and is intended to be an interactive object lesson that corresponds with the story of Babel. To set up the activity, explain to your group that like the people of the Tower of Babel who tried to make a name for themselves and build their own platform and kingdom, what are some ways that we also try to promote ourselves or make our name known to those around us today? As students come up with answers, write them on the bricks of the poster.

SOURCES

1. Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 134.
2. Robert D. Bergen, *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).
3. "Trevor Bayne," I Am Second [online], [cited 9 March 2015]. Available from the Internet: www.iamsecond.com

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

07

SESSION SEVEN

God's Covenant With Abraham

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will learn that God is a covenant-making God, not a contract-keeping one. Because of sin, the people on earth had been separated from God and from one another, but God chose one man, one family, through whom He promised to reverse the separation of Eden (separation from God) and the separation of Babel (separation from one another). This promise was later fulfilled through Abraham's descendant—Jesus of Nazareth. And this promise continues to be fulfilled today through the mission of Jesus' church as peoples from all over the world become part of God's family through faith in the gospel.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-6; 17:1-14

THE POINT

God chooses a nation through which He will reverse the curse of sin and reclaim the world as His kingdom.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Trends show that people wait longer to get married and that fewer people get married today than in times past. But even though culture is changing, Americans are still fascinated with marriage. How else can you explain the popularity of shows like “The Bachelor”? The contestants are not just looking for a relationship, but for a person to marry. And viewers keep tuning in to see what happens.

People are captivated by the idea of marriage, and for good reason. Marriage is a covenant relationship where a man and a woman make promises that bind them to each other for the rest of their lives. A covenant is an arrangement where both parties agree to keep their commitments no matter what.

Unfortunately, many people now approach marriage not so much as a covenant but more as a contract. In a contract, if one party breaks their side of the deal, then the contract becomes null and void. “I’ll hold up my end of the bargain if you hold up your end.”

This new reality changes our view not just of marriage, but also of our relationship with God. Why? Because the Bible describes God’s relationship with His people as a covenant. Yet people often think of their relationship with God as a contract: “I have to do my part and be a good person, and if I do, then God will uphold His end of the deal by blessing me right now and taking me to heaven when I die. But if I do good and God doesn’t give me what I want, then I’m outta here!”

- **Consider your closest relationships. Are these relationships built on conditions? If so, how might that cause problems down the road?**
- **Have you or someone you know ever made a deal with God? What was it? How does that show a lack of trust in God’s promises?**

Option 2

Show photos of celebrities tightly zoomed in on different parts of their faces, such as their forehead, ear, or nose. Challenge students to identify each celebrity. After they have made several guesses, show them the rest of the celebrity’s face. Point out that it’s often difficult to identify someone without seeing the whole picture.

When we’re in the middle of a difficult situation, we can’t always see the bigger picture and how God is at work. However, we must trust that God sees everything and that He will keep His promises to us.

- **Have you ever felt confused, frustrated, or like God had abandoned you only to realize later that God had been faithfully working on your behalf all along?**
- **Is there a situation you’re facing today that just seems too big or impossible? How can you trust God’s knowledge of the bigger picture?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God chooses a nation through which He will reverse the curse of sin and reclaim the world as His kingdom.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Abraham:** biblical patriarch; chosen by God to be the father of many nations

PLOT

As we saw in the previous session, Genesis 11 tells the story of the generations who came out of the flood and built the Tower of Babel with its top in the sky. The Lord came down to judge their pride, and He did so by confusing their language and scattering them over the earth.

The problem of sin and separation from God that began in the garden in Genesis 3 had not gotten better; in fact, it had only gotten worse. People were not only separated from God, but they were now separated from one another.

What can be done to remove these barriers that come between our relationships with both God and one another? How will God fix this problem? Watch and see how God initiated a renewed relationship with His people and continues His rescue plan.

TIMELINE

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM

God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

GOD INITIATES A RENEWED RELATIONSHIP

As we start with this story, we see from the very beginning that God has not given up on humanity. He still has a rescue plan in place, and that plan involves entering into a unique relationship with Abraham (though he was called Abram before God changed his name).

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Gen. 12:1-4)

- Lead students through this passage of Scripture on page 48 in the PSG and instruct them to circle the uses of the pronoun “I” as it appears in God’s words to Abram.
- What do you think this tells us about God’s commitment to His glory and His plan of redemption?

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Election

Election is the gracious purpose of God according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

Through Abram’s descendants, God will reverse the misfortunes of Eden (separation from God) and Babel (separation from one another). The specific promises that God made to Abram make this connection with the events of Babel clear: The people of Babel wanted to “make a name” for themselves (Gen. 11:4), but God promised to make Abram’s name great (12:2). The rebels at Babel were scattered over the earth under God’s judgment, but God promised to and through Abram to bless “all the families of the earth” (12:3).

God will reverse this tragedy by means of a covenant relationship with Abram in which He made three promises to him. God promised Abram land, offspring, and blessing:

Promised Land

First, God promised Abram land, and in connection with that, He commanded Abram to leave his land and travel to another land. This text ends with Abram obeying God's command and leaving Haran for Canaan—the promised land. Abram's obedience was an expression of his faith in God's promise.

Promised Offspring

Second, God promised offspring when He said that He would make Abram into a great nation. This continued the promise of Genesis 3:15. At several key points, God refers to Abram's "seed" (15:5; 17:8), and this promise becomes the primary focus of the stories about Abram in Genesis because of his wife Sarai's difficulty having children.

Promised Blessing

Finally, God promised to bless all the peoples on earth through Abram and his offspring. These verses are key because they set the stage for the rest of history. God's plan is to seek out and save all the peoples of the earth, not just a few. He

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Remember that Adam and later Noah are commanded to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.' The same words are repeated when the Lord appears to Abram and other patriarchs, but instead of being a command ('be fruitful'), it is a promise ('I will make you fruitful'). Adam is told to build himself a large household, but the Lord promises Abram, the head of a new human race, that He will build a house for him (Genesis 17:2,7).¹

wants to be the covenant Lord of a people made up of all nations on earth. From Abram would come the Israelites, who were called to be a light to the nations, drawing them to worship the one true, living God.

GOD COMMANDS ABRAM TO TRUST HIS PROMISES

Sometimes evidence seems to stack up against promises. God made wonderful promises to Abram, but Abram and Sarai still didn't have any children. Both of them were old, and Sarai was well past the years of being able to conceive. So Abram began to question God's promise, and even took matters into his own hands.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And

Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” (Gen. 15:1-3)

Abram experienced great doubt despite God’s great promises. He looked at his situation, and he thought that he would try to help God along by pointing out his servant Eliezer. If we’re honest, we’ll admit this kind of doubt is understandable. There are times in our lives when the promises of God do not look so promising.

In the midst of Abram’s doubt, God came to him and restated His promises, even adding to them. And Abram believed!

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:4-6)

God reassured Abram that he would have children of his own. He would give him offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Not only did God restate this promise to Abram and his children repeatedly (see Gen. 22:17; 26:4; also 28:14), but He saw it through. In Deuteronomy 1:10, Moses said, “The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven,” and again in Deuteronomy 10:22, “Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.”

Paul’s argument in Galatians also helps us see how God will continue to fulfill His promise to make Abram’s offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Paul made clear in Romans and Galatians that being the offspring of Abraham was not about your DNA, but about faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:11-12; Gal. 3:7). Only those who share Abram’s faith are the sons of Abraham, and these will be an innumerable multitude in heaven from every people group on the planet (i.e., as numerous as the stars of the sky; see Rev. 7).

The Lord made this promise to Abram, and then the Lord bound Himself to keep these promises by means of a covenant ceremony between Himself and Abram (like a marriage ceremony). Genesis 15:7-21 gives this account. God commanded Abram to bring Him certain animals and to cut them in half (except for the birds, 15:10). Abram fell asleep, and the Lord told him about the future exodus from Egypt as well as the conquest of the Amorites in the promised land. Then the presence of the Lord, represented in a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, passed between the animal corpses. This act was, in effect, God saying to Abram, “Let this happen to Me if these things do not come true. Let Me be cut in pieces if I don’t uphold My end of the covenant.” The Lord was willing to take the covenant curses upon Himself if the covenant were broken, and that is exactly what He ended up doing at the cross.

TIMELINE

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

JOSEPH’S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Read Genesis 17:1-14. Here we see how Abram's faith faltered somewhat as he and Sarai grew older and older and still did not have a child. God came to him again to reiterate the promises and His covenant commitment. This time He gave Abram a new name, and He gave him a sign of their covenant relationship—a sign that would set His people apart from the rest of the world. The Lord changed Abram's name to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude" (17:6). Not only that, but God also changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which means "princess," because kings would come from Abraham's family. He would produce a royal line (leading, of course, to the King of kings—Jesus of Nazareth).

CHRIST CONNECTION

The story of the calling of Abraham points to Jesus in many ways. For instance, in Genesis 12:7 the Lord made a promise to Abraham's seed, or offspring. This can be understood as referring to all of his offspring collectively (see Gen. 13:16) or just one (see Gen. 3:15; 4:25 ["child"]). Indeed, it could be said that Abraham's collective offspring benefited through the singular promised offspring of Isaac.

In Galatians 3, Paul picked up on this peculiarity of the word "seed." Paul emphasized that God's promise was not to "seeds" but to one "seed," and ultimately the "seed" of Abraham is Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). Yet those who belong to Jesus are then collectively considered "Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise" (3:29).

Another connection is found in Genesis 15:6, where we saw Abraham believing the promise of God and God counting it to him as righteousness. In Galatians 3, the apostle Paul pointed to Abraham's faith as a model of saving faith. Paul argued that we are not justified (declared righteous before God) by trying to keep the rules (Gal. 3:11). Those who break God's law are cursed, and we're all law-breakers. But the good news is that Christ became that curse for us on the cross (3:13). Justification only comes through faith in Jesus, and just as with Abraham, God credits His righteousness to our account (3:6-7). Today, we too are called to trust the promises of God.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In what areas of your life do you often struggle with trusting the promises of God (at home, at school, with your future, in relationships, etc.)?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **When have you taken matters into your own hands to ensure the outcome you want? How did that turn out?** *Answers to this question will vary. Perhaps give students an example from your own life to help begin the conversation.*
- **What sometimes causes us to assume our relationship with God is dependent on how well we keep His rules?** *One of the main reasons we sometimes assume this is because we often have a works-based mind-set when it comes to our relationship with God. Instead of a works-based mind-set, the Bible instructs us to think about our relationship with God as being grace-based, knowing that it is only because of His mercy and grace that we are able to freely enter into a relationship with Him through Christ.*
- **What kind of person will a rules-focused life cause us to become? Do you think that's what God wants? Why or why not?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



The calling of Abraham teaches us a great deal about stepping out in faith while not knowing the exact details and plans that lie ahead. The situation with Abraham was no different—he too experienced the same comforts, friendships, and familiarity that we would face upon leaving the places we call home.

