

How It All Began

Studies in Genesis

by

WILLIAM C. BROWNSON



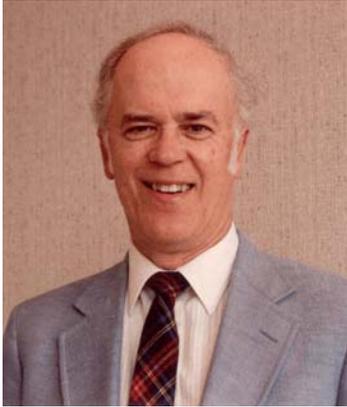
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About the author



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Dr. Brownson has served Reformed churches in Lodi, New Jersey, and Chicago, Illinois. In 1964 he was appointed Professor of Preaching at Western Theological Seminary, a position he occupied for ten years. From 1972 to 1994 he served as radio speaker for the Reformed Church international broadcast *Words of HOPE*. Dr. Brownson served as president of the Reformed Church in America in 1984-85.

In addition to a widespread speaking ministry in churches, on university campuses and at conferences, Dr. Brownson has written extensively for *the Church Herald* and other Christian periodicals. He is the author of 17 books.

His wife Helen has served as an educator and as Minister of Outreach at Christ Memorial Church in Holland, Michigan. The Brownsons reside in Holland. They are the parents of four sons, William and David deceased, James (Kathy) and Jonathan (Jeannette), and have six grandchildren, Rachel, Anna, Benjamin, Joanna, Will and Samuel.

He continues to be busy in retirement teaching at Western Seminary, holding retreats, conducting tours to Turkey and Greece and spending time with family.

Dedication

To my four sons,
Bill, Dave, Jim and Jon,
who have taught me much
about what it means to be a man.

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Preface

Someone has said that if we are to understand ourselves, “we need to know where we’ve been.” Surely that is a critical issue in our time. The question “What is man?” is urgently contemporary, and we want to think deeply and sanely about it. We need, as the saying goes, to “get back to the basics.”

Is there a deeper well from which to draw, a richer mine from which to dig, than the words of Genesis, the book of beginnings? Here we learn what we were, what we are, and what we’re meant to be. Perhaps one of the best ways to discover our humanity is in a new look at this old book. Welcome to the search!

William C. Brownson

Chapter One

How it All Began

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

Genesis 1:1-3, 31 RSV

Have you ever wondered how it all began? How it is that anything at all exists? I suppose everyone has wondered at some time or other. That's about the biggest question our minds can ever engage. And it's a sign of our uniqueness as human beings that we ask it. Stones don't inquire as to how it all began, or where they came from. We humans are curious about the origin of rocks on the moon, but the rocks themselves aren't. Trees, as far as we know, don't speculate about such things; dogs don't; not even computers raise that query about themselves. They can answer a bewildering variety of questions, but they don't ask them—at least not about their own ultimate beginnings. Only people do that, people like us. Because we think, because we inquire, because we wonder, for us those big questions keep coming back.

The Witness of Genesis

There is a book that claims to tell us how it all began. Its very name, *Genesis*, means in the Greek language, "beginning." The opening word of the Hebrew text is *bereshith*, or "in the beginning." This book undertakes to tell about the creation of the universe, about how everything that is came to be. It tells of the beginning of man and his career on this earth. It

tells of the origins of evil in human life and how a plan was set in motion to deal with that. It is supremely the book of beginnings.

Now the question for us is: Can this book be credited? Should we believe the book of Genesis? Someone may say, "I believe it because it's part of the Bible." Fine, but let's push that one step further back. Why do you believe the message of the Bible? Perhaps the answer comes, "Because it's God's Word." Yes, but on what basis do you believe that? I'm not trying now to be clever or difficult, but I am trying to get at the real foundation for our confidence in what Genesis reports.

Let me tell you why I believe the message of this ancient book. I believe it because I believe in Jesus Christ. Does that sound strange, or somehow turned around and backward? I don't think it is. With all believers I have accepted the testimony of the apostles and other early Christians that Jesus of Nazareth lived, died, rose again, and is now alive forever. I believe their witness and His that in Him, God Himself has come to save us. I have accepted Jesus as my redeemer and acknowledged Him as Lord of my whole life—including my mind. Now, by Him and His apostles, the books of the Old Testament are seen as inspired by God and therefore authoritative and trustworthy. So I believe the Old Testament, basically and primarily, on Jesus' endorsement. I believe the message of Genesis because He did. On occasion He quoted from it as the supreme authority in matters of faith and life. Listen to these words of Jesus when He was dealing with the question of divorce, for example:

From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. So they are no longer two but one (Mark 10:6-8).

He is pointing to the book of Genesis as the truth about how things began, here especially the institution of marriage. To Jesus, what Genesis says about beginnings represents divine authority. It tells it the way it really was.

What about Science?

"But," someone objects, "that book of Genesis was written a long time ago. Look at all that modern science has discovered since those days. Shouldn't we look at what science has to say about how things began?"

That sounds like a reasonable question. It's true that our knowledge about the universe has taken a quantum leap in the last two hundred years or so. The achievements of modern scientific inquiry are truly astounding. What we sometimes forget, though, is that science has its own proper sphere of investigation and works under certain limits. The scientist can

examine, observe, describe, and formulate hypotheses, but he always works with the universe as we now experience it. As for its origins, as to how and why it all began, a scientist has no more light than anyone else. Listen to these words from men of science who freely admit this.

Hear T .H. Huxley, for example, whom no one would ever have accused of being a Christian believer. Huxley says, “It appears to me that the scientific investigator is wholly incompetent to say anything at all about the first origin of the material universe.”

Or this from a former professor of biology at Yale, “Biologists are at the present time absolutely unable and probably will be for all time unable to obtain empirical evidence of any of the crucial questions relating to the origin of life on the earth.”

A Harvard professor sums it up in this remarkable acknowledgment, “Science can explain everything except the essential mysteries of life.” Sir Oliver Lodge agrees. “Ultimate origins,” he says, “are inscrutable. Let us admit as scientific men, that of real origin, even of the simplest thing, we know nothing, not even of a pebble.”

Now this doesn’t mean, of course, that science cannot tell us a great deal about the changes and developments that have gone on since this universe came into being. But when it comes to how and why it exists in the first place, science has no answers at all. So there is our situation. These are tremendous questions that stir the mind of every human being, but to which no one by his own efforts can find an answer. Either there is an answer given by God’s revelation, or we remain completely in the dark, left to our own guesses.

As the great scientist Louis Pasteur once put it: “Believe me, in the face of these great problems, these eternal subjects of man’s solitary meditation, there are only two attitudes of mind: one created by faith, the belief in a solution given by divine revelation, and the other that of tormenting the soul by the pursuit of impossible explanations.” Those are the alternatives, really: either a word from beyond, a word from God, or total ignorance and skepticism. And that, imagine it, about a question of profound significance!

Other Options

“But,” asks someone, “is Genesis the only option? Aren’t there other words that claim to come from beyond, other ancient records that profess to explain the origin of things?” As a matter of fact there are. Some of the early Greek philosophers wrote about these things, but their views seem to be of interest now only to the historically curious. No one takes them seriously any more. From ancient Babylon, however, comes an epic that does claim to explain the origin of things. But even a superficial reading demonstrates the vast gulf between this and Genesis 1. In the Babylonian account, there seems to be many gods, most

of whom are rather cowardly. We read of a hero god strengthened by magic spells, and of a firmament created from the body of a slain monster. Man is formed of clay and dragon's blood to feed the gods. These gods, through sexual union, produce the planets. Perhaps that's enough to give a sampling of what is in some of these other ancient records.

Now compare that with the majestic simplicity of the book of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Is it any wonder that Genesis is the only one of these ancient accounts of creation that people still take note of? That is a considerable wonder in itself, that so many modern scholars—even those who reject its message—still reckon with such an ancient document.

The Word of the Creator

Well, what basically is this message from the first chapter of Genesis and what difference does it make to you, to me? It's a word, first of all, about the Creator, the infinite, personal God who is before all things and who brought into being everything that is. He is the supreme reality. This immediately challenges a host of views that are widely held in the present age. It cuts across, for example, the notion that everything exists by chance. It challenges every form of polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. It stands against every form of pantheism, the view that God and the universe are identical. It speaks of a Lord who brought everything into being by His personal will. "He spoke, and it was done. He commanded, and it stood fast."

And so Genesis brings also a word about the nature of the universe. We learn that it is not eternal, that it had a definite beginning. It's distinct from the Creator and yet is His. He rules over and in it. Most striking, the creation exists under this pronouncement: "God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good." This is a good universe. However it may have been abused, distorted, and polluted, it came from God's hand as "very good" and ought to be seen in that light.

Best of all, the message of Genesis is a personal word from the Creator to us. Here He says, "I am your God, your Maker, your Lord." Now this had tremendous meaning for the Israelites, because God had made Himself known to them as the God of promise and covenant, a God who visits and redeems. He had led them out of bondage in Egypt, through a perilous wilderness and finally into a promised land. This God, their Savior, helper, healer, and guide, was to be worshiped as the Lord of heaven and earth. Israel's covenant God is also the Creator.

For us today, the meaning of that affirmation is greatly deepened and extended. We believe that the God of Israel has come to us in Jesus Christ, has opened His heart to us and

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loved us with an utterly self-giving love. He, the God revealed in Christ, is the One who made the heavens and the earth. He speaks to us in Genesis, assuring us that He made us and that we belong to Him. Now we see the universe around us through different eyes. We live out our days not in a vast, uncaring void, but in our Father's house.

How then did it all begin? According to the Book of Genesis, it all began in the Father's heart. It came about through His creative Word, by the brooding and quickening of His mighty Spirit. What a difference it makes to know that! The God who loves us, who gave His Son to die for us, who raised Him again to bring us new life, the God who is with us all the days by His Spirit—this is the Creator with whom everything began. The world, friends, is His. It came good and beautiful from His hand. It belongs to Him. He rules over it and its final destiny belongs to Him. We can live in it with joy and with radiant hope. This great Creator is our God, our Savior forever. In His self-disclosure are answered the deepest questions of our minds and the most ardent longings of our hearts.

I invite you to put your faith today in Jesus Christ who is God's living Word, His supreme self-revealing, His living image. And, believing in Him who is the truth, let the revelation that centers in Him answer for you the big questions of life. Let your heart thrill to the stately music of Genesis 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And whatever taunts and skepticism you may encounter, never be ashamed of these bedrock biblical convictions. Remember, they are the only alternatives to ultimate confusion and despair. Don't be apologetic about the only faith that makes sense out of what is, and gives true meaning to our shared human life. Oh, this day, go out and rejoice in the confidence that this is your Father's world!

Study Questions

1. How can we know whether or not the Genesis account of ultimate origins is true?
2. Why is science unable to tell us how the universe began?
3. What are the other possible options besides faith in a divine creation of the universe?
4. What difference does it make for our daily living whether or not the record in Genesis 1 is true?

Chapter Two

What it Means to Be Human

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 air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon 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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Genesis 1:26-28 RSV

What is man? What does it mean to be human? Those are large questions, and deeply significant ones, too. The answers we give to them influence our lives profoundly and determine in large measure how we relate to other people. The question "What is man?" can be answered, of course, in various ways. The chemist may tell us that man is a mixture of carbon, oxygen, iron, and various other metals. The zoologist may call man a "warm-blooded mammal" or a "featherless biped." A modern best-seller calls him *The Naked Ape*. Each of those definitions has truth in it, but none tells the whole story, does it? There are pessimists who say that the human race is only a temporary eczema on the skin of our planet. To them, all of human life is simply a "stir in the slime," so much "fuss in the mud." And then there are others who say that man is made in the very image and likeness of God.

That is the view of the Bible, that God created man in His own image. Or to bring it closer to home, the word is that God created you and me in His image. Think with me today about what is meant by that great affirmation from the book of Genesis.

One of the Creatures

Let's look at it in two parts. The first is: God *created* you. That is something you have in common with everything else in the universe. You are a creature. The billions of stars are like you in that respect and so is the earth. Every grain of sand, every drop of water, every puff of oxygen shares that role with you. In this you are one with roses and potatoes, with the apples and the redwoods. The amoeba, the fly, the trout, the rhinoceros are all your fellow creatures. God alone is the Creator. Everything else that shares the status of creature.

Now all that makes clear right at the outset that we don't exist by chance. How strange that anyone should really believe that we do! How remarkable that people should take seriously the notion that this universe, with all its wonder, order, mystery, and complexity just happened accidentally! Perhaps you've heard of the Monte Carlo series of experiments conducted at M.I.T. What would be the probabilities, the scientists asked, of time plus chance producing the amount of complexity that now exists in the universe? They allowed for a time span of eight billion years. Do you know the answer that the computers fed back? Absolute zero. That's how probable it is that everything around us could have developed by chance. No way! Everything *is* because it was created by God.

So, together with all other creatures, we are here by design and not by chance. Also, we are dependent with all plants and animals on the same life support systems. We all need the same water, air, and sunlight. We are all links in the same food chain, depending either directly or indirectly on the same vegetation. And, as might be expected, our bodily functions are in many respects similar. We are part of the natural order, the created life of this planet.

In Some Ways Unique

But that isn't all. Though in many ways one with nature, we are in other respects distinct. There is something special about the way in which we have been made. Notice how this comes out in the Genesis account. The early acts of creation are introduced with words like these: "Let the earth bring forth" or "Let the waters bring forth." But at the last, the wording changes to, "Let us make man in our own image." It is God who personally breathes life into us. This "plural of majesty," as scholars call it— "Let us make man"—heralds a momentous step which is both climax and conclusion to God's creative work. And though man is part of the creation, he is given dominion over the rest of it. In

other words, in some ways a human being is like the rest of the created order; in other ways he stands apart and is like God. He is unique among the creatures.

Just what is meant by that? How is human life unique? There are some features that spring to mind immediately. We can think, we can reason, we can probe the mysteries of the universe with equations such as $E = MC^2$. No animal can begin to do that. We have a conscience also, a feeling of “oughtness,” an awesome sense of responsibility for what we do. Apparently nothing else in creation shares that with us. We can relate to another person as a “thou” instead of an “it” or an object. That’s a part of the mystery of man, of human life, that we can know what it is to love and give of ourselves.

But we don’t need the Bible to tell us that these things are true about human beings: a reasoning mind, a sense of moral responsibility, a capacity to enter into relationships. The word that we do need to hear (and that we do not know apart from God’s speaking to us) is that we are made in His image. We were made like Him, for a special kind of relationship to God. Every creature is made by God’s Word. That is, God says, “Let it be,” and it is done. But man uniquely is made *for* God’s word. He is made as a person to whom God speaks, with whom God enters into relationship. We are made to hear God’s word and respond to it. When God says, “I am your maker,” a man or woman may echo, “Yes, Lord, You have made me.” When God pronounces, “You are mine,” we can answer, “Yes, Lord, I belong to You.” We are the only creatures in the world who can pray, who can live in fellowship with God and respond to Him with the love of grateful hearts. That is our unique glory. We are made for God, with minds to know Him, hearts to love Him, and wills to choose His way. Yet we are not compelled toward Him. We may say yes or no to God in a way that no other creature can.

According to the Bible, that is the twofold mystery of human life. We are created and thus share much with the rest of the created order, but we are unique because we are made in God’s image for a special relationship with Him.

Getting the Whole Picture

Now it is the failure to grasp both of these truths about ourselves that lies at the root of many of our contemporary problems. For example, it is our refusal to recognize that we are really a part of the created order that has given us such difficulties in the whole area of ecology. You see, we have remembered the word that we are to have dominion over everything, but we have forgotten that we ourselves share in the life of the creation. We have often exploited God’s handiwork in a foolish, self-centered way and have excused it because we are “making money” or “saving time.”

Think about strip-mining, for example. In some parts of our country, this practice has left acres and acres of land on which nothing can grow, while at the same time it has disfigured beautiful fields and hillsides. If the top soil had been pushed back before the mining was done and if later it had been spread again over the area that had been mined, as has happened in some cases, within a few years the beauty and usefulness of the terrain could have been restored. But, because that took too much time and too much money, it often wasn't done.

And it would be too expensive and time-consuming, I suppose, to provide the technology that would keep us from polluting our water supplies; so we keep on destroying their beauty and freshness. And because pesticides are the quickest way to wipe out forms of organic life that cut down farm production, we keep pouring them on our fields and crops, even if it means upsetting the balance of nature in ways that we do not fully understand. We sometimes exercise our dominion over nature without the sense that we ourselves are a part of it. In other words, there is something about us that refuses to recognize that we are creatures and that our welfare is bound up with the welfare of the whole created order of which we are a part. That's one of our problems.

But many times also we have forgotten the other dimension of our lives—that we are made in God's image and therefore are unique. Think of books like *The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris. Here is an attempt to demonstrate that a great deal about human life is explainable because we are members of the animal kingdom. In fact, the underlying assumption seems to be that everything about humankind can be accounted for on that basis. B.F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* argues that we are simply conditioned beings whose behavior can be totally explained as a result of the environmental pressures that have molded us and made us what we are.

Now the point is not to call into question the specific findings of these scientists, but rather to recognize that they present a one-sided view of human life, failing to recognize its deeper dimension. And that has tragic consequences. When people believe that they are chemically determined, impelled willy-nilly by certain processes within them or pressures around them, they cease to feel responsible for what they do. A sense of human dignity begins to wither away.

And when we forget that every human life is precious, made in God's image, we all too easily begin to exploit people just as we exploit the rest of the created order. We begin to look on them simply as objects to be moved around and used. We evaluate them on the basis of their intelligence or wealth or attractiveness to us, rather than on their essential dignity as persons made in God's image. Human existence begins to come apart, to fray at the edges, and we begin to live on lower and lower levels because we have forgotten who we really are.

Here is the tragedy of human life. We renounce and deny on the one hand our creatureliness, and on the other hand our bearing of God's image, our relationship to Him.

But God hasn't forgotten about us. He hasn't written us off. He hasn't rejected us totally but has come down to us in Jesus Christ to do something about our plight. Christ, who is fully God, is also completely human. He lived in this world as one at home with everything around Him and at home with God.

When Pontius Pilate led Jesus out to a jeering crowd and said scornfully, "Behold the man," he spoke more wisdom than he knew. There in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, was God's idea of what a human being should be. And the good news is that by the power of this same Jesus we can be forgiven and transformed. We can learn again what it is to be creatures, instead of pretending to be gods. And we can learn by His renewing grace what it is to be God's children, to walk with Him, and to see every other human being as made in His image and precious in His sight. Jesus Christ is the One who united those things, and who enables us to put it all together.

Maybe it is time to look again at men in Christian history like St. Francis of Assisi. He is often thought of as rather quaint because of the way he preached to the birds and felt at one with the trees and with what he called Brother Sun. But he had grasped what it is to be a creature, and to have a sense of kinship with every other created thing. But also in the heart of St. Francis was a devotion to the Creator, a realization through Jesus Christ that he was God's beloved child. That kept the deeper dimension of his life rich and open and free. And that combination, friends, is what it means to be human. Ponder this. You, together with everything else in the universe, are God's creation. But He has made you in His image, gloriously unique. In Christ He shows you what you are meant to be, and offers you freely the power to live as a true human being. Trust Him for that today!

Study Questions

1. Suggest ways in which our answer to the question "What is man?" will affect the way we live.
2. In what ways are human beings like other creatures? In what ways are they distinct?
3. What does it mean that we are created "in God's image"?
4. How can we tell what human beings are meant to be like—what is a truly *human* life?

Chapter Three

Death in a Garden

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which 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 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, and he ate.

Genesis 3:1-6 RSV

Death in a garden. That’s what we read about in Genesis, chapter 3. What a strange combination of words! Death we customarily think of as dark, ugly, and forbidding. But gardens, we know, are bright, lovely, and inviting. It seems odd, bizarre that the two should be found together.

We meet that same strangeness when we look at all of human life. There is much about it that is radiant and winsome, almost godlike. Viewing some scenes in history, you could write hymns to man’s splendor and speak with glowing optimism about his future. But there are ugly things too—bestly, sinister, tragic. We have learned again in this century that ordinary, average people under extreme pressures are capable of the most frightening kinds of evil.

Now it strikes me that many views of the human situation see only one side of this strange mixture. I think of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our great nineteenth-century American thinkers. He spoke for many when he said, “Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string.” He saw man’s nobility, his near-infinite possibilities. And many others were convinced at the beginning of this century that man was moving onward and upward,

letting “ape and tiger die.” Then came the World Wars and the gas chambers, the brain washings and the assassins’ bullets. We’ve learned that everything isn’t roses. There is death in the garden.

On the other side, there are extremes of pessimism. For many there seems to be nothing but darkness and death. They see man’s pettiness, lovelessness, and nothing more. The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes once described human life without the absolute control of the state as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Eloquent men in this century like Kafka, Camus, and Sartre see no possibilities left for mankind. Painters like Francis Bacon splash despair on every canvas. For them there is no garden left—only the place of the dead.

But there is a way of viewing human life that does justice to both of these dimensions—to its beauty and ugliness, its glory and shame. In these ancient words from Genesis 3 we read about death and a garden, together with the profound mystery that underlies both.

Someone says, “Oh, that Genesis 3 stuff—hasn’t that all been discredited by modern science? No one takes it seriously any more do they—all that about Adam and Eve, the serpent, and the forbidden fruit?”

Let’s take a fresh look at that. Consider three points of view about what is recorded in Genesis 3. *First*, you could say that the author of this chapter thought that things happened in this way but they actually did not. This represents the patronizing attitude that many moderns take toward ancient writings. They assume that these authors from the distant past were rather simple-minded folk and that we moderns are the sole possessors of true wisdom. It’s a familiar fault among readers of the Bible. But if we come to this book with an air of knowing superiority, we will never grasp its message. To dismiss Genesis 3 with the judgment that the writer was simply mistaken is to miss completely his profound meaning and the astonishing relevance today of what he wrote.