- **God's initiation of relationship with Abraham called for Abraham's obedience. Why do you think Abraham obeyed God by leaving his land?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What would it take for you to obey God if He called you to do something that makes no sense from the world's perspective?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HEART



Abraham's calling causes us to think about the reality that God is the one who pursues us, not the other way around, and it is because of His righteousness, and not our own, that we are able to stand rightly before Him.

- **How does knowing that God seeks after you encourage you to trust in Him?** *By seeking after us God demonstrates that He cares, and we tend to trust those who genuinely care for us.*
- **How should knowing that God is the one that makes us righteous before Him motivate us to pursue lives of holiness?** *Knowing that we don't have to work for our righteousness, but instead freely receive it from God, both frees and motivates us to lives of obedience in response to the grace God has shown us.*

HANDS



The calling of Abraham is primarily about God continuing His rescue plan of humanity. It isn't primarily about Abraham, or even his future descendants—it is about God and the fact that He will be rescuing peoples from every tribe, tongue, and nation as a result of His actions in the life of Abraham. If God has a global perspective, shouldn't we as well?

- **What are some ways your student group can be involved right now in being a light to the nations?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include individual things like personal prayer and evangelism, as well as group participation in mission trips, Christian sponsored clubs on school campus, etc.*
- **How does the way we live affect our mission as God's people? How does it bring glory to Him?** *Answers to this question will vary, but centers around the idea that our witness to others includes the way we live around them, for better or for poorer. When we live in such a way that makes much of Jesus and others see that, then God is glorified.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #7 can be used during group time; this contains a quote by Tim Keller related to the study.

SOURCES

1. Paul J. Leithart, *A House for My Name* (Canon Press, 2000), 61.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

08

SESSION EIGHT

The Testing of Abraham

SESSION SUMMARY

In the previous session, we saw how God chose Abraham out of all the people on earth to be the father of faith, the one through whom the Savior would come. Though Abraham was getting along in years and had no children, he believed God would keep this extraordinary promise.

In this session we see how Abraham's faith in God's promise was put to the test. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the very son Abraham and Sarah had been promised and God had finally given them. Believing God would somehow be true to His word, Abraham was willing to obey, even if it meant giving up his beloved son. This event gives us a picture of the special sacrifice God requires for sin and a picture of saving faith in God's promises. As we embrace God's promises, we are empowered to engage in His mission.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 22:1-14; Hebrews 11:17-19

THE POINT

Faith is trusting in God to keep His promise to provide salvation.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Good news! Research shows that 67% of Americans believe there is such a place as heaven. But here's the bad news: Most Americans believe the way to get there is by "being a good person." ¹

We shouldn't be surprised. Pop culture indoctrinates us with the idea that by our goodness we work our way up to God. Wayne Cochran's song "Last Kiss," made famous by J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers and later covered by Pearl Jam, mourns the tragic loss of a girlfriend, and then, in longing for reunion, talks about being good so he can see her again someday in heaven.

When baseball legend Tony Gwynn died, the ESPN sports talk show "First Take" featured Stephen A. Smith reassuring the world that Gwynn was in a better place because of his great character.

The default view of most Americans is that heaven does exist, but the way to get there is through obedience. Christians know that's not the case. The Bible teaches from cover to cover that salvation is by grace alone through faith in Christ. It's not a result of good works, "so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

But while the New Testament makes it clear that we are saved by faith, not works, it also makes clear that faith is accompanied by works. In other words, real faith demonstrates that it is real by the good works it produces.

This session will examine the unfaltering faith of Abraham and how all believers are to be so filled with the confidence in God's resurrection power that we are willing to live every day for His mission.

- **If I asked your school friends if you were a Christian, what evidence would they be able to offer of your faith?**
- **Why is it important that we live in a way that reflects Christ to those around us?**

Option 2

Prior to the session, search the Internet for some sample ACT or SAT practice questions. Select a few to write on the board. As students arrive, distribute paper and pencils and announce that today they are going to take a quiz. Following the activity, discuss some of the common reasons students are tested (to see what they've learned, to get accepted to college, etc.).

- **What might a teacher conclude after you pass or fail a test? What might you learn about yourself? (I'm good at math, I didn't study enough, etc.)**

This session will examine how God tested Abraham. As a result, Abraham learned that God would provide.

- **When have you been tested in your faith? What did you learn from that experience?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Faith is trusting in God to keep His promise to provide salvation.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Abraham:** biblical patriarch; chosen by God to be the father of many nations
- **Isaac:** the promised son to Abraham and Sarah

PLOT

The last session marked a bright moment in history when we saw God's rescue plan take shape in the choosing and calling of Abraham. It showed us that while humanity is still broken and contaminated because of sin, God still hasn't abandoned us to ourselves. It showed us that God keeps His promises, and that He is at work to restore and make all things new once more.

In the midst of this good news, however, we come to a historical event that is difficult to fathom at first. It appears, on the surface, to make no sense and serve no good purpose whatsoever. In fact, it even makes us initially wonder how God is going to pull off this rescue plan if things go the way He has commanded them.

So what is God doing in this story? What is He teaching us about genuine faith, about His sovereignty over all things, about ourselves, and ultimately, about His future Son?

GOD ASKED FOR A SACRIFICE

Remember that God had made a covenant with Abraham in which He promised Abraham land as well as offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that through Abraham's descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God promised to redeem the peoples of the planet through Abraham's family.

The problem, of course, was that Abraham and Sarah didn't have any children, and Sarah was well past the age of being able to conceive. But God repeatedly stated that Abraham and Sarah would have a child of their own, and Abraham believed God's promise.

In the chapters between what we studied in the previous session and this one, several situations arose, including a threat to the fulfillment of God's promise when a king named Abimelech attempted to take Sarah as his wife. But God remained faithful and miraculously provided a son named Isaac (Gen. 21). Isaac was not only the child God promised Abraham and Sarah; he was the heir through whom God's promises would be carried forward.

More than a decade later, however, Abraham's faith was put to the test big time. God told Abraham to do something that would horrify any father, but especially a man through whom the salvation of the world was to come.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. (Gen. 22:1-6)

It's easy to say we trust someone, but the proof of that trust is demonstrated by obedience. We see this truth in this story with Abraham. Here the covenant-making God has tested Abraham's faith by telling him to sacrifice his "only son Isaac." This is no small or insignificant request. Abraham not only deeply loves his son, but he also knows that Isaac was the start of God's fulfilling promise to bless all the peoples of the earth through his offspring. God had not only promised Abraham offspring as numerous as the sand, but He had also promised that his descendants would restore the world. If Isaac were to die in this way, then the promise of rescuing the world would die with him. God's test of Abraham went beyond anything we can fathom because its implications affected the salvation of the world. It seems that if Isaac dies, the promise dies with him.

TIMELINE

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

But in obedient faith, Abraham rose early in the morning, gathered the materials for a sacrifice, and set out for the place God told him to go. After a three-day journey, Abraham saw the place and told his servants to remain with the donkey. He said that he and the boy would go over to that mountain to worship and then return. So he took the wood and laid it on Isaac; he himself carried the fire and the knife, and they set off for the mountain.

Abraham demonstrated strong faith in the promises of God. Not only did he intend to sacrifice Isaac, but he also believed that somehow the boy would come away alive on the other side. After all, he told his servants that after the sacrifice was done he and Isaac would “come again to you” (22:5). He believed that God would keep the seed promise even if it required resurrection from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19).

Abraham and Isaac headed up the mountain for the sacrifice. Abraham did not know exactly what would happen, but he still trusted in the promises of God.

GOD PROVIDES THE SACRIFICE AND CALLS ABRAHAM TO TRUST IN HIM

So how does this climactic moment in history end? What happens to the promise? Let's continue to read to find out.

And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here am I, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here am I.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (Gen. 22:7-14)

Notice what Isaac asked his father: “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Isaac saw that his dad had the knife and fire, and Isaac himself was carrying the wood, but there was no animal. Isaac’s question echoes through the pages of the Old Testament: Where is the lamb? How will the sacrifice take place? Abraham answered, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” In a nutshell, this is the heart of Christian faith. We believe God provides salvation because He is the One who provides the substitute.

When they reached the place, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his son, laid him on the altar, and raised his knife to sacrifice the boy. We shudder to think of what that moment was like. What was going through his mind at that second?

Suddenly, the Angel of the Lord called from heaven and told Abraham not to touch the boy, “for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me.” Abraham’s faith was tested, and he passed with flying colors because he was willing to obey God, even if it cost him everything. True faith leads to obedience (see Jas. 2).

After the Angel stopped him, Abraham saw a ram caught in some thorns. God had provided this animal for the sacrifice as a substitute for Isaac. Abraham offered the ram instead and named the place “The Lord Will Provide.”

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

In Hebrews 11:17-19, the New Testament writer gives us inspired insight into this event in Abraham’s life. He tells us what Abraham was thinking and what motivated his obedience to the Lord.

Hebrews 11 is considered the “Faith Hall of Fame,” and in this passage the author praises Abraham’s faith. Faith was the means by which Abraham offered up Isaac when the Lord tested him. Abraham had received a promise that his offspring—his heir—would be the one to bring restoration to the world, and even though God’s command to sacrifice Isaac looked contrary to that promise, he began to carry it out.

Why did he offer Isaac? Abraham offered Isaac not just because he had faith, but because he had faith in resurrection from the dead. He thought God was able to raise Isaac from the grave, just as God had been able to bring life out of Sarah’s “dead” womb. (See Gen. 17:15-19; 21:1-5.)

Perhaps you’ve been in a situation where you felt God was testing your faith. Sometimes it may even seem like God is asking too much. In those times, we can lean on the truth that we can always trust the sovereignty of God. Abraham already knew that He could trust God, but this experience confirmed that trust even more.

- **What situation are you facing right now that requires you to trust and obey God?** (p. 55, PSG)
- **What do you already know about God? How can that knowledge help you to trust Him?** (p. 55, PSG)

God provided a ram for Abraham and Isaac; you can trust God to provide for you as well.

TIMELINE

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

JOSEPH’S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

CHRIST CONNECTION

We are familiar with the idea of a substitute. Substitute teachers take the place of our regular teachers when they have to miss a day. Subs come into the game to play in our place. Sweet’N Low® is a substitute for sugar in our tea. Substitutes are important when a teacher is sick or when a starting point guard can’t get the job done; substitutes perform tasks for us when we are unable.

The theme of substitution is at the heart of Christianity, and the theme of the substitute lamb runs throughout the Bible. Abraham said that God would provide a lamb. As we will see in future sessions, at the Passover a lamb’s blood was shed as a substitute for the life of a firstborn son in Israel (firstborn sons just like Isaac). That sacrifice caused the death angel to pass over them. Also, on the Day of Atonement animals were given in place of the Israelites as substitute sacrifices. All of these stories point forward to the moment when the Lord Jesus Himself would die as the sacrifice for our sins (see 1 Cor. 5:7). God provided His only begotten Son as the substitute for the world.

Here in Genesis 22, God provides a ram to be the substitute for Isaac. Just as Isaac (the willing son to be sacrificed) hints at Jesus (God’s Son who went up the mountain), so also the ram hints at Jesus as our substitute. The ram caught in the thorns points ahead to the coming descendant from Abraham, Jesus the King, who will be crowned with thorns and pierced for our transgressions.