A *second* point of view is that the author knew that these things didn’t happen, but wanted to teach a moral lesson by them. On this view, what is recorded in Genesis 3 is symbolic of what happens in everyone’s life. Now there is something of truth in that view. But it hardly fits with the New Testament understanding of this passage and it gives us no help in understanding why everyman’s experience should be this way.

A *third* view of the account is that the author was given remarkable insight in describing here things that really happened. That doesn’t rule out symbolism. It doesn’t mean that everything in the narrative is to be understood in a precisely literal sense. But it does mean that something like this, something of unspeakably far-reaching significance, actually took place at the dawning of human life in this world.

Rebellion

Well, what is described here? What is the central meaning of this strange word about death in a garden? I see it as an all-important message to us about rebellion, estrangement, and hope. Genesis 3 makes it inescapably plain that the human problem is rooted in rebellion against the Creator. You know the scene. God creates as the crown of His handiwork a human pair. He places them in a pleasant environment. They are secure and sheltered, yet given room for initiative. There are discoveries to be made, tasks to be fulfilled, opportunities to satisfy everything within them. They, the man and the woman, are made for each other and for their Maker, made to find in relationship to Him and to each other their full humanness. They are given a word to live by, to order their lives around, so that by responding to God's yes with yes and to His no with no they may learn the language of loyalty and love.

Now Genesis 3 talks about rebellion against *that* God, a betrayal of *that* relationship. I wish we all saw the meaning of sin more clearly from that perspective: not so much the breaking of impersonal rules or the violating of social norms, but as rebellion against the God who gives us all we have. That act of eating the forbidden fruit, which is so often caricatured and ridiculed—what is the meaning of that but an outright rejection of God's rule? Adam and Eve first question His word, then deny and disobey. They begin by suspecting God's motives and go on to distrust His love and reject His fellowship. What God forbids seems to them supremely desirable. They proceed to renounce the Creator for the creature, the Giver for the gift.

And we do it still. Read the record in Romans 1 about how we “suppress” or “hold down” the truth about God that shines forth in the creation all around us. Why? Because we want to run our own lives, be our own gods. It's more convenient not to acknowledge His lordship. We expect our happiness and our fulfillment to come from what is created rather than from the One who freely gives us everything. And so we go our own way, throwing off the rule of the God who made us for Himself. That's how contemporary this quaint, familiar story is.

Estrangement

It is also about separation or estrangement. What happens to people when they disobey God's Word, when they declare themselves independent of Him? The message of Genesis 3 is that sin causes separation. You see that estrangement first between the man and the

woman. When confronted with their disobedience, he blames her: “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” And the woman promptly shifts the blame somewhere else: “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.” The woman, made to be a true help to the man, puts a stumbling block before him. And the man, made to be the cherisher and protector of his wife, becomes her accuser.

What could be more contemporary than that? There is something in every broken marriage, in every relationship gone sour, every cooling of love, which is rooted in our turning from God. Sin brings distance and discord between people. It sets man against wife and brother against brother. Sad, isn't it, that we seem so prone to hurt instead of to help and heal!

But the separation between us as human beings expresses an ever deeper rift. Our rebellion has cut us off from God Himself. The man and the woman were made for communion with God, made to enjoy His presence, but now they hide from Him. Shame and guilty fear lead them to flee from His presence. And how many people are hiding today, scrambling to escape the sight of heaven, trying to drown out God's voice and banish all thought of Him from their minds.

What this rebellion means from God's side is vividly described in the closing words of the chapter:

The LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden. . . . He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Those who had renounced God's rule and revolted against Him could no longer live in His presence. Choosing to be without God, they are given their choice. The gift of His fellowship is gone; the gate into His presence has banged shut. The flaming sword turns every way to block the path to the Tree of Life. We, all of us, have made a way for ourselves out of His presence, but we can never make a way back. We are strangers, wanderers, exiles from our true home. That's a gloomy message, isn't it? Sin and separation. Rebellion and banishment. And the signs of it are all around us.

Hope

But Genesis 3 holds out also a message of hope. To rebellious creatures, running and hiding from God, He comes. “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?” That is a call of grace if there ever was one. They are estranged from Him, but God doesn’t want it that way. He wants them back. He comes looking for them. And even when banished from His presence, they are not forgotten.

The rest of the Bible is the story of God’s unwearied search for His estranged children, His wandering sheep. He chooses, remember, a special people for Himself and lets them know that even though their sin has separated them from Him, He is still willing to dwell among them to be their God. He sends His prophets to call them to repentance and promise them a Savior. Then, in the fullness of the time He comes, in the person of His Son, Jesus of Nazareth. For all their evils, He brings free forgiveness. Instead of separation, a restored friendship. Instead of a flaming sword, now an open door. The powers of evil are bruised and the gate of heaven swings open wide.

But not without pain and sorrow. Before the tragedy of rebellion and separation could be overcome, there had to be another garden—the place we call Gethsemane, and another death—the sacrifice of God’s own Son. Then came the smashing of a sealed tomb on Easter morning. Now the Lord of glory, the Good Shepherd, risen from the dead, is out after His wandering sheep, ready to bring His banished ones back home. That is the good news of the seeking God.

What about you? Have you responded to that good news? If you are willing to admit today that you share in the great rebellion and that you are on the wrong side of the great divide, then there is hope for you. That flaming sword that turned every way to guard the Tree of Life has been buried in the Savior’s side. He has borne your judgment on His cross. There is a way back. He is still asking, “Where are you?” He is still calling, “Come home.” Why not acknowledge now your disobedience, your rebellion, and lay down your arms? Come out of your hiding, home from your wandering. Put your trust in Jesus Christ, Son of this gracious God, Savior of the world. He is our hope, the promise of our yet becoming what we are meant to be. Thank God for that! The last word about us is not death in a garden. No, it is life—in Jesus Christ.

Study Questions

1. Is a Christian optimistic or pessimistic about human nature? Explain your answer.
2. What is the most important question to ask about what is described in Genesis 3?
3. What do we learn from this passage about the essential nature of sin? How does this differ from the popular understanding of the word?
4. What hints of promise and hope do you find in this passage?

Chapter Four

The Broken Link

Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." 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?"

Genesis 4:8-9 RSV

Let me tell you about two brothers, Tom and Dick Stanton. They were twins, yet very different from one another. Tom became a banker, his brother Dick a businessman. Both took up residence in their home town, and both were members of the same church. Dick had a vital personal faith and was obviously committed to living out his Christianity in day-to-day experience. Tom, on the other hand, seemed to be religious only in a formal, superficial way. He sometimes went through the motions of church attendance, but his deepest interests lay elsewhere. Tom seemed annoyed with his brother, envious of him, uncomfortable around him. He seemed to resent deeply Dick's forthright Christian commitment. Tom's father saw this attitude developing and remonstrated with his son. For a time the situation seemed to get better.

Some time later, Tom invited Dick to go in with him on a business venture. Dick accepted with enthusiasm, but after a while Tom spread rumors about his brother Dick that blackened his reputation. When a cloud of suspicion had been created, Tom took advantage of that to cheat Dick out of his entire interest in the new enterprise. Dick was forced into bankruptcy and held up to ridicule.

When the father of the two confronted Tom, he first insisted that he had done nothing wrong. Then, when pressed with the evidence, he said, "Business is business, Dad. Do you expect me to look after Dick? In this world, it's every man for himself."

Now things like that happen in the late twentieth century. They could happen in your neighborhood among people you know. That's how contemporary is this biblical word about Cain and his brother Abel. Sometimes we don't really hear what God is saying to us in these

ancient Scriptures because the events they describe are so remote from us in time, space and culture. But this record in the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis is a word for every age, a somber story, unsearchably profound.

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings 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 countenance fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." 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 don't know; am I my brother's keeper?"

Anti-God, Anti-man

What an account about the first two sons of our first parents! It's a tale of envy and resentment, treachery and violence. It's about a man who refused to be his brother's keeper and instead became his killer.

What does it say to people like us, many millennia later in another part of the world? Let's think about that. What can we learn from Cain and Abel? One thing is clear at the start. The sin that separates us from God will set us against one another too. In the first generation, disobedience to God; in the second, hostility against man. When the link of loyalty to God is broken, so are the ties of human love.

Many people don't like to believe that. We would like to think that religion is a private matter with little effect upon public life. But the deep message of this chapter is that a break with God tears the fabric of human society as well.

Cain and Abel both bring offerings to the Lord. Abel's gift pleases God. Cain's does not. We aren't told exactly why. Some say it was because Abel brought a blood sacrifice whereas Cain brought only the fruit of his own labors. But there was surely more to it than that. Abel's offering spelled faith and commitment. Cain's meant nothing because his heart

apparently was not in it. Jealousy and bitterness soon followed and led to a brutal slaying. There in stark vividness is revealed what happens in human life when we turn away from God.

Now that's not to say that every person who disobeys God becomes a murderer as a result. But it is a grim clue as to why we are so prone to hate and envy, deceive and destroy. The apostle Paul tells us in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans how all of us tend to suppress the knowledge we have of God. The result is that we are inclined to worship creatures instead of the Creator and to gravitate toward selfishness and malice instead of love. Even as I write this, a murderous feuding goes on in Sri Lanka where hundreds of lives have already been lost. In Beirut and Belfast, the bombings go on and on. Men still murder their brothers and then talk about them with brazen contempt. Whatever we may profess about how religious we are, our real estrangement from God appears glaringly in the way we abuse our human brothers and sisters.

The Bondage We Bring on Ourselves

Notice this also. Sin, once indulged, gains increasing power over a person's life. We would like to think that we are still the same persons after we have disobeyed God and refused to care for people, but we are not. Listen to the word of God to Cain:

If you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.

Evil appears here as a kind of semi-personal power, a predator lying in wait for us. When we disobey God, when we cherish hate in our hearts, we become acutely vulnerable. Sin leaps upon us then, gains control over us. The evils we were meant to subdue come to rule over us.

Cain wouldn't listen to the word of warning. He held on to his jealousy and let it harden into hate. He plotted against his unsuspecting brother, lured him to a lonely place, and there killed him with his own hands. Cain, the first son whom God gave to Adam and Eve, the man made in God's image, had been so mastered by evil that he did the unthinkable. He murdered his own brother.

Many centuries later, Jesus of Nazareth diagnosed the human problem in this way: "Whoever commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). In other words, the more you give in to it, the more it dominates you. Can we doubt that that is true? Watch what happens in drug addiction, for example, in sexual promiscuity, in financial dishonesty. One step seems to lead inexorably to another. People become less and less free until they end by doing things

more shameful and destructive than they would ever have imagined possible. Temptation may come to call on us with a charming, winsome appeal, but behind it is a dreadful power crouching at the door. When we welcome any kind of evil into our lives, we always get much more than we bargained for.