When it comes down to it, we see several parallels between Abraham’s story and the gospel of Jesus as told in Genesis 22. For instance:

- Isaac was Abraham’s “only” son (of promise), and Jesus is God’s “only” Son (John 3:16).
- Both Isaac and Jesus were subject to be sacrificed.
- Just as Isaac willingly submitted to be sacrificed on a mountain, Jesus willingly submitted to crucifixion on Calvary.
- Both Isaac and Jesus carried the wood for the sacrifice.
- When asked where the sacrificial lamb was, Abraham responded that God would provide it. God ultimately provided the sacrificial lamb when He gave His “only Son” as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus is our substitute.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Christ the Substitute

At the heart of the atonement is Jesus Christ substituting Himself for sinners as He died on the cross. This truth is seen against the backdrop of the Old Testament sacrificial system, which provided a picture of humanity’s need for sin to be covered and guilt to be removed by an innocent sacrifice. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature, with its demands and necessities, and identifying Himself completely with humankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross, He made provision for the redemption of humanity from sin.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Like Abraham, we may not know when we are being tested. In what ways should Abraham's story impact our obedience?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **When was a time you sensed God testing you? What did you learn about Him from that experience? What did you learn about yourself?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does faith fuel obedience?** *Faith is connected to obedience given the fact that faith—genuine belief and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins—will automatically be demonstrated in the way that we live.*
- **Why is it important for us to trust in the provision of God and not in our own work?** *Whether in talking about salvation or living life in general, the Bible is clear that no amount of human effort or works is good enough to put one's trust in. In all areas, whether in salvation or living wisely from day to day, we are to seek the provision that God supplies, so that in all things He will get the glory (1 Pet. 4:11).*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



The story of Abraham and Isaac is mind-boggling to the reader at first. Isaac is the promised son to Abraham and Sarah, and God has specifically stated that it will be through Isaac that Abraham's descendants will be named—meaning the covenant will continue through him. Yet while it is mind-boggling at first, we quickly come to realize what God is doing through this event.

- **What are some things God asks us to do in His Word that may seem counter intuitive? Why does He ask us to do these things?** *Examples might include: love your enemies (Matt. 5:44); if you want to save your life, then lay it down (Matt. 16:25); deny ourselves and take up the cross (Matt. 16:24), etc. Whatever examples you arrive at, help students to see the wisdom in these commands.*
- **Why is it important that God provide a substitute for us?** *Quite simply because we are unable to provide one for ourselves. Apart from God's grace and provision, humanity would be forever separated from Him.*

HEART



The Abraham we see in this event is somewhat different from the Abraham we have seen in previous chapters. That is because Abraham has learned over time and through some poor past decisions that God can be trusted and will fulfill what He has promised. While Isaac was asked to be the sacrifice, one could also say that in another sense Abraham's will was also a sacrifice.

- **How does Abraham's obedience challenge you to be more obedient to God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does Abraham's faith in God challenge your own faith in God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS



Abraham's faith and belief in God influenced his decisions and the way he lived. The same is true for us as well—true faith will also result in a transformed life.

- **How has this session challenged you to live differently?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How might you be able to use this story in the Bible to point others toward Christ?** **Explain.** *Help students think of creative ways they might be able to illustrate to someone the foreshadowing of Christ in this account.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, items #8 and #9 can be used during group time. Item #8, The Lord Will Provide, is a poster showing how God has provided a substitute in different sections of the Old Testament, beginning in Gen. 22. Item #9 is an artistic poster of the cross of Christ being foreshadowed by the sacrifice of Isaac.

SOURCES

1. Bob Smietana, "Americans Believe in Heaven, Hell, and a Little Bit of Heresy," LifeWay Research, 28 Oct 2014 [cited 11 March 2015]. Available from the Internet: www.lifewayresearch.com.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

09

SESSION NINE

God Reaffirms the Covenant

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we see that God renews His promise to be with Abraham's offspring and to bless the world through them despite their sinful and unworthy ways. Abraham's descendants fight, lie, and manipulate one another, but God remains faithful and renews His promises again and again. We can take heart in knowing we serve a God who keeps His promises in unusual ways to unworthy people, a God who is present with us as we fulfill His mission.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 25:19-26; 26:1-6

THE POINT

God promises to be faithful to His people even when they show themselves to be unworthy of His love.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

A typical childhood classic is the story of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Warner Bros., 1971). Perhaps the most intriguing fictional characters in the story are the Oompa Loompas, the short and stout little men who helped Willy Wonka in the factory. Whenever one of the kids violated a rule and was nearly turned into a lump of chocolate (or some other frightful consequence) the Oompa Loompas would come out and sing a song with a moral lesson, like obeying your parents or avoiding gluttony. “Live this way and you will be happy”—that was their message. (If time allows, share a clip from the movie.)

I wonder sometimes if we look at the Old Testament in a similar way. We read the stories and think the point is to imitate the “good guys” and avoid the actions of the “bad guys” if we want to live a happy life. The problem is, that’s not the message of the Old Testament.

Within these pages we have plenty of examples of people who walked faithfully with God and still suffered. Likewise, we have examples of people who were unworthy of God’s blessing and yet they prospered. The message of the Old Testament centers not on “good people” but on a gracious God who keeps His promises to be with His people and bless them even though they are sinful and unworthy of His love.

- **Can you recall a time when you received something good, perhaps an accolade or a gift, even though it was undeserved and unexpected? What went through your mind upon receiving it?**

Option 2

Give each student a sheet of paper folded lengthwise. On one side, lead students to think of someone they consider to be extremely trustworthy and list specific reasons they trust this person. On the opposite side, lead them to think of someone they trust very little and list specific reasons they cannot trust this person. Without calling on students to name the people they listed, discuss how a person’s history determines our current level of trust for them. If they have proven untrustworthy in the past, we are cautious to trust them in the present.

On the board, write God. Emphasize that before you determine whether or not you believe God to be trustworthy, it is important to recall how He has acted in the past. Call on volunteers to name instances from their own lives, biblical accounts, or stories from the lives of others that illustrate God’s trustworthiness. List these on the board.

Next, call on volunteers to state things that God has never done. This list might include things such as: made a mistake, told a lie, asked for forgiveness, forgotten a promise, and so forth.

As you look over both lists, discuss the level of God’s trustworthiness based on His history.

- **How has God proven to His people that He is trustworthy? How has He proven His trustworthiness to you personally?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God promises to be faithful to His people even when they show themselves to be unworthy of His love.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Isaac:** son of Abraham through whom God would renew His covenant

PLOT

In the previous sessions, we've seen how God chose Abraham to be the one through whom salvation would come to the world. We saw how Isaac was the child of promise, and how Abraham's faith was tested. But what happens when Abraham's descendants are unfaithful to God? How will God's promise go forward?

In this session, we see that God renews His promise to be with Abraham's offspring and to bless the world through them despite their sinful and unworthy ways. Abraham's descendants fight, lie, and manipulate one another, but God remains faithful and renews His promises again and again. We can take heart in knowing we serve a God who keeps His promises in unusual ways to unworthy people, a God who is present with us as we fulfill His mission.

TIMELINE

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE

The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

We're still working through Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and we see how this book is divided into units by the key phrase "These are the generations of..." (see 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2). The use of this phrase in Genesis 25:19 indicates that a new section is starting, one that deals with Isaac and his children.

These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger." When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. (Gen. 25:19-26)

We've seen that Isaac is the child of promise who carries forward the promises of land, offspring, and blessing that God gave to Abraham. But before the promises are carried forward, a crisis must be addressed. Like Abraham's wife, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, could not have children.

Rebekah's barrenness was not only tragic for the family, as painful as not being able to have children may be. In this case, barrenness was a cosmic tragedy because God had promised that the removal of the curse of sin and the defeat of Satan would come through the birth of a child (Gen. 3:15), and the restoration of the world would come through the offspring of Abraham (12:1-3). The fact that Rebekah could not have children again put those promises in jeopardy.

But Isaac prayed for his wife, and God miraculously opened her womb. Are you noticing the pattern here? God is using unlikely pregnancies and births to keep His promises and deliver His people, and He is asking His people to trust Him in the process.

Rebekah became pregnant with twins, and they fought inside her. She was perplexed by what was happening, so she prayed and asked God about it. God told her the fighting foreshadowed what their lives would be like. Two nations were in Rebekah's womb. They would war with each other, but the older would serve the younger.

When God promised the salvation of the world through the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3:15, He said that victory would come through warfare between the offspring of the woman and the serpent. This declaration plays out in Genesis, and it continues here as Edom—the descendants of Esau—will constantly war with Israel—the descendants of Jacob.

But through it all, God's salvation and blessing will come to the world. And how unusual will be the way it comes. In the ancient world the inheritance was given to the oldest son, but here God promised it to the younger son. Jacob would carry the promises forward, not Esau, the firstborn.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Truthful

The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood (Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2). God represents things as they really are. Everything He says can be trusted because God guarantees the truth of everything He tells us. The call for humans to be honest and not to bear false witness is rooted in the truthful character of our Creator. Telling the truth is one way we bear the image of God, whose Son is the Way, "the Truth," and the Life (John 14:6).

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES EVEN WHEN PEOPLE ARE UNWORTHY

We've seen how God keeps His promises in unusual ways. As the story progresses, we watch how God's people prove to be unworthy of those promises by their behavior. They play favorites, lie, and manipulate. Yet God remains gracious to them.

While God's grace toward sinners is on the clearest and ultimate display in the cross of Jesus, God's grace toward sinners does not begin there. Through the entire Bible we see God's unmerited love given to unworthy people. We see that clearly here in Genesis 26, where God reaffirms His covenant with Abraham through his son Isaac.

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. And the LORD appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will

establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” So Isaac settled in Gerar. (Gen. 26:1-6)

Here we read about another famine in the land, just like there was in the days of Abraham. The famine in Abraham’s day foreshadowed the exodus. Famine drove Abraham and his family to Egypt, where plagues were unleashed on Pharaoh’s house, and Abraham’s family left Egypt richer than they came. The same thing will happen generations later on a larger scale, when God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt. God continues to rescue His people and keep His promise of land, offspring, and blessing despite horrible circumstances, such as famine and being away from their homeland.

This famine, which happened in the life of Isaac, shows God continuing to keep His promises in tough circumstances. God told Isaac not to go to Egypt but to live in the Philistine region of Gerar. Like his father before him and his descendants after him, Isaac spent time among the Gentiles outside of the promised land. Like his dad, he spent time among Abimelech, the king of the Philistines (see Gen. 20).

The horrible circumstances (starvation) and the unworthy characters that Isaac and his sons turn out to be make us wonder if God will truly keep the promise He has made. Can human disobedience or natural disasters keep Him from being true to His word?

The promises of land, offspring, and blessing were once again in jeopardy, but God took this opportunity to restate the promises to Isaac. God told Isaac to remain in the land of Gerar as a foreigner, and He promised to be with Isaac and to bless him. Then He promised to give this land—even the territory of the Gentiles—to Isaac and his offspring. He again promised offspring for Isaac as numerous as the stars, and He foretold that Isaac’s offspring would bless all the nations of the earth.

Why did He do this? God restated these promises because Isaac’s father, Abraham, obeyed His commands. It is intriguing that God would mention Abraham’s obedience because, at first, Abraham was anything but obedient. Remember how he took matters into his own hands rather than trust God? He tried to offer his servant Eliezar as the heir, and then he fathered Ishmael by Hagar.

But God graciously kept His promises to Abraham despite Abraham’s unworthiness. In the end, Abraham seems to have been transformed by God’s gracious presence. He became a man of faith and obedience, even willing to offer up the child of promise in obedient faith to God.

We see here in Genesis 26 a similar unworthiness in Isaac, and we also see God’s graciousness to keep the promises. Like his father, Isaac passed off his wife, Rebekah, as his sister because he feared the men of the area would

TIMELINE

JOSEPH’S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD

God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

kill him to take her as a wife since she was so beautiful. Yet despite Isaac's cowardly treatment of his wife, he was blessed in this foreign land and became rich, to the point the Philistines wanted him to leave. Eventually Isaac made it back to the land of promise in Beer-sheba, where God restated the promises to him yet again.

- **In what ways does remembering God's faithfulness in your past affect how you face difficult situations today?** (*p. 61, PSG*)

CHRIST CONNECTION

Consider this pattern throughout the Bible. God granted Isaac as a miracle child to Abraham and Sarah in order to keep His promise to them. Likewise, Esau and Jacob were an answer to Isaac's prayer. God granted a miraculous birth, the prophet Samuel, to Hannah who was barren. Manoah's wife faced infertility but gave birth to Samson, whom God used to judge Israel. Ultimately, the virgin Mary gave birth to the Savior of the world, an unlikely birth that was the culmination of all of God's promises.

There is no doubt that God graciously grants many things to us in the gospel. He gives us forgiveness of sin, adoption into His family, eternal life, an inheritance in His kingdom, and so much more. But the one thing the gospel of Jesus Christ secures for us that is far more glorious than any of these is God Himself.

The God-man, Jesus Christ—the One who shed His own blood for us and was raised from the dead to free us from the curse of sin—will live with His people forever. The promise of God to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is the promise God has fulfilled for us in Jesus Christ. And if we learn anything about God's character from these biblical accounts and others, it is the fact that God is someone who keeps His promises, even at the cost of His own life!

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some ways you have seen God keep His promises in your life or in the life of someone you know?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What situations have caused you to doubt God's promises to you?** *Answers will vary, but may include a troubled past, broken relationships, abuse, etc.*
- **How can you battle your doubts and trust God's promises in these difficult circumstances?** *Answers may include fighting against doubt by recalling the promises of God in Scripture (which would involve Scripture reading, Scripture memory, and prayer); remembering God's character and the truth that He has never failed to keep His promises; remembering stories like this one where God was faithful to His people; etc.*
- **How has this session challenged you on a personal level?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



There's no question that God has made promises to us that are independent of our worthiness. Not only that, but God also keeps His promises even when we fail to live as we should. Yet, we often seem to believe that God is mad at us or that we forfeit His blessing if we fail Him. When we think this way, we reveal a works based mind-set at work within us.

- **Why is it easy to think God is perpetually angry with us when we fail Him?** *Oftentimes we think this way because of a works based mind-set. We think that if we do this then God will do that, or if we do that then He will do this, etc. We tend to see Him as primarily a Judge rather than a loving Father who disciplines those He loves.*
- **Why is it important that we change that way of thinking?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HEART



It is important to remember that God's grace, love, and mercy are unmerited—meaning we didn't do anything to deserve them. In fact, the Bible affirms that we love only because God first loved us, and that it is His kindness that leads us to repentance.

- **How can we stand on the promises of God we see in Genesis? How does this help us grow in love and obedience toward Him?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does God's faithfulness lead to a deeper trust in Him?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS



God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (see Pr. 3:34; Jas. 4:6). There is no place for pride or boasting in the Christian's mission, but only the desire to become more like Christ in the hope of expanding His kingdom in the hearts of people.

- **What are some limitations that may make a person feel unqualified to share the love of Christ with others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How does knowing that God uses unlikely and unworthy people to accomplish His plan free us from the fear of not being qualified to share His message?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #10 can be used during group time. Item #10 contains a map that will help students to visually grasp the landscape and journeys of many of the characters they are learning about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

10

SESSION TEN

God's Dysfunctional Covenant Family

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will see that despite the dysfunction of Isaac's family, the deception of Jacob, and the despondency of Esau, God is committed to His plan to redeem a people from all the nations on the planet through the offspring of this family—Jesus of Nazareth. Because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our own struggles with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 27:1-40; 28:10-22

THE POINT

God is sovereign over all of life and will work out His plan of redemption despite and sometimes through our dysfunction.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

I grew up attending a church with beautiful stained glass windows in the sanctuary. These windows depicted scenes from well-known Bible stories. However, whenever I stood close to the window, I could not see the story; instead, I saw jagged glass, bright colors, and indistinct details. Up close it looked like an abstract collage; only when I stood back and took in the entire window could I see the beauty, the intricate planning, and the masterful design.

God's plan often works this way. Up close in the gritty details of daily life, things look jagged and messed up. There doesn't seem to be cohesion; the particulars don't make much sense. But whenever we look back at our lives, taking in the whole picture, we can often see how God has been working all along the way.

A family member's illness, a rejection letter, trouble at school, not getting a spot on the roster, or a sudden move across the country—at the time, these may seem like unwanted deviations from our plans (or God's plans). As we look back, though, we can see how God has worked through these moments to put us where He wanted us when He wanted us there, and we see how His plan was better than what we could have mapped out for ourselves.

- **When was a time you thought your life was ruined as a result of something that happened or some bad news? Looking back, how have you seen God work through that difficult situation?**

Option 2

Display an deflated balloon, explaining that conflict is a lot like a balloon. Invite students to call out some common sources of family conflict. With each idea students offer, blow into the balloon, pausing periodically to discuss how some conflicts get started. Blow some more, then pause, talking about the types of things that cause conflict to escalate. Continue this process, then pop the balloon when it reaches its capacity.

Acknowledge that as the balloon got more and more inflated, everyone was cringing, just waiting for it to pop. Point out that conflict has a definite impact on the people around us and it can cause problems if we don't deal with it.

- **How has conflict affected the relationships in your family?**
- **When have you been shown grace by a parent or someone you respected, even though you know you didn't deserve it? How was their response similar to the grace God shows us?**

Today we will see how conflict between Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau, brought pain to their family. However, the good news is that God does not reserve His love and grace for perfect families. We will see this truth on display in Isaac's family: God can and does use dysfunctional families to carry out His plans.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God is sovereign over all of life and will work out His plan of redemption despite and sometimes through our dysfunction.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Esau and Jacob:** twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah

PLOT

God's plan may not seem the least bumpy or even the most efficient at times, but through it all He is always committed to His promises. We saw this truth on display in the previous session, in which God reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even when they proved less than faithful in their actions.

As we continue along the biblical journey, we will see that despite the dysfunction of Isaac's family, the deception of Jacob, and the despondency of Esau, God is committed to His plan to redeem a people from all the nations on the planet through the offspring of this family—Jesus of Nazareth. And this story will show us, among many things, that because God specializes in showing mercy to unworthy people, we should look for ways God can make visible His grace through our own struggle with ongoing flaws and dysfunction.

GOD'S PLAN GOES FORWARD THROUGH A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

Some Christians long for “the good old days” when family values were celebrated. We complain about the shows on TV and wish there were more sitcoms focused on the perfect nuclear family. Or perhaps we worry about the messages these shows convey. The truth is there hasn't been an era of “good old days” since the garden of Eden. Families have always been sinful and dysfunctional. Because of our innate sinfulness, families have always shifted blame, reversed roles, and much more.

No family is perfect. Every family has its challenges. The good news is that God doesn't reserve His love and grace for perfect families. We will see this on display in Isaac's family: God can and does use dysfunctional families to carry out His plans.

Let's review. When Isaac and Rebekah's children—Esau and Jacob—were in their mother's womb, the Lord told Rebekah that the older would serve the younger. In ancient cultures, the younger son would serve the older son, and the older son would receive the family inheritance. But as this story unfolds, we see the older son, Esau, selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Esau was defined by food, by his appetite.

Not only did Esau sell his birthright, but he also took Hittite wives. He intermarried with a pagan people who didn't follow the one true God, and his actions made things miserable for his parents (Gen. 26:34-35). But God had declared that His promise to Eve (her offspring would crush the serpent's head, Gen. 3) and to Abraham (his offspring would bring salvation to all the peoples of the earth, Gen. 12) would be carried forward through Jacob, not Esau.

We see in Genesis 27 a final showdown between these brothers. Even though Isaac and his family were sinful, dysfunctional, and manipulative, God graciously keeps His promises.

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.” Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, ‘Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.’ Now therefore, my son, obey my voice as I command you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon

TIMELINE

JACOB AND ESAU

Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

JOSEPH'S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

myself and not a blessing.” His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me.” So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob. (Gen. 27:1-17)

As Isaac anticipated his death, he sent for Esau in order to bless him. God had made promises to Abraham and Isaac concerning land, offspring, and blessing, so Isaac intended to pass that on to his oldest son. Earlier in the narrative, the Scriptures told us that Isaac loved to eat what Esau brought back from the hunt (Gen. 25:28). So Isaac instructed Esau to hunt some game and prepare a meal in order that Isaac might bless Esau before the Lord.

One can see the dysfunction of this family in that the parents played favorites. Isaac loved Esau’s “manliness” and appreciated his ability to bring back food from the hunt. Rebekah preferred Jacob, so when she overheard Isaac’s conversation with Esau, she hatched a plot to help Jacob receive the blessing instead of Esau.

The plot was to deceive Isaac into thinking that Jacob was Esau. Jacob was to bring goats from their flock so that Rebekah could make a meal that Isaac loved. Jacob protested that even though his father could not see well, if Isaac touched Jacob, then Isaac would realize that he was not Esau. Jacob was concerned that he would be cursed by his father rather than blessed. But Rebekah had everything figured out. She clothed Jacob in Esau’s clothes, she put the goats’ skin on Jacob to make him hairy, and she prepared a meal her husband would like.

Genesis paints an unflattering picture of Abraham and his offspring. We see them lie, cheat, and manipulate. Abraham and Isaac both passed their wives off as their sisters in order to take the heat off themselves (Gen. 12:11-13; 26:7). Isaac played favorites with his son Esau; so did his wife, Rebekah, with Jacob. Rebekah and Jacob were willing to deceive in order to get what they wanted.