No Hiding Place

One more lesson here is crystal clear. Sin once committed cannot be hidden. It cries out to heaven for judgment. We would like to think that we can cover up the seamy side of our past. We would like to think that our sins will never meet us again. We wish we could dismiss all thoughts of coming judgment. Cain did. When the Lord said to him, “Where is Abel your brother?” he tried to cover everything with a lie: “I don’t know,” and then a word of brazen defiance: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” He acted as though God didn’t know and couldn’t find out. We sense in him no shame, no fear, not a shred of penitence. He thinks he’s going to get away with it.

In this present age, our administration of justice is so imperfect that many guilty ones do get off and the blameless sometimes suffer terribly. It’s possible to fool people, to bribe and intimidate judges, to escape human punishment for our crimes.

But with God, all attempts at deception are simply ludicrous. Nothing can possibly be hidden from His gaze. The darkness and light are both alike to Him. Here is His response to Cain, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” No drop of another’s blood has ever been shed by any of us without its crying out to heaven for judgment. Jesus assures us that there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed, nothing secret that shall not be known. God will bring to light one day even the secret purposes of every human heart.

Hints of Hope

What a gloomy word, you say, this message of Cain and Abel. Indeed. But it bears within it also some gleams of hope. There is a way, we learn, to worship God acceptably and so to be at peace. Abel did. God looked with favor on him and his sacrifice, and his name is in the roll call of the faithful. Also, though sin is a cruel master, an oppressive tyrant, there is a power that can free us from its grip. The same Lord who tells us, “Whoever commits sin is a slave to sin,” promises this also:

“If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. . . . If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:31-32, 36).

The risen Jesus can tame the wild beasts and set the captives free. Strong is the one who binds us, but a stronger than he has come.

And finally, friends, there is a mercy that forgives us. We can never blot out our own sins, never hope to hide them. As Lady MacBeth lamented after the murder of her husband, “All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten this little hand.” But even though every evil we have ever thought, said, and done is known to God, all can be forgiven. This is the gospel: in Jesus Christ His Son, God takes the judgment for all our sins upon Himself. He dies for us, bearing the stroke that we deserve, to make it possible for us to know pardon and peace. The blood of Abel may cry out to heaven for judgment, but the blood of Jesus pleads more powerfully for mercy. And mercy shall surely be ours if we confess our sins and put our trust in Jesus the Savior.

I deeply hope that you won’t read this word today as a message meant for someone else. I hope you will realize, I hope I will, that there is something of Cain, something of Tom Stanton in all our hearts. I hope that we will know that we are all—down deep—wanderers from God who are prone to envy and to hate. For when we know that, friends, we will call upon the Savior and be reconciled to God through Him. We will experience the wonder of His forgiving love and find in the gift of His Spirit the power to love our brothers and sisters. Remember, if the broken link between ourselves and God can be forged again in Jesus Christ, then there can be peace among us. Yes, and hope for our world.

Study Questions

1. Why are love for God and love for people so closely intertwined?
2. Explain how evil can gain increasing power over a person’s life.
3. What is your reaction to the biblical doctrine of judgment? Is it “fair”? Explain your answer.
4. What attitudes are revealed in Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Chapter Five

The Good Life

When Enoch had lived sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

Genesis 5:21-24 RSV

A man named Enoch, the Bible tells us, “walked with God.” That says it, simply and beautifully. There is the good life, in a nutshell: walking with God. Do you know what that means? Better yet, have you experienced something of what it is? Have you found this good life?

The fifth chapter of Genesis, in which these words are found, is a strange passage of Scripture. It tells the life stories of various ancient, long-lived characters and tells it with what seems at first like dreary monotony. “So-and-so lived for so many years and became the father of the next one in line. Then he lived so many more years and had other sons and daughters (whose names aren’t given). Thus all his days were so many years and he died.” That’s the way it goes. He lived; he had children; he died. No doubt he had his sorrows and joys, hopes and fears, sins and successes. His life must have been full, as every life is, of homely, human touches.

But we learn nothing of all that until we get to this man named Enoch. His story starts out in the same way: “When Enoch had lived sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah.” But then come these remarkable words:

Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

Suddenly, here is something new. Not just the cycle of a man's birth, fatherhood, and death, but a word about the life he lived. In Enoch's case, living meant walking with God.

To picture behavior in terms of "walking" is a common practice in the Bible. Think how appropriate that is for describing the course of your life. It implies effort and activity: you're not riding or coasting. It involves change: you move through varied scenes along the way. Walking also has a rhythm of regularity about it. Perhaps most vividly of all, walking portrays progress, movement toward a goal. Every life is a walk, long or short, going somewhere, in someone's company.

I don't think this idea had ever occurred to me until I met it in the literature of the Christian faith. At first, it puzzled me. I happened to be reading once the biography of Robert Murray McCheyne, a zealous young Scottish minister of the nineteenth century. I remember this quotation from the opening chapter: "The most remarkable thing about McCheyne was the holy consistency of his daily walk." I remember thinking to myself, "What's so remarkable about that? So he takes a walk every day. I suppose many people do that." Only later did it dawn on me that the author was using the word "walk" to describe a man's life style, his total way of living. That's the biblical idea. Your walk is your life, viewed as a whole. To have "a consistent walk" means, in other words, to live a consistent life.

Faith

Well, Enoch walked with God. His life could best be described in those terms. What can that mean? There is a fascinating word about Enoch in the New Testament Book of Hebrews that throws light on what walking with God meant for him. It goes like this:

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:5-6).

Apparently, walking with God involves pleasing Him, and that simply can't be done without faith. Walking with God is first of all then a matter of *believing*. When you think about it for a moment, you realize that it must be that way. If you are to walk with God you must know that He is there, that He is real and that He is near to you. The presence of God must be for you a living, bright reality. Otherwise, it's meaningless to talk about walking with Him.

We don't know, of course, how much Enoch knew of God, what light of divine revelation had come to his life. But surely God had made Himself known to this man in some way. Faith is always our response to what God discloses of Himself. That's why it is tied in so closely with His Word. Faith means more, of course, than knowing that God exists and is present. It includes knowing that He is good, that He is gracious toward us, that His smile is over our lives. It involves the conviction that to find the Lord and know Him is real joy and fulfillment. No one would want to walk with God if He didn't believe that.

"But," someone objects, "how is it possible to walk with someone whom you can't see? The whole thing sounds ridiculous to me." Yes, in our common-sense view of life the real things are those we can see, touch, and measure. But faith knows a different kind of vision. To those who believe, God Himself is the supremely real Person and the things of His kingdom are the real things in life. No one ever walks with God until his inner eyes, as it were, are opened to see and know Him. In other words, this kind of life begins with meeting God, with experiencing His presence and goodness in our lives. It's that kind of awareness of God and encounter with Him that the Bible calls faith.

What about you? Have you met Him? Has He become real to you? For us that is much easier than it was even for Enoch. For us it happens in the person of Jesus Christ. It's when we encounter Him, realizing who He is and receiving Him into our lives, that God Himself becomes real to us.

Fellowship

But walking with God involves more than believing in Him. The phrase speaks also, with simple eloquence, about *communion with God*, fellowship with Him. The fact that we believe He is there and even know what He is like does not guarantee that over the long haul in life we will walk with Him. You can have neighbors whose name and character you know in a general way, but with whom you have very little personal contact. Especially in the winter, if you live in places like Michigan, you may never exchange words with your neighbors unless they are out shoveling snow or you need to borrow something from them. You can even know members of your family fairly well and still have little real fellowship with them, not much sharing, not much personal interaction. "Walking" with a person implies the development and growth of a relationship, doesn't it? It means cultivating someone's friendship, wanting to be with that person, sharing experiences with him or her. It develops through continued association.

Most of us find that we are so prone to forget God, to go our own way without Him, that it is only the discipline of continually turning our lives back toward Him that keeps God in

our thoughts. Enoch must have thought a lot about God. He must have worked at remembering Him, at what Brother Lawrence used to call “practicing the presence of God.” Enoch must have talked things over with the Lord in prayer. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he did a lot of that while he was actually physically walking. Many of us have found that that helps. At least I can say it has for me—just taking walks with God.

I tossed around in my mind whether I should say anything about that, because it’s deeply personal with me. But since preaching is really a kind of witness to what the Lord means to us personally, I feel I want to share it. I take a lot of walks, usually early in the morning, sometimes late at night. And when I walk, although I enjoy and profit from the exercise, I don’t do it mainly to keep in shape. I love the out-of-doors and revel in the sights and sounds of God’s handiwork, but even that isn’t the main thing. I walk really, mostly, to talk things over with God, to share things with Him, to open my life afresh in His presence. I’ve been doing that for over forty years and I can’t begin to measure or express how much it has meant to me, and how real God has made Himself to me in those walks.

A Shared Future

Now the point is that our daily devotional disciplines—Bible study, prayer and praise, meditation—all help us to remember God. They help our fellowship with Him to deepen and grow. We become more and more conscious of Him in all of life. That’s what it means to walk with God. But it means even more. Walking with Him, as that word picture clearly implies, means going with Him where He is headed, aiming for His goal. Remember the word of the prophet, “Can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). Obviously not. You don’t walk very long with anyone whose values and goals are radically different from yours. Listen to the prophet Micah:

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8).

A humble spirit, a love for kindness, a practical working out of justice: that is God’s road. The apostle Paul puts it this way: “Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). Walking with God for Paul means avoiding things like impurity, idolatry, strife, selfishness, envy. It means the cherishing and practicing of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. Those who walked with Jesus in the days of His flesh learned that it meant belonging to a self-giving fellowship, not seeking first of all to be served but to serve. They learned that to walk with Him they had to be out searching after lost sheep, seeking and

caring for broken people. To walk with God is really to be in tune with His plans, to bring all of life in line with His purpose, to be always moving toward the things of His kingdom. That sounds like a big order; but like all walking, it's really a matter of one step after another with Him.

Well, if that's the life, if that's walking with God, where does the way lead? Where does it end? Listen again: "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." There is the goal of the road: to be with Him. That's the future for His traveling companions.

What real basis of confidence do God's people have about the life to come? The great central assurance, of course, is the resurrection of Jesus. But there is still another strain of certainty running throughout the pages of Scripture—the present experience of fellowship with God. For those who have known that, the thought that it should be destroyed, or even interrupted, by an incident like death is inconceivable. The God with whom we have walked in life will be there with us in the moment of death and we will hardly lose a step. Remember how the psalmist put it? "Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward, thou wilt receive me to glory" (Ps. 73:24). If you know God through Jesus Christ and walk with Him here and now, there is not the slightest doubt that you will be with Him hereafter, and forever.

Perhaps you're wondering, "Sure, all this sounds fine; but is it really possible for me?" That makes me think of the biography of John Paton, great missionary to the New Hebrides. He tells of the simple godliness of his father, whose humble life John observed and whose prayers he often overheard. Later in life, Paton often found encouragement in this memory about his father: "He walked with God; why may not I?" And when you and I think about Enoch and a host of other believers like him, let that same thought kindle hope in our hearts, too. He walked with God; she walked with God; why may not I?