In spite of all of this scheming, God continued to be gracious. He kept His promises. His plan to redeem the world will not be thwarted by human cunning and sin.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God’s Plan and Human Action

God’s sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.” In ways we are unable to fully comprehend, the Lord’s plan goes forward in a way that extends to the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God’s overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

GOD'S PLAN GOES FORWARD THROUGH A DECEITFUL SON

So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that your soul may bless me." But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands. So he blessed him. He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." Then he said, "Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you." So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said, "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed! May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" (Gen. 27:18-29)

Jacob deceived Isaac into thinking he was Esau. Isaac questioned how Esau could have gotten back so quickly, but Jacob replied that the Lord had blessed his endeavor. Isaac, not convinced, asked him to come closer so he could tell if he were really Esau. He was confused because this son sounded like Jacob but felt like Esau. Ultimately, on account of the smell of his clothes, Isaac blessed him.

Jacob schemed and lied to get what he wanted. In fact, he had numerous opportunities to come clean with his father and tell the truth. But he was so blinded with greed for the blessing that he continued to deceive.

- **When have you been guilty of altering the truth, even just a little, to get something you wanted? How did that work out?** (p. 67, PSG)

We are often no different than Jacob. In situations where we find ourselves lying, it is usually because of something we want. We want others to have a certain opinion of us, so we bend the truth.

Notice that the words of blessing Isaac uttered over Jacob were basically a restating of the promises to Abraham. God had promised Abraham land, offspring, and blessing. Isaac spoke here of land and blessing. He asked that God

TIMELINE

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD

God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED

God displays His glory among all the peoples.

would cause Jacob's brothers and the nations to serve him. God's blessing would be given to those nations that blessed Jacob.

Jacob would eventually become the representative head of the nation of Israel, and Israel was called to be a light to the nations. God's redeeming plan would go through Jacob to all the nations of the earth. The saving line would come through the deceitful younger son, Jacob, not Esau.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In Genesis 28:10-22 we are reminded of God's faithfulness to keep His promises, even to those who are undeserving. After betraying his brother, Jacob fled for his safety. He found a place to stay the night, choosing a stone as his pillow.

As he slept, Jacob dreamed about a stairway on the ground with its top in the heavens. Angels were going up and down. It is here that Yahweh reminded Jacob that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and He would be Jacob's God, too. God would give the land to Jacob and his offspring. He would give Jacob offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth. God promised that all the peoples of the world would be blessed by Jacob's offspring. Then God promised, "I am with you." Jacob took the stone he used for a pillow and set it up as a marker and named the place Bethel, or "House of God." Like in Eden, God promised to live among His people. Jacob then vowed to serve Yahweh as His God.

The stairway Jacob saw reminds us of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:4). The people of Babel had attempted to come before God on their own terms. But this story shows us that if man is to reconnect with God, then it will require God coming down to us. Christianity is different from other religions because we believe God's presence is secured not through our climbing up toward Him but through His gracious descent toward us.

Jacob's stairway gives us a glimpse into the reversal of Babel. The people of Babel were trying to reach God by lifting up a tower, and it caused them to be separated all over the planet. But when the offspring of Jacob, God incarnate—Jesus of Nazareth—will come down from heaven, He will be lifted up to draw all people to Himself. He will bless all the peoples of the earth and reunite them in Himself. John 1:51 tells us that Jesus is the true stairway to heaven. He is the One who reconnects earth and heaven.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some common dysfunctions in families? How can God's grace in the gospel overcome these?** *Answers will vary with the first question. The second question is designed to help students understand that the gospel, the person and work of Jesus, is able to speak directly into those issues and help the Christian overcome.*
- **In what kinds of situations do we find it easiest to lie? What do those situations tell us about what our hearts are craving?** *Answers will vary to the first question. The second question is intended to point out that we don't lie for no reason—we lie in order to gain something. And the thing that we are looking to gain is reflective of what our hearts are craving at the moment.*
- **How can we change the desires of the heart?** *Allow students time to think through this one, discussing their ideas along the way. Some may say that change comes through discipline or determination, but if they are honest, they will also say that this type of change isn't really change at all, only a temporary modification of behavior. However, the Christian worldview argues that lasting change or transformation comes through Christ alone.*
- **What hope does it give you to know that God works even through our deceit and sinfulness to accomplish His plan?** *The purpose of this question is to simply emphasize that no matter how bad we know our hearts to be or how awful we have made things, God is still at work accomplishing His good work and will.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



This story of Jacob and Esau contains family favoritism, deceit, and manipulation. Once again we see the human heart and the depths of its sinfulness on full display. Yet, at the same time, we also see God's plan of rescue continuing to be carried out, displaying His grace and goodness despite man's sinfulness.

- **How does the truth that God's plan is always working out help you face the surprises, disappointments, and hardships of your daily life?** *Answers to this question will vary. Give students an example from your own life to help get the conversation started.*
- **What are some things we can determine about God's character based on this story?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include traits like grace, mercy, sovereignty, goodness, omniscience (all-knowing), etc.*

HEART



In this story we learn that Jacob experiences the presence of God, and as a result, is forever changed by that experience. We see this same formula repeated through the Bible—people encounter God and are transformed as a result (see Isaiah 7; Acts 9).

- **In what ways are we changed by experiencing the presence of God?** *Answers to this question will vary. Ask for answers based on real-life experience, as well as what they think should take place.*
- **Is it possible to experience God's presence and not be changed? Why or why not?** *This question may get different responses, so allow students to explain their rationale. The differences in response may likely be based on one's understanding of the word "experience," which may be taken to mean a "worship experience" or an actual literal encounter as with Saul on the Damascus road. Entertain these different understandings, but try to land somewhere in the middle as a thought experiment for this question.*

HANDS



The story of Jacob and Esau not only teaches us a lot about God and ourselves, but also the importance of developing healthy relationships around us so that God's message of redemption may spread throughout our communities.

- **How does the story of God's continual grace through messed-up people free you to be part of His plan?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways you, as a group or as an individual, can engage in God's mission to bless all peoples of the earth?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #10 can be used during group time. Item #10 contains a map that will help students to visually grasp the landscape and journeys of many of the characters they are learning about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

11

SESSION ELEVEN

The God Who Gives New Names

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we follow the story of how Jacob received a new name from God. His old name meant “deceiver” and was an apt description of his life. But after a mysterious encounter with God, Jacob was never the same. He received a new name that reflected God’s grace to him and his descendants. Like Jacob, we are flawed and sinful, in need of an encounter with God that will transform our identity and give us a new mission in life.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 32:24-32; 35:9-15

THE POINT

Encountering God leads to a fundamental change of identity and purpose.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Many people use the beginning of a new year as an opportunity to get in better shape. They purchase exercise equipment, work out every day, start eating healthy meals, and eventually start to feel better. But like most New Year's resolutions, within a few months people start to slack off and eventually wind up back where they started.

The human heart longs for lasting change, and this longing goes beyond faddish New Year's resolutions. For students, it might be a reputation they want to be free from; for some, it may be a pattern of bad grades. Whatever the case, most of us wonder if transformation is possible.

It's easy to lose hope in change because so often we've tried to make changes only to be disappointed. We are tempted to give up and think, *What's the use?* For this reason, we love transformation stories. Shows like "The Biggest Loser" and "Extreme Home Makeover" tap into our desire for transformation. Even sports channels offer pre-game shows, such as ESPN College GameDay, that reveal players' life stories, how they have overcome adversity, and how their life has been changed for the better. We love seeing someone bring his family out of poverty or seeing an obese man no longer have heart problems or seeing a down-and-out family have their home remodeled. It reminds us that dramatic change is possible.

- **Looking back over your life, what kind of transformation have you seen take place in your family? in the life of a friend? in your own life?**
- **What kind of transformation would you like to see take place in these areas?**

Option 2

Prior to the session, gather a baby bottle, a jar of baby food, bite-size crackers, peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a hamburger. (Pictures of these items will work, as well.) Display the foods on a table at the front of the room. As students arrive, draw attention to the different food items, then ask:

- **Which of these foods did you prefer to eat as a baby? as a toddler? as a grade school student?**
- **Are you the same person you were as a baby? How have you changed? Did this transformation take place all at once or over time?**

Point out that as we grow in our relationship with Christ, God desires for our thoughts and behavior to change so that we can better serve Him. In today's session, we'll see the transformation that took place in Jacob's life and why change was necessary. Like Jacob, God also wants to use us to fulfill His mission, but that may mean we have to make some changes first.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Encountering God leads to a fundamental change of identity and purpose.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Jacob:** youngest son of Isaac and Rebekah; tricked his father into giving him Esau's birthright

PLOT

The good news from the Bible is that life-change is possible, and it is not dependent on you. We might be able to mask behavior for a while, but such acting never amounts to true transformation. Only God has the capability of changing hearts and lives. God is the life-changer, and we see this in His interactions with Jacob.

As we continue the story of Jacob we see that an encounter with God leads not only to brokenness, but to lasting change within someone's life. As a result of this encounter, Jacob is forever changed, and even receives a new name from God highlighting the transformation that God had done in his life. Where his old name meant "deceiver" and was an apt description of his former ways, Jacob receives a new name that will speak now to the grace of God in his life.

Like Jacob, we are flawed and sinful, in need of an encounter with God that will transform our identity and give us a new mission in life.

JACOB'S OLD NAME REFLECTED HIS FLAWED CHARACTER

As we will see, Jacob became the namesake for God's chosen people, Israel. Yet the account of Jacob reveals a deeply flawed man. He cheated his brother out of his blessing and lied multiple times to his father.

In the east, Jacob met his future wife Rachel at a well. He loved Rachel and wanted to marry her, so he served her father, Laban, for seven years to win her hand in marriage. But Laban deceived Jacob. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his oldest daughter, Leah, and Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The author of Genesis provides markers that indicate Jacob's sinful, wandering heart. Genesis often presents traveling east as a bad thing, as a signal that a person was moving away from God (i.e., exile). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished to the east, away from God's garden (3:24). After Cain murdered Abel, he went east (4:16). When Lot chose the land near Sodom and Gomorrah, he went east (13:11). After Jacob cheated his brother and deceived his father, he traveled toward Paddan-aram and came to the eastern country (29:1).

Despite Laban's deception, God kept His promises to Jacob. Remember, the promise was land, offspring, and blessing. God gave Jacob financial blessing (though Jacob had schemed to get it), and God blessed him with children. So Jacob had offspring, and he had blessing, but he did not have the land yet.

The Lord told Jacob to return home to the land promised to his fathers, so he journeyed toward Canaan as a rich man with a large family. In order for Jacob to receive the promises of God, however, a transformation needed to take place. Jacob was fearful that his brother, Esau, would seek revenge, so he sent gifts with an envoy ahead of him to soften the blow. As Jacob remained behind, he encountered an unusual man who would change his life forever.

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." (Gen. 32:24-27)

Later on in the text, it is revealed that this man is God Himself.

This wrestling match is instructive in at least two ways. First, the fact that God confronted Jacob hints at the reality of Jacob's flawed character and the truth that God will not allow sin to go unpunished. We see a similar event in the life of

TIMELINE

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through His encounter with God.

JOSEPH'S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Moses when he failed to obey God's command (see Ex. 4:24-26). God wanted to use Jacob, but He would have to change him first.