Study Questions

1. Why is "walking" a helpful image of the life we all live?
2. As you think about it, what does "walking with" a person imply to you?
3. What disciplines do you find most helpful for "keeping in touch" with God?
4. What most helps to make you sure about the reality of the life to come?

Chapter Six

Rainbow in a Dark Sky

God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth."

Genesis 9:17 RSV

I once heard a distinguished college president tell a terrible joke. It was about a man advised by his doctor that his leg had to be amputated. When the patient regained consciousness after surgery, the doctor said, "There's bad news and there's good news. The bad news is that by mistake we took off the wrong leg. The good news is that we've looked at the other one again and you won't need to have it amputated after all." Isn't that awful?

The special twist of this kind of humor is: the bad news is so bad that after it, what is supposed to be good news only makes things worse. The joke becomes quite cruel.

Why do stories like these arise? There's more than a trace of cynicism in them. They are a kind of reaction to life's tragic ironies, to its overwhelming disasters. At least, we think, we can relieve them at times with a laugh.

I wonder if we haven't done that with the memory of Noah's ark. This matter of a vast flood is a very persistent memory of the human race, especially in the ancient near east but also in other parts of the world. Geologists have unearthed quite a bit of evidence that at some point in ancient history there was indeed a vast deluge. We don't need to believe that the flood covered the entire globe or that every possible species of animal was in the ark in order to take seriously the essential truth of this biblical record. That is, once a tremendous flood almost wiped out an entire civilization.

We ask ourselves, in the light of a catastrophe like that, what good news can there be in the story of Noah, in knowing that a tiny remnant was spared and then pointed to a rainbow in the sky as a sign that it wouldn't happen again? Is this like one of those "good news, bad news" jokes? There has certainly been a lot of raw humor on the subject. If you've ever heard Bill Cosby's record "Noah," you know what I mean.

Today let's listen to this biblical account once again. Let's seek to hear God's Word in it. It may be that the bad news can be seen in a different light and the good news can be even better than we thought.

The Bad News

First, the bad news. The Genesis account tells of a deluge that nearly wiped out the human race in its infancy. This is simply a fact to be faced, whether we are religious persons or not. A number of frightful calamities have overtaken the human race in its long history. There have been famines in which countless thousands have died of hunger, plagues which decimated populations, wars which destroyed the finest of a nation's youth. Think of the earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, the wind storms and fires that have brought their special terrors. Still today, our newspapers, radios, and television sets remind us unceasingly of the troubles and sorrows that overtake our fellow human beings. The great flood is only one among a host of such events, though perhaps the most destructive of all.

The record in Genesis adds this special dimension to the bad news: the flood was sent by God. In this case, at least, the great trouble that overtook men and women came from His hand. Imagine it! That wasted world drenched in torrents of water and tons of mud—His work! That is really bad news, isn't it? No one wants to hear that. But it's what the Bible makes unmistakably plain: God sent the flood and He did so because of human wickedness. Listen:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination 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 (Gen. 6:5-6).

Hence the flood. Again:

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 upon 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" (Gen. 6:11-13).

There's the first hint we have toward understanding this bad news. What God destroyed in the flood, man himself was in the process of destroying. We human beings had filled the world with evil and violence. We had corrupted our way, as the Bible puts it, on the earth.

We begin to see here in the early chapters of Genesis what the whole Bible underlines. Human rebellion against God has in it the seeds of destruction. It has about it the smell of death. Listen to Paul's words from Romans 1:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless (Rom. 1:28-31).

To turn away from God, apparently, is to start on a path that can only lead to decay and finally to destruction. Human evil, we see, makes a terrible difference to God. It offends His holy majesty. It grieves Him in His heart. Finally, it brings down His judgment. That's the bad news, friends. We in our disobedience are destroyers whom the Lord must eventually destroy.

The Good News

But, even in the midst of that dreadful message of divine judgment, there are hints of really good news. For one, the flood did not come without warning. God told Noah:

Behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall die (Gen. 6:17).

He repeated that warning a number of times. Noah, whom the Bible calls "a preacher of righteousness," probably warned all the people he knew. It took him many years to build the ark, and every time someone asked him what he was doing, he doubtless told them what God had said. There was nothing arbitrary about this act of judgment. People were told that it was coming and were urged to prepare for it. But God gave to Noah more than a warning; He showed him also a way to safety. He told him to build an ark, a huge floating box. He instructed him about the materials to be used, the dimensions of the craft, and how to make it seaworthy. Anyone who listened to Noah's preaching or watched his work could have done the same thing. They had plenty of time and were told just what they needed to do. Apparently the idea sounded to Noah's contemporaries like utter nonsense. Here's a grown man building a giant sailing vessel out in the desert! Think of the jokes that must have been

exchanged about that. The whole thing seemed ludicrous in the extreme. No one else even took the trouble to build a raft.

The Old Testament tells us also of a general in the Syrian army who had been stricken with leprosy. His name was Naaman. When one of the servants in his household, a girl kidnapped from Israel, told him that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal lepers, Naaman decided to pay him a visit. He went with a good deal of pomp and ceremony, prepared to pay Elisha handsomely for his services. He thought that the prophet would speak mysterious words or go through an elaborate ceremony, but instead he simply told Naaman to go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. The proud general was not about to comply. He said in disgust:

Behold, I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean? (2 Kings 5:11-12).

So he turned and went away in a rage.

His servants later remonstrated with him.

“Master,” in effect, “what have you to lose? If the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” (2 Kings 5:13).

So although the procedure seemed ridiculous to him, Naaman went along with it. He dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child.

Again, remember when some of the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes during their wilderness wanderings? Many of them were lying in their tents mortally ill. Moses cried to the Lord for a remedy, and God said,

“Make a brazen serpent and put it up on the top of a pole. Then tell the people that if they will look at that snake, they’ll be healed” (See Num. 21:8-9).

Many of them, like Noah’s contemporaries, like Naaman, thought that this whole idea was preposterous. They were not going to do such a stupid thing. But some of them inched their

way toward the tent doors and looked up at that brazen serpent, and the ones who did were completely healed.

There are still skeptics and mockers today. They are told how Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world and how God raised Him from the dead and how if they will only believe in Him, call on His name, receive Him as their Savior, they can be forgiven and have eternal life. But they think the report sounds silly. It doesn't seem to them that such a simple thing as believing in Jesus will do them any good. So they perish in their sins. Some, on the other hand, believe. They take the way of safety God has provided. They receive eternal life.

A Comforting Sign

Noah was like them. He believed in God's promise enough to do what God told him, even though it seemed foolish, even though he couldn't understand it. And we read in the Genesis record that when the ark had been completed, God shut Noah in Himself. God remembered him. Then, when it was all over, when Noah stepped out of his ark onto the washed earth, he saw arching in the clouds above him a rainbow. God called that a sign of the covenant He was making with all the earth.

We're not being asked here to believe that this was the first rainbow that had ever appeared. Doubtless there had been thousands before that. But now the rainbow was given by God a special significance. Think of some analogies. In the case of Abraham, circumcision had existed long before his time, but God took this custom and made it into a sign of His covenant with the patriarch. In a similar way, although there had been many baptisms in the world before Jesus called His followers to be baptized, He gave to the rite a new significance. And surely there had been bread and the fruit of the vine for generations before Jesus fed His disciples at the Last Supper. Yet He gave to the loaf and the cup a wonderful new significance.

What was deeply needed in the wake of a vast calamity like the flood was *reassurance*. And that was what the rainbow was—the gift of God in the cloud to say, “never again.” And, friends, at a far deeper level, that's what the cross of Jesus Christ means, and His resurrection. Because He bore the stroke of judgment for us, because He suffered in our place, the cross and the empty tomb mean to us “never again.” Those who trust in Jesus will never be condemned for their sins. They will never really die. For them, the judgment is past, is over and gone forever. Oh, believe that, friends, and be at peace!

Study Questions

1. What brings more comfort: to think of something like the flood as a “natural disaster,” or as a “divine visitation”? Explain your answer.
2. How are frightful judgments consistent with God’s loving purpose for the world?
3. Evaluate this statement: “The history of the world is the judgment of the world.”
4. How are judgment and hope brought together in the saving work of Christ?

Chapter 7

Communication Breakdown

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 scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. 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, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

Genesis 11:4-7 RSV

I was watching a televised football game recently in which the offensive team was penalized for taking too much time. The coach had sent in the play from the sidelines a trifle late and the quarterback was apparently confused. The seconds ticked by and finally the whistle blew: “Five yard penalty—delay of the game!” The announcer observed, “That’s what you call a breakdown in communication.” He was using a phrase that has become familiar to all of us. We’ve all heard it, and we’ve all experienced what it describes.

I used to teach an introductory course in communication at our seminary. One of the assignments in the course was to tell about a communication breakdown in which the student had been personally involved, then to analyze the dynamics of it and finally to suggest how it might have been resolved. A few members of the class objected at first that they hadn’t experienced anything like that. So we talked about it. “Was there never a time when you as a teenager weren’t really heard by your parents? Have you never had a misunderstanding with your peers? Were there no times when you and your sweetheart or spouse seemed to be talking past each other? Were there no interchanges with teachers in which you failed to get the message or felt that you were misunderstood?” As nearly as I can remember, I never had

one student who kept on insisting that his or her communication efforts had always been successful.

Our Pride

These personal failures, however, are limited in extent and often not too serious. The Scripture passage before us today speaks of something much more far-reaching—a primeval breakdown in communication which had profound consequences. It's from the eleventh chapter of Genesis. Listen:

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men 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 scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:1-4).

In this situation, people are seeking to make a name and a cultural unity for themselves.

Why do they want that? What's involved? For one thing, human beings seem to fear scattering and dispersion. We're all conscious of those forces in our life that tend to drive us away from each other. Human selfishness makes for disintegration, until it's "every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost," as we say. The fear of this scattering and chaos often leads people to embrace any strong leader, to fall in with any tyranny, to hop on the latest bandwagon. We all seem to know instinctively that almost any government, any basis of unity, is better than none.

But there is also a positive factor at work—the vital optimism of a growing culture. It's something like the enthusiasm of youth—a kind of "sky's the limit" mentality, such as we knew in the frontier days of the United States. And certainly there's nothing wrong with such optimism.

The problem with this particular project was that all the emphasis fell on what man himself would build and do, without any reference to God. You might call it a kind of Titanism. Man is meant to have dominion over the creation as God's representative, but he takes matters into his own hands. He is to name the animals, to build a culture, and to use all of his gifts under God; but he strikes out here on his own, forgetting the Giver, to make a name for himself. He will conquer space; he will master the universe; he will be the center of everything.

So what happens? Here the first note of humor appears in the ancient Scriptures. We read this: “And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built” (Gen. 11:5). Men say, “Let’s build a tower with its top in the heavens; let’s be right up there by God’s throne. That tower will be out of sight! ” This is Superman singing, “Glory to man in the highest.” But the Lord came *down* to see it. He hadn’t caught on yet. Apparently the tower was still too far down, too small for God to see with the naked eye. It reminds me of that remarkable verse in Psalm 113: “Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?” (vv. 5-6). To this exalted Lord, even the heavens are a long way down.

God’s Judgment

Well, when the Lord came down, as it were, He didn’t like what He saw.

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, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

God seems to be spoiling the fun, confusing the language, scattering people everywhere. We needn’t think that He did that in a moment of time or with the force of a thunderbolt. Perhaps He simply let the disintegrating forces already present among people do their work. Maybe He even gave them a push.

But what sense can we make of that? Why would God do such a thing? Because He’s jealous? Yes, but not in the petty, all-too-human sense of that term we use. God is jealous with the jealousy of a great love. He won’t let man make it on his own, because that would be the worst evil of all. A humanity completely united and organized without God would be the supreme tragedy, the beast of the visions of Revelation, the ultimate tyranny. And so, in God’s merciful judgment He scatters things. He’s saying to us, *You’re not going to make it without me. You can go your own way and do your own thing, but I’m telling you it won’t hold together. It won’t work.*

Now think about this in the light of what we’ve been studying in this remarkable book of Genesis. After a small beginning in chapter 3, the downward slide of human evil gathers the proportions and force of an avalanche. At each stage, rebellion is followed by some kind of judgment, but always with a hint of hope and mercy. Adam and Eve are banished but not

without the promise of a seeking God. Cain is condemned to be a wanderer but even he is not without divine protection. The violent, corrupt earth is drowned with a flood; but a few survivors live to see the rainbow of God's covenant. And now, in the judgment which falls at Babel, the gloom seems unrelieved. All of primeval history seems to end on this note of frustration, scattering, and judgment.

A New Unity

But in the very next chapter the focus is suddenly to narrow again. It is no longer all mankind but one man, Abraham. And now the major note is one of hope. The promise is made to Abraham that through him and his progeny all the families of the earth are to be blessed. And so begins that long, strange, beautiful story that leads to a cross, an empty tomb, and a Pentecost day when men of many languages hear the good news in their own tongue. The curse of Babel is lifted. God is saying to a restless, striving world: "Look, you don't have to make a name for yourselves; I'll give you a new name. You don't have to reach heaven with a tower; I've come down to bring heaven to you. You don't need to build a unity or a destiny of your own." Jesus says, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The Lord has a better way.

What does all this mean in terms of our attitude toward the United Nations, for example, toward political parties, toward community organizations? Are we to write them off? Condemn them? Despise them as merely human pretensions, akin to the tower of Babel? Far from it.

As Christians we're to be on the side of everything that looks toward peace and unity and human fulfillment; but we are also to be a prophetic voice, proclaiming at every level that these lofty goals will not be reached without the Lord. No abiding peace without the Prince of Peace and His healing gospel. No fundamental unity without the one Lord to whom everything belongs. We will find no way to the highest except the one way, Jesus Christ Himself, no genuine fulfillment without the fullness of His Spirit, no deep-level communication without His barrier-breaking cross. We ought to be saying, in season and out of season, that we must have the Lord at the center if we are going to get everything together.

And that's not only true on a worldwide scale. We've all been building our towers of Babel. We've been saying in all our relationships, whether in the family of nations, the family of races, or in our own families, in effect, "We can make it without You, God." And tragically, again and again, we see things coming apart and communication breaking down. All the while to each of us, God in His message of judgment and grace keeps calling, "Come

back, rebel sons and daughters! You can't make it on your own. You don't need to. Put your lives, your families, your culture in my hands. Accept my love for you in the gift of my Son. Listen to my voice and walk in my ways." And as we do that, trusting in Jesus Christ, bowing before His lordship, ordering all of life according to His will, we learn the universal language of His love. The barriers begin to break down and a new fellowship is created in the world, radiant with a new kind of hope.

Friends, there's a great future ahead. In the awesome visions of the Book of the Revelation, we see gathered "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues." Communication then is restored. All are singing the same new song, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10). And even now, in expectation and foretaste of that great future, people are singing all over the world, "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity may one day be restored. And they'll know we are Christians by our love. They'll know we are Christians by our love." You can be a part of all that. God is calling you today to share in it through faith in His Son. Why not begin now to go God's way!

Study Questions

1. What are the factors which usually lead to a "breakdown in communication"?
2. What are the limits of man's God-given "dominion" over the creation?
3. What hidden mercy do you see in the judgment of Babel?
4. What should our attitude be toward various "secular" organizations which seek to promote unity among the world's peoples?

Chapter Eight

One Life and the Whole World

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 curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

Genesis 12:1-3 RSV

In a society persecuted by advertising, where the most trivial items are sometimes praised to the skies, how can we speak of something truly great? The superlatives are all used up—in describing toothpaste, detergents, or late model cars. Even the most profound sayings of the human spirit become grist for the advertisers' mill. Recently I heard one of Byron's best poems used in praise of something from General Motors. What a challenge that gives us! When we want to express what is deeply significant, what can we possibly call it? How can we give to other people any due sense of its real importance?

The Call of Abram

I feel that way about what I'm going to speak of now. It's the call of God to a man named Abram, or Abraham. Now that happened thousands of years ago, in a corner of the world quite remote from most of us. But to my mind, aside from the life and work of Jesus Christ Himself, the call of Abraham may well be the most significant event in the history of the human race. It marks a bright new beginning in God's purposes for the world. Like a tiny stream high on a mountain side, it seems small in itself; but it marks the source of a mighty river destined to carve its long way to the sea.

Up to this point in the Genesis record, the narrative has been dealing with mankind, humanity as a whole. The great themes are man and woman, universal sin and suffering, the

rise and spread of nations, vast, sweeping judgments. Now, with startling suddenness, the field of vision narrows and all interest is focused on a single man, Abram. You get the feeling that everything from creation onward has led up to his career. Who is Abram, this man of destiny? When we first meet him, he lives among the Chaldeans in a city named Ur along the Euphrates River. That may sound rather primitive, but it wasn't. Ur was no mean city. Archaeologists tell us that it had been a flourishing center of culture for generations before Abram was born. Life there was sophisticated and urbane. The people were worshippers of many gods, with moon worship probably the most popular cult of all. Abram was apparently a member of a prosperous family, probably quite prominent in the life of the city.

We don't know exactly how, but one day the Lord of heaven and earth spoke to this man Abram. The first word was a command: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." It was as though God had said to one of us, "Leave the nation of your birth; part with all your countrymen; say good-bye even to your nearest relatives and go to a land that I'll tell you about later."

Now that's quite a demand to make on anyone—to leave behind everything that is familiar and precious. Just think of the questions that must have come rushing to Abram's mind. "Why in the world do You want me to do that? What's the big idea? What am I getting into, anyway? You haven't even told me in what direction I'm supposed to go!"

But to that puzzling command was added a large promise. Listen to it:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.

First of all, God will do something *for* Abram, making him a great nation, blessing him, making his name great. Then God will do something *through* him for all the families of the earth. Abram will "be a blessing." Do you see the picture? One life, and then the whole world. What God does for Abram has a meaning far beyond this one man. The blessing of God Almighty, His saving good will, His life-giving peace is to pass through Abram to all peoples.

The Part We Forget

This is the very thing which the descendants of Abram, the people of Israel, have again and again forgotten. God separated them from the other nations to make them His own people, to keep them from idolatry and to fit them for their high mission. But they were

prone to think that God was interested only in them. At times they saw in their election, their choice, an occasion for pride, for remaining exclusive and aloof. Like Jonah the prophet, they were often reluctant to share God's message with the pagan world. The Gentiles were seen as wicked and godless. What interest could the Lord have in them?

But it was not only Israel that forgot. So did the church—God's new Israel—time and time again. She settled down to guard and hoard what God had given, only to find that it spoiled in the process. Her candlestick, her glory, was taken away in many areas because she forgot the world around her. Immigrants from the Old World who founded churches in the United States have often followed the same pattern. Because the surrounding culture seemed strange and forbidding, they were content to "hold the line," to "keep what we have," to "work only with our kind."

That's an ever-present danger, isn't it? When the question arises for any group of people, "Why have we been so favored?" what answer do we give? Not perhaps what we answer openly, but what do we feel about that in our hearts? Is it because we have worked harder than other people have? Because we are more upright or godly? Because we come from better stock? Or, in contrast to all of those, is it because God has showered His mercy on us so that others may receive the overflow?

Look today, right now, at the gifts you have received—at the privileges and opportunities that are yours. Why have you been given these things? Is it just for you and yours? Simply for your profit and enjoyment? I ask myself questions like that, often. We feel so blessed as a family in the faith God has given us, in the happiness we've experienced, in the love we've shared. I somehow know this can't be just for us. It must have a meaning beyond the small circle of our lives. The people of God are enriched so that they can give, favored so that they can show favor, yes, blessed to be a blessing.

But now what happened in this promise made to Abram? How was it fulfilled? You know that. We celebrate it at Christmas. The promised "seed of Abraham," the "star of Jacob," "the lion of the tribe of Judah" is Jesus Christ. He is the One in whom supremely this great promise is fulfilled.

Blessing to the World

Think about it. What has come to the families of the world because of Jesus? More than we can measure. At this very hour, friends, there is no nation in the world untouched by the saving, healing, life-giving power of Jesus Christ. Allover the earth, human life is seen as precious and significant where He is known. The status of womanhood has been raised;

children have been honored and protected; mercy has come to the poor, the sick, and the prisoner wherever that name has been cherished.

But better still, people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation have come to know the living God through Him. Through Christ they have found forgiveness, release from the burden of a guilty past. They have been delivered from the power of enslaving evils. The hearts of literally millions of people have been filled with joy and courage because of Him. Self-centered lives have again and again found in Him the strength to love. Wherever His resurrection is known, He has set the world singing with a triumphant hope. Vast movements of liberation, renewal, and reform have been launched in His name, and the end is not yet. Even while I'm speaking, His message is being translated into new languages; His name is being proclaimed by radio almost everywhere in the world; the strong winds of His Spirit are refreshing the earth. Yes, those with eyes to see it know that the promise is being fulfilled more and more. In Him, the seed of Abraham, all the families of the earth are coming to be blessed.

But remember, it all started with that one man, Abram. Because he heard God's call and answered it, all these mercies have since come to the world. And because all those in Christ are part of the seed of Abraham, following in the footsteps of his faith, as Paul puts it, the same call and promise are for us, too. Remember, it wasn't only for Abram, but also for Isaac his son. God later made the same promise to him: "By your descendants all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 26:4). Isaac, too, became a channel for God's gift to the wider world. And that is true also of a multitude whose names we have never known—true because they too heard God's call, believed Him, and obeyed Him.

We can all see how, in the history of the church, individual lives here and there have touched the whole world. There are giants like the apostle Paul and Augustine. How many great institutions and large denominations are but the lengthened shadows of a Calvin, a Luther, or a Wesley! In our own time, people like James Dobson and Billy Graham have touched lives in far-flung places through their own personal ministries.