Second, the fact that the man dislocated Jacob's hip, in what seemed to be a desperate act to get away before sunrise, may point to the reason God held Jacob accountable and wanted to transform him. Before the blessing could be carried forward, this sinful man—Jacob—had to be broken. Perhaps that is why the man asked Jacob about his name, which meant "cheater." Jacob's life up to this point had been in line with his name.

- **What are some areas in your life where brokenness needs to occur?**
(p. 72, PSG)

JACOB'S NEW NAME REFLECTED THE GRACE GOD SHOWED HIM

It is one thing for a person to show grace to someone else. But the effects are multiplied when the God of the universe shows grace to a wretched person. Grace ensures we will never be the same. We see this truth in the life of the cunning deceiver Jacob. Despite Jacob's repeated lying and scheming, God poured out grace upon him, and we see its effect here in Genesis 32.

Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh. (Gen. 32:28-32)

Even though Jacob was injured in the wrestling match with the man, he grabbed him and would not let him go. Jacob had already told the man his name, which revealed the deceptive nature of his character. But here, in an act of amazing grace, the man who happened to be God Himself allowed Jacob to prevail, and then He renamed him.

Today, parents often choose names that are popular or have family significance. But in the ancient world, names indicated character. Names told you about a person's makeup. Therefore, being renamed indicated a change in character—a new start!

Jacob's new name would be "Israel" because he had struggled with God and prevailed (32:28). In a battle of great endurance through a painful injury, Jacob had struggled with God for a blessing and had not given up. Though He would not tell Jacob His name, God blessed him. Then Jacob named the place "Peniel" because he had seen God face to face and been saved (32:30).

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Naming the place Peniel indicated that Jacob actually wrestled with God, not a man. Of course, this truth raises all kinds of theological questions and concerns, such as “How could a man wrestle with God and not be killed instantly?” But the text is not concerned with these matters; rather, its purpose is to show us that Jacob was a transformed man because of his encounter with the gracious Lord. Jacob walked away with a limp, but he walked away a changed man. He did not return to the promised land the same scoundrel that left it years before.

JACOB’S NEW NAME REFLECTED THE TASK GOD GAVE HIM

Everyone wants God’s blessing. That’s why we pray and ask God for health or for provision or a thousand other things. Asking for blessing is not wrong, of course. It shows how dependent we are on God, and asking Him to bless us is one way of communicating what a good and gracious God He truly is. We ask Him to bless us because we know He delights in blessing His children.

The problem, though, is that many of us do not understand why God blesses His people. We want God to change our lives, but when He does we don’t understand why or for what purpose He has changed us.

In Scripture, we see that God’s purpose in blessing His people is not so they will hoard the blessing to themselves. God blesses His people so that they will be a blessing to others. God changes people so that they can be agents of change for others.

We see in Jacob’s life that God blessed and changed him so that Jacob—Israel—would be the means by which God brought change and blessing to the whole world. Watch how God reappeared to Jacob and again gave him his new name, which implied the continuing nature of God’s promised blessing to Abraham:

God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. (Gen. 35:9-15)

Notice the progression for Jacob: Blessing (v. 9), New Identity (v. 10), Responsibility (v. 11). In the same way, God blesses us with salvation and transformation so that we can then fulfill His calling on our lives.

TIMELINE

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD

God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

GOD’S GLORY IS REVEALED

God displays His glory among all the peoples.

JUDGE AND SAVIOR

Even in the midst of His judgment, God provides a means of salvation.

What led to the events in this passage? After Jacob returned to the land, he reconciled with Esau and blessed him. Later, God commanded Jacob to settle in Bethel and exhorted him to repent of his idolatry. So Jacob got rid of all his family's false gods. In these events, we see the gradual transformation in Jacob's life. Yes, the transformation was slow, but it was progressive. (The same is true with us!)

God would keep His promises to Jacob. Jacob was indeed fruitful and multiplied. He had 12 sons who would become the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. And God would keep His promise that through Jacob's offspring would come a King—a Messiah—who would bring salvation to the world.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Genesis 32 should encourage us because it reveals that no matter how messed up our lives may be, no matter how many bad decisions we have made, and no matter how much we have wrecked the relationships around us, if we encounter the living God, we can be given a new life. The New Testament teaches that we can encounter God through His Son, Jesus, and that in Christ we bear His name! Therefore, our identity will no longer be wrapped up in our sin, but rather, our identity will be that of beloved children of God.

Just as God had done with Jacob, his firstborn son would not carry the promises forward. The promises passed to Judah (see Gen. 49), and through Judah would come the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus would fulfill God's calling on Israel to be a light to the nations, and through His death and resurrection, He would bring salvation to the world.

God chose this man with all of his wretched past to be the agent through whom He would bring His saving blessing to the whole world. Because Jacob would have a son, and his son would have a son, and his son would have a son, and his son would have a son, until eventually a virgin peasant girl would have a Son named Jesus—the Savior of the world! Through Jesus, God can change your life forever and use you to bring blessing to the world around you. He will give you a new identity and a new purpose that fuels your life like never before.

God's renaming of individuals in the Old Testament reflects both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of mission.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

New Identity of the Believer

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, until the person becomes more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In what ways do our past mistakes haunt and define us?** *Answers will vary, but the basic idea behind it is the idea that we often feel, even though it isn't true, that past mistakes do define us. Like Jacob, see if students can identify with this mind-set.*
- **Why is it difficult for us and for others to forget past mistakes?** *Answers will vary.*
- **In what ways has your life or someone you know been changed by an act of grace from another?** *Answers will vary, but the point of this question is to emphasize that grace is able to transform one's life and the decisions that he or she makes.*
- **Have you ever wanted to be someone else or to have a fresh start or to receive a new reputation? What ways did you go about accomplishing that?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

What we think about ourselves and how we understand our identities plays a significant role into other parts of our lives. How we view ourselves significantly influences the type of person we think we are becoming.

- **How is God's "renaming" us similar to or different than trying to change our reputation?** *The biggest difference between the two lies in the fact that in and of ourselves, we are incapable of producing lasting transformation. God, however, is able to produce transformation, and He does so in one sense by pronouncing a fundamental change in name in the life of a believer, a change that carries over to other parts of that person's life.*
- **In one sense, Jacob's story teaches us that an encounter with God results in brokenness. How has this been true in your own life?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



HEART

Jacob's story encourages us that difficulty in life can have positive benefits at a later time. In fact, they may be exactly what God uses to stir our hearts toward Him, leaving behind a life of sin.

- **What difficult circumstances in your life has God used to lead you to repentance?** *Answers to this question will vary. The main point is to help students internalize this truth.*
- **Why were those struggles necessary to get you to the point of repentance?** *Answers to this question will vary.*



HANDS

Like Jacob, if we have received a new identity from God and have been led to repentance through difficult circumstances, we are called to display the same love and grace to others that we have received. We are no longer living for ourselves, but for the God who saved us and is calling us to be a blessing to others.

- **Describe a time you made a difference in someone else's life by an act of grace.** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some areas in which we ask for the blessing of God without giving thought to how God might want us to bless others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #10 can be used during group time. Item #10 contains a map that will help students to visually grasp the landscape and journeys of many of the characters they are learning about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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12

SESSION TWELVE

The God Who Uses Suffering

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we see how God used the suffering in Joseph's life to accomplish His plan to save many lives. We also get a preview of how God will work through Jesus' suffering in our place to save the world. The good news for those in Christ is that we can trust God to take the hardships in our life and use them to fulfill His plan.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 37:3-11,23-28; 39:6b-23

THE POINT

God is sovereign over our lives and can use suffering to accomplish His plans in and through us.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Twice I have received in the mail the same “miraculous” prayer rug. The rug depicted Jesus with His eyes closed. It claimed that if you stared at the picture long enough, then Jesus would open His eyes. When His eyes opened, then you were supposed to kneel in the middle of the rug and pray, and whatever you asked for, you would receive from God. With the rug came a letter with testimonies from people who had used it.

Most of us see this rug for the gimmicky nonsense it is. God is not some kind of genie who grants us whatever we want or think we need. And yet, many Christians believe if only they have enough faith and obey God, then God will help them achieve their dreams, make lots of money, find that perfect “someone” to spend the rest of their life with, and so on.

Believing that God is a grand “bargainer” who rewards people’s obedience with a suffering-free life is detrimental to our faith. People who see God this way blame Him and walk away from the faith when things don’t work out. They face disillusionment because of the suffering they never expected.

The Bible never guarantees that true faith in God will lead to an easy life. We live in a fallen world where suffering is inevitable. Sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. But we see in Scripture that those who trust in God are never alone in their suffering. God can even use pain to bring about His good purpose and plan.

- **What are some prayers you’ve made that God didn’t answer the way you had hoped?**
- **Looking back, how do you think God was working in that situation to accomplish His purpose?**

Option 2

Show a series of pictures depicting different types of suffering, such as a person standing by the bedside of someone sick, starving children, people arguing, a student intentionally being left out of the group, etc. Discuss the many different forms of suffering and things we might say to comfort people in these situations. Next, group students into teams and assign each team one of the scenarios listed below.

Encourage students to use Bible reference tools to look up verses they could use to encourage people in these situations.

- Your best friend just found out her parents are getting divorced.
- Your teacher at school is going through chemo.
- A student in your student ministry made some bad choices and now everyone shuns him.

Remind students that no matter what we are going through, God is sovereign. In today’s session, we will see how God is faithful to use suffering and injustice to accomplish His plans in and through us.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God is sovereign over our lives and can use suffering to accomplish His plans in and through us.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Joseph:** favorite son of Jacob and Rachel; sold into slavery by his jealous brothers
- **Joseph's brothers:** twelve brothers whose families would eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel.

PLOT

The unfolding drama of God's redemptive story continues as we take a peek into the life of a young man named Joseph. Throughout Joseph's life, we see how God uses suffering to accomplish His plan to save many lives. Not only that, but we also get a preview of how God will work through Jesus' suffering in our place to save the world. The good news for those in Christ is that we can trust God to take the hardships in our life and use them to fulfill His plan.

TIMELINE

JOSEPH'S HARDSHIPS

The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD

God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

GOD HAS A FUTURE PLAN

We've seen how God made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But God also warned Abraham about a future slavery in a foreign land before they would receive the promised land (Gen. 15:13). So, yes, God's plan was to bless the entire world through Abraham's offspring, but that future plan included pain and suffering.

That's where the story of Joseph (Jacob's son) comes in. Let's take a look at Genesis 37, where we see God reveal His plan for Joseph's future.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. (Gen. 37:3-4)

Jacob's favorite son was Joseph because he was born to Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, in Jacob's old age (Gen. 30:22-24). That's why Jacob made Joseph a robe of many colors, a sign of favoritism toward Joseph and something that caused Joseph's brothers to despise him.

Making matters worse, the story goes on to say (vv. 5-11) that Joseph had dreams about his brothers bowing down to him—not something you want to hear from your younger brother. The text never indicates whether or not Joseph was right or wrong in recounting these dreams to his family, but it's clear that the dreams were a picture of God's future plan.