Perhaps you say, "Yes, but these are all outstanding people, men of great faith, one in a million. How am I, a weak sort of Christian with a common, every-day job—how am I in the class of these people? What about me, a housewife, a student, a teacher, a laborer?" When you feel that way, remember Abram. In the eyes of his generation he didn't do anything very outstanding. He spent most of his life just wandering around. His faith, though it was real, was sternly tested; and Abraham was not above a few compromises. He was very human like the rest of us. But for all that, he believed God's promise and stepped out to obey His call. And listen, whenever anyone does that, blessing is released that keeps on going; ripples

begin that don't stop spreading. One person, moving out to follow the Lord, touches a whole world. *That* is the blessing of Abraham. *That* is the promise of the Spirit.

I suppose that everyone who feels he has something to say would like to have the ear of all the world. I know I've felt that way personally about the gospel, ever since I became a Christian. I'd like to be able to tell it to everyone on the earth. And I am deeply thankful for the privilege of doing that, in a measure, through Words of Hope broadcasts in various languages. But like millions of other parents, I had the opportunity for worldwide influence long before I began preaching on the radio. Whatever witness I can bear to my own children, whatever love I can show them, whatever of Christ I can help them to know, will not only bring something to their lives but will somehow touch everyone they meet. In ways we'll never fully understand, every Christian's obedience has an effect on the whole scheme of things. Never doubt it: when God finds one believing person in a home, a school, a factory, or a business, that one can become the agent of His worldwide purpose.

So what does that say to us today? Listen, dear friends, to God's personal call to you through His Word, by His Spirit in your heart, in the fellowship of God's people, in the daily providences of life. Listen to that adventurous summons of His to leave the familiar and the secure to follow Him. Hear Christ's own word, "Follow Me, trust Me, and I will make you fishers of men." "Believe in Me," He says, "and out of you the living waters will flow, bringing life wherever they go." Yes, for you, even you, it can be, as it was for Abraham, "one life, and the whole world!"

Study Questions

1. What was strange about the command given to Abram?
2. What was surprising about the promise he received?
3. Think of practical ways in which the theme "blessed to be a blessing" should affect our life in the church.
4. What are some evidences in the Bible and in Christian history that God can use one ordinary, believing person to affect profoundly the wider world?

Chapter Nine

Looking out for Number One

Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of mar; this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley, and Lot journeyed east; thus they separated from each other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

Genesis 13:8-12 RSV

T*his place isn't big enough for both of us!* Those bitter words have occasioned many a feud. Living space gets crowded, conflicts arise, and someone has to leave. That's the way it happened with Abram and his nephew Lot. Their whole household was migrating from Egypt back toward the land of Canaan. Abram had grown rich in cattle, as well as in silver and gold. His nephew Lot, whom Abram took into his home when Lot's father died, had also become prosperous. He had large flocks and many men working for him. In fact, Abram and Lot together had so much that there simply wasn't room in those newly harvested pasture lands for all the animals to feed. Lot's herdsmen started arguing, contending with those of Abram. Can't you hear them? “This is my territory!” “Get your mangy cows away from here!” There were other tribes in the vicinity, too, which made the crowding even more serious.

One evening, when the day's journey was done, Abram put his spear in the ground and said, “This is as far as we go today. Come here, Lot, I want to talk to you.” They walked together out on a hillside near Bethel. There is a breath-taking view from that spot. You can

see almost the whole sweep of the Jordan valley, clear down to the Dead Sea. Abram said, “We can’t have this fighting between us and our men. It’s no good. Let’s split up the partnership and go our separate ways. We have all this land around us. Look, if you take what’s on the left, I’ll go to the right; and if you choose to go to the right, then I’ll take the other way.”

Lot’s Choice

So Lot looked things over. He saw in the distance the fertile Jordan valley, well watered everywhere “like a garden of the LORD.” Lot said in his heart, “That’s for me.” He knew that the two cities down that way, Sodom and Gomorrah, were unsavory places to live, but that green valley was too beautiful to pass up. So he made his choice and headed toward the Jordan. He even went to the outskirts of Sodom to establish a home. After Lot had made his choice, Abram stayed on in the hill country of Canaan.

Now here were two men, closely related and from the same background. In many respects they were similar. They both had some knowledge of God and of His promises. But they faced a crisis, a big decision, in very different ways, didn’t they? Look with me at that decision making.

See first how Lot went about it. He seems to have made his Decision without much concern for anyone but himself. He surely wasn’t thinking about Abram. Actually, it was only by Abram’s kindness that Lot was in on this at all. Everything Lot owned had come to him because he was part of Abram’s household. Abram was the older of the two, the head of the clan, the heir of God’s promises. Lot might have considered that, but he didn’t. What Abram wanted in this choice didn’t enter Lot’s mind, or if it did, it made little difference.

And Lot surely wasn’t thinking much about his family when he brought them to the suburbs of Sodom to live. Life there was exciting and risqué, but it was surely no place for a family, as Lot later discovered—much to his sorrow.

What effect would this decision have on Lot’s character, on the kind of life he lived, on his relationship to God? I doubt if he had thought very much about any of that. The thing that loomed so large, that seemed to blot out every other consideration, was the immediate personal advantage for him, Lot. He knew a “good deal” when he saw it. He was “looking out,” as we say, “for number one.”

It’s so easy to make choices that way, isn’t it, even for us who call ourselves Christians and are members of the church? We see some new possibility that will put money in our pockets and make life more comfortable. Maybe it’s a chance to win considerable popularity, to get us in with the crowd, to become noticed and approved by the right people. Or we

have a shot at something that will make us “successful,” as we say. If we’re not careful we will leap at opportunities like that without thinking about anything else: what it will mean for our family or what effect it will have on other people. We don’t stop to ask, “How will it affect my integrity as a person?” or, “Is it really God’s will for me?” The appeal of that new possibility is so absorbing that at the time nothing else seems to matter.

For Lot, the attractive possibility, the beautiful dream, turned into a nightmare. Things went from bad to worse. Soon after he moved to Sodom, he and all his family were carried away by invaders and had to be rescued by Abram’s men. Even when Lot came back home, however, his troubles weren’t over. Sodom was such a sink of moral filth that its evils cried out for judgment. No one, not even a messenger of heaven, could visit that place without being abused. When the doom of the city became imminent, Lot had to flee with his wife and daughters. His wife, still hankering after that wretched place, turned back and perished with it. From then on, Lot seemed afraid to face life. When we last read of him, he has gone into hiding in the mountains. His daughters, with husbands dead back in Sodom and no hope of marriage, become desperate. After getting their father drunk, each conceives a son by him. Incest becomes the final shame of Lot’s old age.

He was not a bad man. There was certainly something of the fear of the Lord in Lot’s life and a capacity to hate what is evil, but his religion never seemed to affect his decision making. When it came to that dimension of life, he kept on “doing what comes naturally.” He looked out for number one. There is a cynical, popular song which fairly well sums up Lot’s outlook:

It’s all right now, I’ve learned my lesson well;
You can’t please everyone,
you gotta please yourself.

Is that pretty much the way we operate, too?

Abram’s Choice

Now look at Abram. How did he face the same crisis? Here is quite a difference. Abram was a man who loved peace and was concerned about the strife within his household. In other words, he cared about personal relationships. They meant more to him than lands and possessions. Even though Lot had risen up to be his rival, Abram wanted him to have the best. And here is a marvelous thing: Abram was ready for the Lord’s sake and for others, to let some things go that were rightfully his and which he might well have demanded.

There’s a rare quality, isn’t it - that relaxed grip on things? The secret lay surely in Abram’s faith. He was a man who trusted God, who had God’s purposes in his mind. He was

no perfect believer—far from it. He didn't always live by his faith. At times he left the place where he was supposed to be and wandered to places like Egypt. While there, he told some tall tales for self-protection. He tried on occasion to work out God's great promise in his own way. But he was learning, and he really did believe in God's future for his life.

Can't you see him on that slope in Bethel when Lot, with all his company, was moving down the hillside to claim the best land? What are you feeling, Abram? "Well, at least now there will be no more arguments." But that wasn't the last of it. God appeared then to this gracious man of faith after he had stepped aside for Lot, the opportunist, and said to him:

Lift up your eyes [Abram], and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and your descendants for ever. . . . Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you (Gen. 13:14-15, 17).

Regardless of what Lot may have decided, Abram, it's going to be yours.

Did you ever have an experience like that of Abram? Your faith was weak, you had your disappointments, but you were learning to trust God and He surprised you with His marvelous goodness. Something like that happened to me. When I was in my last year in college, it seemed to me that I was one of the few guys who didn't have a steady girl. I had believed that God would some day provide a wife for me, and all that, but it seemed like all around me these other fellows were finding someone and I wasn't. So I decided I had better get busy and not wait around. Before long I was falling in love with love, looking around desperately for someone who might be the right person.

I decided that I'd write to a girl I had once dated. You should have seen the letters I wrote—clever, impressive, suave, I thought! We had a date or two; my plan seemed to be working out well. Pretty soon she asked me to come to her home for a weekend visit. That sounded good to me. She happened to have a nice car, so we started out driving together one Friday. It was a long distance, so we had plenty of time to talk. The conversation soon moved beyond the superficial, and I began to feel uncomfortable. This girl apparently had very little interest in the Christian faith and even less in anything like the ministry of the gospel. I wasn't in a healthy condition spiritually at the time, but one thing I knew was that God had called me to be a minister of the gospel. It suddenly dawned on me that this girl couldn't possibly be the right one for me. I was so disappointed and disheartened that I made

some kind of flimsy excuse, got out of the car, and hitchhiked back to college—a sadder and a wiser man.

It wasn't many months later when I met the wonderful Christian girl whom I was later to marry. I knew by that time that the choice somehow had to be God's choice; and I discovered, more vividly than at any other point in my life, that the old saying is true, "God gives the very best to those who leave the choice with Him."

Our Choices

All of us have to look ahead, to make plans for the future, but we can look ahead in these two ways. We can anticipate with the question, "What's in it for me?" or we can take the Lord into the plan, "What's in it for Him?" That means "looking out" for Jesus Christ, the Person who deserves to be "number one" in all of life. And strangely, when we do that, we'll be caring about other people, too.

Someone says, "Yeah, but Abram could afford to be generous. He had plenty to start with. What did he have to lose?" That may be true, but the principle applies whether we have much or little.

Once there was a descendant of Abram who was quite poor. He grew up in a carpenter shop and knew what it was to work hard. He had one suit of clothes to His name. Sometimes He had nowhere to sleep at night. When someone offered Him all the kingdoms of the world, He turned them down. Instead, He headed for the city of Jerusalem where He knew He would be rejected. There He took a cross on His back, and walked up a hill to be crucified, amid the jeers of a crowd. Why? Because He wanted to obey God and because He cared, deeply, about people like you and me. For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame of it. Then God raised Him from the dead; God exalted Him; God gave Him a name above all names and a kingdom that will never end. And this one, Jesus Christ, our Brother and Savior and King, said it would be that way for us, too. "If you save your life and clutch it for yourself," He said, "you are going to lose it. But if you lose your life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, you will really find it."