The journey from Joseph's initial dreams to the fulfillment of God's plan would be long and difficult. But it's important to see how his dreams set the stage for the conclusion of Genesis. God's overarching plan, as we've seen, was to bless the entire world through Abraham's offspring. Joseph's dreams gave a glimpse of this plan coming to fruition at the end of Genesis because, through Joseph's exaltation above his brothers and father, God would not only rescue Israel, but He would also rescue the surrounding people groups.

Despite the suffering that would befall Joseph, God would use the terrible circumstances to exalt Joseph and save his family (along with many others). God gave the family a picture of this plan through Joseph's dreams. It's not surprising that Joseph's brothers did not like the plan, but as we will see, the dreams pointed to the way God would save them from famine and certain death.

We can learn from Joseph's brothers because no matter how much we may not like what God is doing, we can trust that God's plan for our future is better than any plan we can come up with for ourselves.

- **What are some dreams you have for your future? How might God's plans be better?** (p. 78, PSG)

GOD PREPARES JOSEPH FOR THAT PLAN

Have you ever noticed that not everyone is responsible enough to enjoy certain blessings in life? How many times have we watched athletes or singers get rich at a young age and be bankrupt within a decade? Most of the time, they weren't prepared to handle the fame and fortune.

In a much bigger way, God knows what it will take to prepare us for the wonderful future awaiting us. God knows what we need in order to conform us into the image of Christ so that we can be ready for the inheritance. That's why sometimes He does not instantly rescue us from hardship and suffering; rather, He lets us be trained by the hard times, the distress, and the want so we can be the type of people who enjoy the blessings He has prepared for us (see Rom. 8:28-39).

We see this truth in the life of Joseph. He suffered greatly at his brothers' hands, but God used this event in Joseph's life to prepare him for his future role.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. (Gen. 37:23-28)

Joseph's brothers were shepherding their dad's flock near Shechem, and Israel sent Joseph to check on them. When the brothers saw him coming in the distance, they devised a plan to harm him. At first, they intended to kill him and throw him into one of the pits (37:20), but Reuben tried to convince the brothers not to kill Joseph. Hoping to come back later to rescue Joseph, Reuben told his brothers to throw him in the pit alive (37:21-22).

When Joseph approached, the brothers stripped him of his robe and threw him in the pit as Reuben had suggested. As they ate, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on a journey to Egypt. Judah devised a new plan; he reasoned that killing Joseph would not be profitable, but selling him as a slave to the Ishmaelites would be. So they sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver, and the caravan took Joseph down to Egypt. When Reuben returned and found this out, he was distraught, and the brothers let their father believe that a wild animal had killed Joseph.

This horrific act of betrayal and injustice was part of the process God would use to accomplish His plan. God's plan was not merely to rescue Israel; rather, He intended to rescue the world, and Joseph's rejection and suffering were the means by which God would accomplish the plan.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Omniscient

Scripture teaches that God is all-knowing. He is the One who is "perfect in knowledge" (Job 37:16), and this knowledge extends to all things past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. His knowledge is complete, and as He is outside of time, He has known from all eternity whatever will come to pass. In response to God's omniscience, we admit our finite knowledge and trust His decisions as wise and good.

JOSEPH TRUSTS GOD EVEN WHEN GOD SEEMS ABSENT

Although Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery, God was with him. Joseph became a servant in the house of Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers and the captain of the guard. Because God was with Joseph and prospered everything that he did, Potiphar put Joseph in charge of his entire house, and the Lord blessed Potiphar's house greatly. This is one example of how God continued to keep His promise to Abraham that He would bless everyone who blessed Abraham (see Gen. 12:1-3). But just as things were looking up, they went from bad to worse.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her. But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story,

TIMELINE

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED

God displays His glory among all the peoples.

JUDGE AND SAVIOR

Even in the midst of His judgment, God provides a means of salvation.

THE RED SEA

God continues to provide for His people by parting the Red Sea.

saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.” As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, “This is the way your servant treated me,” his anger was kindled. And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed. (Gen. 39:6b-23)

Joseph did the right thing in rejecting the advances of his master’s wife. Even so, he was falsely accused, and despite his innocence, he was thrown into prison. Yet even there, the Lord was with him (v. 21). God had not abandoned him. God gave Joseph great grace so that even the prison warden put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners. And once again, the Lord prospered everything that Joseph did.

Too many Christians have the false idea that if God is with us, then nothing bad will happen. We think of verses like Romans 8:31—“If God is for us, who can be against us?”—as if they promise life without adversity. But we leave out the verses that say we may experience suffering, famine, nakedness, peril, and many other obstacles (8:35-39). Rightly understood, nothing can separate you from God and His love in Christ, not because He shields you from bad things but rather because in the midst of those circumstances, He walks with you. He brings you safely through to the other side.

We are tempted in the tough moments to question if God is with us, but the Bible assures us that He never leaves nor forsakes His people. Our hope is not in a God who keeps bad things from happening to us; our hope is in a God who is with us in life and death, a God who sees to it that nothing separates us from His love in Jesus Christ.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Joseph’s life points forward to Jesus. Jesus would be betrayed, handed over to captivity, stripped of His robe, and killed through an unjust sentence. But the rejection and humiliation of Jesus was God’s plan to save Israel and the world! Jesus looked abandoned by God, as if His cries to the Father went unanswered, but when that grave opened on Sunday morning, it was clear He was not alone. God vindicated His Son.

We get a glimpse of this plan in Joseph’s life. He suffered. It seemed as if he were abandoned, but God was with him and God was accomplishing His good plan. Joseph succeeded even in captivity, and his humiliation would eventually lead to God’s exaltation to bless Israel and all nations (see Gen. 12; Phil. 2).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why do we sometimes envy God's plan for someone else's life rather than accept the one He has laid out for us?** *Answers will vary, but may include things like: we covet what others have, whether in possessions, personality, or abilities; we fail to be content with who we are and what God is doing in our own lives; etc.*
- **When we try to live out God's plan for someone else, how does that usually turn out?** *Ultimately, trying to live out someone else's plan is unfulfilling in the long run given that 1) it isn't God's plan for us, and 2) we are living life behind a mask and under false pretenses.*
- **What are some ways you intentionally put a strain on your body in order to be better prepared for the future? How can the same truth apply to our character?** *Answers to the first may include some sort of physical/athletic conditioning that has benefits for how one plays a sport or maintains a healthier lifestyle. Allow students to think of similar ways this concept applies to the building of one's character.*
- **What are some challenges you have faced that prepared you to handle future challenges and blessings?** *Given the personal nature of this question, answers will vary. The goal is simply to help students internalize the questions above.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



Joseph's story challenges our thinking about our integrity and our actions. Joseph did what was right and fled from the sexual temptation of Potiphar's wife, yet was still sent to prison. Even though he suffered for doing the right thing, he maintained his integrity and would be used by God in the long run to save many nations.

- **What lessons can we learn from Joseph's victory over temptation?** *Answers to this question will vary, but one might include the fact that overcoming a temptation doesn't necessarily lead immediately to a happy and joyful life. Yes, there is joy in overcoming sin through the power of the Spirit; however, we still live in a broken world of sin until Christ returns.*
- **Why is it important to do the right thing, regardless of the outcome?** *Allow students time to answer, helping them to consider the importance of doing the right and godly thing because it is the right and godly thing, and not because of the outcome.*

HEART



Joseph's story encourages our hearts and reassures us that God is not only good and sovereign, but is working all things for the good of those who love Him.

- **Why do we assume God is there in the good times and gone in the bad?** *For some, the answer to this question is based solely on one's feelings—they don't "feel" God is near, so that must mean He is not. However, this thinking is clearly not true—one only needs to look at Jesus on the cross to demonstrate that. Others will answer this question based upon a works-based view of Christianity, thinking that if they do good then God will be present, but if they do bad, He will be absent.*
- **How does the knowledge that God is with you in hardship help you battle things like discouragement, depression, and isolation?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS



Joseph's story not only challenges our thinking and encourages our hearts, but it also informs us on how we should live and treat others around us.

- **What can your church do in showing people around you that God has not abandoned them?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **How can you personally encourage someone you know who feels alone this week?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #10 can be used during group time. Item #10 contains a map that will help students to visually grasp the landscape and journeys of many of the characters they are learning about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

13

SESSION THIRTEEN

God Is Faithful to His Covenant

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how the story of Joseph reveals three ways that God remains faithful to His covenant. He remains faithful by bringing fruit out of our affliction, by showing us a picture of forgiveness, and by overruling evil with good. With confidence in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, we are called to offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us, and trust Him no matter our circumstances.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 41:46-57; 45:1-15; 50:15-21

THE POINT

God is sovereign and will bring good out of evil circumstances.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

One of the most quoted movies has to be the 1987 film *The Princess Bride* (MGM)—quotes from the battle of the wits to the way the priest said “marriage”; but most of all, from the line of Inigo Montoya exacting revenge on the six-fingered man: “Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!” In the end, he got his revenge!

We all enjoy the get-even stories, don’t we? We read books like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and we sing songs like Taylor Swift’s “Mean.” We know what it’s like to be wronged, bullied, or betrayed in some way.

- **Recall a time when you felt “wronged” by someone. What was your response in that moment? Why?**

The reason these stories and songs resonate with us is because we have deep sense of justice, and when people do wrong, we want them to be held accountable. The problem comes when we want to be the ones who execute justice instead of leaving that role to God. Harboring bitterness or holding a grudge reveals a lack of faith in the justice of God. It reveals that we think we could do His job better than He can. It’s also a failure to trust that God can take the evil things done to us and use them as part of His bigger plan for good.

- **If you could go back and change your response in that moment, what would you do differently? Explain.**

Option 2

Read aloud the following quote by Frederick Buechner: “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Distribute paper to each student. Direct them to write the name of the person against whom they hold the most anger, resentment, and unforgiveness. Then lead them to write how they think they, as well as the unforgiven person, might be affected if they continue to harbor these feelings rather than offer forgiveness.

Admit that forgiving the person against whom you hold so much bitterness is difficult. Challenge students to spend a few moments praying for that person, as well as praying that God will help them forgive that person. Encourage them to continue to pray for that person and their attitude toward that person each day this week, and even longer if necessary, until they are able to forgive.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God is sovereign and will bring good out of evil circumstances.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Joseph:** son of Jacob whom God used in the midst of great suffering

PLOT

During our previous story we saw how Joseph suffered grave injustices. He was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, forced to work in Potiphar's house, then falsely accused of sexual advances against his master's wife and thrown in jail. Yet through every difficulty Joseph experienced, he remained a man of steadfast faith.

After hearing all of that, we might wonder if Joseph could ever bounce back from the horrible sufferings he has endured. Not only that, but we might also wonder what good could come of it? What was the purpose of it all, anyway? What is God telling us through the life of Joseph today, and what does the covenant have to do with any of this?

These are but a few of the questions we will address as we conclude our study on Joseph and the Book of Genesis. However, before we turn to our last story, spend a minute reflecting on the one big story in Genesis that is taking place in and through these smaller, individual stories.

TIMELINE

THE SALVATION OF MANY

God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD

God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED

God displays His glory among all the peoples.

GOOD COMES FROM JOSEPH'S SUFFERING

Let's briefly summarize Joseph's journey. He was falsely accused of attempted rape, and he spent years in jail. While in prison, Joseph—the dreamer—rightly interpreted a dream for Pharaoh's chief cupbearer. He asked the cupbearer to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh once Pharaoh showed him favor. But the cupbearer forgot Joseph when he was restored to his position. Once again, Joseph had been treated unfairly.

After two years, Pharaoh had a dream that alarmed him, and this caused the chief cupbearer to remember Joseph. Consequently, Joseph was brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dream. Relying on God's power, Joseph explained the dream's meaning: there would be seven years of agricultural abundance followed by seven years of famine. Joseph wisely mapped out a plan for Pharaoh that would prepare a reserve for the seven years of famine. As a result, Joseph was now promoted to rule over Egypt as a vice-regent to the Pharaoh.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

In Genesis 41:46-57, we see a glimpse into the type of life Joseph was now living compared to suffering he had undergone in previous chapters. In short, Joseph was 30 years old when he came to power in Egypt. He executed his plan to store up extra food in the cities during the seven years of abundance. In an echo of God's promise to bless Abraham's offspring, the text says that Joseph stored up grain "like the sand of the sea" (Gen. 41:49).

Not only was Joseph fruitful in his work, but he was fruitful in his family life. He married a woman named Asenath, and she gave birth to two sons. The first son was named "Manasseh" which basically meant, "made to forget." God had made Joseph forget the hardship he had endured at the hands of his family. The second son was named "Ephraim" which basically meant, "made fruitful." God made Joseph fruitful through his affliction. So, not only had God brought Joseph through his hardship, but God produced something in Joseph through his suffering that would not have otherwise been produced.

FORGIVENESS COMES THROUGH JOSEPH'S SUFFERING

We've seen that one way God was faithful to His covenant was by bringing fruit out of Joseph's affliction. It's here that the story takes a turn, and now we see in the life of Joseph an incredible picture of forgiveness, one that models the faithfulness of God to His people.

As we saw earlier, our culture thrives on movies and songs about revenge. But we follow a King who commands us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us and forgive those who have wronged us. King Jesus puts forth a counter-culture where we do not hold a grudge. He shows us a bigger and better plan where evil is used for good and forgiveness leads to salvation.

When Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt for food, they bowed down to him, which fulfilled his earlier dreams. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. Through a series of circumstances, Joseph hatched a plan to keep his brother Benjamin behind, but the brothers worried such an event would hasten their father Jacob's death. At this pivotal moment, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers.

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, "Make everyone go out from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. So Joseph said to his brothers, "Come near to me, please." And they came near. And he said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; do not tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.' And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him. (Gen. 45:1-15)

The reason Joseph could forgive his brothers is because he saw that it was really God who had sent him to Egypt, for this very purpose: to save them from famine. God was keeping His covenant promises to Abraham. He rescued and sustained Jacob's family through the suffering, humiliation, and exaltation of Joseph to power in Egypt.

Joseph kissed his brothers and showed them great mercy. He forgave his brothers because He trusted in the good plan of God—a plan that took what was meant for evil and turned it to good, to salvation! Joseph could have let bitterness take root in his heart, but instead he forgave his brothers because he trusted in God’s plan to save others.

JOSEPH AFFIRMS THAT GOD TURNS ALL THINGS FOR GOOD

You’ve probably heard the saying: “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” Just because someone mistreats you, it does not give you the right to mistreat them. Repaying evil with evil may be our sinful urge, but it is not the way God works. He is the God who forgives those who sin against Him and who does not repay evil with evil; instead, He overrules evil with good. We are called to follow God by displaying this kind of love to everyone, including our enemies and those who wronged us, because God uses this in His master plan.

As we pick back up with the story of Joseph, we see that Israel took his family down to Egypt to live there during the famine. At the time, they numbered around 70 people (see Gen. 46:27,34). But God blessed them in Egypt and made them rich, and they multiplied (see Gen. 47:27).

Remember, God had promised to bless the whole world through Abraham’s offspring. So before he died, Jacob restated these promises from God to his sons and foretold that the Messiah would come from Judah (see Gen. 49:8-10). When Jacob died, Joseph took his father’s body to the promised land for burial. When he returned to Egypt, his brothers were concerned that Joseph would get his revenge now that their father was dead.

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this command before he died, ‘Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.’ And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, “Behold, we are your servants.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:15-21)

TIMELINE

JUDGE AND SAVIOR

Even in the midst of His judgment, God provides a means of salvation.

THE RED SEA

God continues to provide for His people by parting the Red Sea.

THE WILDERNESS

Israel is to walk in faith and follow after God on their way to the promised land.

But Joseph exhorted them not to be afraid, and he indicated that he trusted in God's justice. He said he was not in God's place—what they intended for evil, God used for good to save many lives. So Joseph forgave them, comforted them, and took care of them and their families. He showed amazing grace to his brothers.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The Messiah will come from the line of Judah (Gen. 49:8-10), not the line of Joseph. We see a change in Judah's character throughout the Joseph story. Judah devised the plan to sell Joseph into slavery, but later on he was willing to substitute his life for Benjamin's (see Gen. 43:9; 44:33). The Lion from the Tribe of Judah—Jesus Christ—would substitute Himself on the cross for the sins of the world.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Joseph went on to live a long life. When he died, he was put in a borrowed tomb in Egypt, awaiting the return of God's people to the promised land. Genesis began with life in paradise, but it ended in death in a borrowed tomb outside the promised land. God made a covenant with Abraham, and the promises seem to be unfulfilled. But, the story was not over yet ...

Joseph's life was a preview of the coming Messiah who would forgive those who wronged Him. Joseph knew that God used his brothers' sinful actions to save many people. Jesus would be mistreated, betrayed for silver, handed over to captivity, and ultimately executed at the hands of evil men. While He was being crucified, He looked down at the ones killing and forgave them. On the cross, He secured saving forgiveness for the world, and then God highly exalted Him, so that the nations of the world would stream to Him, bow their knee and confess Him as Lord (see Phil. 2:5-11). Evil men killed the Messiah, but God used even their evil deeds to accomplish His goal of salvation.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Faithful

God's faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; 1 Pet. 4:19). God's faithfulness is demonstrated in His fulfillment of the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The apostle Paul linked the attribute of "faithful" to God's coming through on His word: "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it" (1 Thess. 5:24). We reflect God by keeping the promises we make to Him and to others.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some challenges in your life that have made you a better follower of Christ, son or daughter, student, and friend?** *As with Joseph and the affliction he endured, students are to consider in what ways difficulties and hardships have led to positive growth in their own lives.*
- **What are some challenges you've faced that you see others facing? In what ways can God bring fruit out of your past affliction by leading you to minister to others in similar circumstances?** *This question is designed to help students consider the various ways they might be able to minister to others due to some shared circumstance. Answers will vary among students.*
- **Why is it so difficult for us to forgive those who wrong us? What is it about forgiveness that is so painful?** *Answers to this question will vary. For some, a lack of forgiveness may be the result of pride working in their hearts; for others, it may stem from an unbiblical view of forgiveness, thinking that it is something earned rather than freely given and received. Help students understand their own hearts and why forgiveness may be difficult for them.*
- **How has the story of Joseph connected with you on a personal level?** *Even though the story of Joseph may be well known among students, they have probably learned several new things about it in light of the past two sessions. Allow them the opportunity to verbalize how it has connected and/or challenged them in any way.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of
Redemption
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story
meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD



The story of Joseph challenges the way we think about, and approach, various difficulties in life. As in the case of Joseph, belief in God's sovereignty and plan over his life led him to persevere through his difficulties, forgive his brothers, and recognize that God was doing something bigger than he could see from his limited view point.

- **How does the gospel help you put the bad things that happen in your life in the right perspective?** *The goal of this question is to help students view the difficulties in their lives through the lens of the gospel. Thus, instead of seeing suffering here and a bad situation there, they are able to see, through the gospel, God working all things for their good and joy.*
- **What are some verses we could cling to when struggling to believe that God is in control and is working all things for good?** *Answers to this question will vary. Allow students to share some of their favorite verses that encourage them in difficult times.*

HEART



Christ died on the cross in order to fully forgive all of our sins, and His forgiveness is the fuel to forgiving those who sin against us. Refusing to forgive is not just disobedience; it's unbelief. Holding a grudge against someone reveals that we believe the cross of Christ is enough to forgive the sins we commit against God, but it is not enough to forgive the sins committed against us.

- **How does holding a grudge contradict the gospel?** *Give students an opportunity to articulate this themselves, helping them to think through why these are contradictory.*
- **How can meditating on the gospel empower you to be patient with and forgive others?** *Answers will vary, but one important thought to keep in mind is the command to forgive others in the same manner that we have been forgiven. If we have been forgiven greatly, then we should forgive greatly.*

HANDS



Longing for justice and for things to be set right are not wrong, but our bitterness, desire for revenge, and lack of forgiveness reveal that we want to execute a task that belongs to God alone. The power to forgive our enemies is found in trusting the justice and mercy of God.

- **How can we show those with whom we disagree love and mercy as an expression of God's love for us?** *Answers to this question will vary. The goal is to help students think of personal and practical ways that the gospel transforms the way they interact with others.*
- **Since Jesus is the Savior who offers forgiveness to the world, how can we be part of the commission to take the message of forgiveness to all peoples?** *Help students to think of personal and practical ways that they, as individuals and as a group, can live on mission for the gospel.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #11 can be used during group time. Item #11 contains a chart that will help students to visually grasp all of the ways they have seen Jesus throughout the Book of Genesis.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

STUDY PLAN

YEAR 1

Fall 2015

God the Creator (Genesis 1-11)
God the Covenant-Maker
(Genesis 12-50)

Winter 2016

God the Redeemer
(Exodus)
God the Lawgiver
(Exodus, Leviticus,
Deuteronomy)

Spring 2016

God the Savior
(Numbers, Joshua)
God the Judge (Judges,
Ruth, 1 Samuel)

Summer 2016

God the King (1-2 Samuel)
God All Wise (1 Kings, Job,
Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

YEAR 2

Fall 2016

God the Revealer
(1-2 Kings, Isaiah)
God the Pursuer (Major
and Minor Prophets,
1-2 Chronicles)

Winter 2017

God the Sustainer
(Daniel, Ezra)
God the Provider (Esther,
Nehemiah, Malachi)

Spring 2017

God the Son (Gospels)
God Among Us (Gospels)

Summer 2017

Jesus the Storyteller
(Synoptic Gospels)
Jesus the Miracle-Worker
(Gospels)

YEAR 3

Fall 2017

Jesus the Savior (Gospels)
Jesus the Risen King
(Gospels, Acts)

Winter 2018

The Spirit Who
Empowers (Acts)
The God Who Sends (Acts)

Spring 2018

The God Who Directs His
People (Epistles)
The God Who Changes
Us (Epistles)

Summer 2018

God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)
The God Who Makes All
Things New (Epistles,
Revelation)