So as you face life's decisions—what you'll do with your life, who your close friends will be, whom you will marry, what standards and values you'll have—don't make Lot's choice. Look first toward the Lord and His loving purpose for you. Trust Him and do what you know is right. You may seem for the moment to be missing something, but don't worry about that. None of those who trust in the Lord are ever forsaken. God works for those who wait for Him.

Study Questions

1. What differences in character do you discern here between Abram and Lot? Which is most fundamental?
2. How will living a faith affect the choices we make?
3. Think about the last major decision you made. What were the chief factors you took into consideration?
4. Can you remember an experience in which you let something go for the Lord's sake, and later received it from Him in a fuller way? Tell about it.

Chapter 10

Holy Laughter

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me."

Genesis 21:1-6 RSV

Most of us are not accustomed to laughing much in church. I've been in many worship services where it was hard work even to spot a smile. And laughing—that is really tough! Perhaps you've heard ministers or priests talk about their experiences in trying to use humor in their sermons. It often goes like this: The minister says something that's supposed to be funny or maybe tells a joke. But the people just sit there. Nothing happens. The minister pauses to wait for the laugh, but now his face falls. He blushes, clears his throat, fidgets with his notes, and somehow tries to get going again. The maddening thing is that he knows that these very same people have plenty of humor in them at other times.

Why is this? Why is laughing so rare in church? It could be that those present aren't actually listening at all, so that when the minister comes to the punch line they don't even hear it. Or it could be that they can't really imagine that a minister or a priest would have any laughs in him and so they can't quite believe their ears when they hear him say something funny. Or it could be that they are so restrained by the formality of the service and by what they feel is the seriousness of religion, that they just can't crack a smile.

Happily, I think that pattern is breaking down here and there. Maybe people are listening more. Maybe they're seeing pastors as more genuinely human; and best of all, maybe the

image of true religion as something sober, grim, and laugh-less is breaking down. I surely hope so!

Laughter: Good and Bad

At any rate, it's good for us to laugh in church— or anywhere else. Laughter relaxes us. It helps us to draw zest and pleasure even from what is difficult and humdrum. It breaks the spell of intensity and gloom that sometimes builds up around our lives. I heard a man tell some time ago of an accident in which he almost lost his life. But he had such a sense of the humor of the circumstances that he could look back on it with a laugh. He was working at a dumping ground in Chicago, directing traffic. One of the truck drivers didn't see him and started backing up toward him at a high rate of speed. By the time he saw what was happening, the truck was almost upon him. All he could do was grab the chute at the back of the truck and hang on for dear life. He was dragged for a considerable distance and his clothes were literally torn off his body. Miraculously, he came through that ordeal without a broken bone. What gave the whole story a comic turn? It was the fact that a load of refuse from the dog kennels had just been dumped in the area through which he was dragged. Can you picture being dragged through all of that at the bottom of a garbage truck—and what it would be to get cleaned up afterward?

It's an especially good thing if we can laugh at ourselves. That releases the tension of our self-importance and our pompousness. It helps us not to take ourselves too seriously.

Not all laughter, of course, is a good thing. It can sometimes be malignant, almost demonic. It's chilling, isn't it, to hear people laugh at the suffering, the misfortune, or the pain of another human being? There is also the laughter of ridicule and mockery, the laughter heard by people who are handicapped or different or discriminated against. That kind of laughter can be an exquisite kind of torture. It wounds and destroys the personhood of other people. There is a laughter at off-color jokes and suggestive stories that seems to glorify a way of living that's promiscuous and unfaithful. Often it may reveal that the person who laughs so loud is uncomfortable about the role of sex in his or her own life. What we consider to be funny often says a great deal about our own inner needs.

Old Folks Laughing

But I want to talk to you today about laughter in a better sense—what you might call “holy laughter.” There are several passages in this book of Genesis that tell about Abraham and his wife Sarah, passages that make a special point of telling how they laughed. Here is

the first scene. God comes to Abram when he is an old man and when Sarah is an old woman. God says, “Abram, I’m going to change your name. No longer will it be Abram but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, I will give you a son by her, and she shall be a mother of nations.”

Abram fell down on his face before God. It looked like an expression of great reverence, humility, worship, awe; and there no doubt was some of all that in it. But I think the main reason Abraham fell down was that he didn’t want God to see him laughing! The Scripture puts it just that way. “Abraham fell on his face and laughed.” There he was, lying on the ground, laughing away and talking to himself. “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old—by a wife who’s ninety? That’s too much!”

When he finally gets control of himself and can say something to the Lord, he says, “O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!” Ishmael, of course, was Abraham’s son by Hagar, Sarah’s maid. He represented Abraham’s effort to work out God’s promise by himself—the common-sense way of seeing it realized. Ishmael was now thirteen years old, a fine boy. Why not Ishmael, Lord? But the Lord said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son.”

Some time later, the Lord appears to Abraham again, and this time Sarah is there. She is listening inside the tent when the Lord speaks. He repeats this strange promise about a child. “Where is Sarah, Abraham?” “She’s in the tent.” The Lord says, “I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” Now, inside the tent, is this old woman, past the change in life. She’s listening intently to what’s going on, and at this last word she starts to laugh. She knows about herself, what she is physically, and about old Abraham. Here comes a word that they’re going to be like young married folk again. Imagine that!

But then suddenly she is frightened. The Lord’s messenger asks, “Why did Sarah laugh?” The Lord knows about that and it was His way of saying to Abraham that He knew of his laughing, too. “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son” (Gen. 18:13-14). Then Sarah tells a lie. “I did not laugh.” But she can’t get away with it. God says, “No, but you did laugh.” That ends the conversation.

Do you mean that is holy laughter? Why, Abraham and Sarah both seemed to be laughing *at* God’s promise. They both are incredulous about such a thing happening. Abraham almost wants to correct God with a simpler solution to the problem, and Sarah is sheepish and ashamed to be caught laughing. What’s holy about all that?

Listen, the wonderful thing that emerges from this whole narrative is that God has a sense of humor, too. Remember, the whole laughing bit among human beings is originally

His idea. How does He react to their laughter? He doesn't clobber them for laughing; doesn't disqualify them. He doesn't come off like some stuffy parent might. I suppose many of us might have said, "If you're going to make light of my promise, I'll take it back." But no, God doesn't seem to be angry at all. He answers their question with His own—and it's really quite a question: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" Then He simply restates the promise: "This is what is going to happen."

Now that to me is beautiful. It tells us something about faith. Abraham and Sarah both had faith. You can read their names in the roll call of the faithful in Hebrews 11, in faith's "Hall of Fame" as it were. But apparently it was a faith that could have doubts, that could be puzzled, that could shake its head at what God promised, and could even laugh. Oh, remember that! To have faith doesn't mean that your feelings are always sweet and pious. It doesn't mean that you never have questions or that amazing things stop taking you by surprise. God sees faith, friends, even in our nervous, half-believing laughter. Isn't that something? Listen. You can relax in God's presence, you can be yourself, you can even laugh. Maybe sometimes He laughs with you!

Just imagine how it must have been with Abraham and Sarah when the promise began to come true. Think of how many jokes there must have been about it in that large household—in the kitchen, away in the fields, out behind the barn. "Hey, have you heard the news? The old lady is expecting!" And when spring arrived, sure enough, the baby came.

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah. . . bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

The Laughter God Gives

That's what the Scripture records. And do you know what they called him? "Isaac," which means "laughter." Literally, "May God smile or laugh over him." The name they gave, like all Hebrew names, had a special meaning. It was their own little "in-joke" with God. And Sarah went on to say, "God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me." Yes, God had made laughter for her. That's the holy laughter, a laughter of joy and wonder and gratitude at God's amazing gift; the laughter that chuckles afresh every time we think of what He has done.

Have you ever prayed with anyone who began to laugh right out loud in the midst of his prayer? That happened to me once. I didn't know what to make of it. This visiting minister, a man who knew God deeply, was praying about some of the things that he wanted God to do

in the church meetings we were then having. Then he started to recall what God had done in the past and he began to laugh. It struck me then as strange, but I think I understand it more now. I've seen God do some things in answer to prayer within our own family that almost make me laugh and shout every time I think of them.

That supremely was the laughter of Mary, the mother of Jesus. When the word came to her that she was going to bear a child, she must have felt like Sarah, only more so. This child was to be born not to an old woman but to a *virgin*! I can imagine Mary laughing to herself, even as she welcomes God's will. "Who is ever going to believe this? And Joseph, most of all!" But she was encouraged by that same word of God's promise, "There is nothing too hard for the Lord." Or again, "With God nothing is impossible." And so she expressed, with a touching kind of faith, her holy laughter. "My soul magnifies the Lord;" she sings, "my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior." She is echoing Sarah's word, with far greater meaning. "God has made laughter for me—and for the whole world!"

I ask you today, what promise of God do you need? Maybe it's a promise that seems ridiculous, out of the question, impossible. Is it that God will soften the heart of someone close to you? Restore some damaged relationship? Give life, perhaps, to a dying marriage? Is it that He may free you from some inner bondage? Change the vexing situation in which you live and work? Quicken your hopes and make your life new? Or that He will use your life in some way for His grand purpose? All of that, friends, He promises to do—and more. You may laugh at the thought. You may say, "Sure, God, sure." But He really is the God of the unexpected, of limitless possibilities, of new life. So don't lose heart. Hang in there with Him. Trust His large promise. Some day in the Lord's own way, your Isaac will come, and you'll say, "God has made laughter for me."

Study Questions

1. Why do you suppose many people feel that laughter is out of place in a church service?
2. What have been the most relaxing, refreshing experiences of laughter in your life?
3. How can laughing—or crying—be consistent with believing God's promises?
4. What encouragement for your own faith do you find in this experience of Abraham and Sarah?

Chapter Eleven

God Will Provide

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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, 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.

Genesis 22:1-3 RSV

You never know when God's supreme test may come in your life. Perhaps it will be at some momentous crossroads in your youth. Or maybe it will be later, in the days of heavy responsibility, the prime of life. Or it could be in the declining years when you are growing old. It just could be. That's how it was with Abraham.

The Test

"After these things," the Genesis narrative tells us, "God tested Abraham." Does that have a strange sound to you? Apparently God, in His infinite love and wisdom, sometimes puts His servants to the test. He does not *tempt* them, but He does *test* them. Temptation comes from the Evil One, the enemy. He aims at leading us into some forbidden path, at luring us away from God. But in the same happening, with a very different intent, God may be testing us. His purpose is to refine us, that we may come forth as gold, purified. He wants to call forth, to bring to expression, His own gracious work in our hearts and lives. And so He tests us. The catch is that usually we don't realize, at the time, that we are being tested. All we know is that the experience can be very, very difficult.

Perhaps you know what I mean by that. Many of us have passed through times of trouble and anguish in the past. Looking back, we may call them our “trials,” which is really just another name for “testings.” But I doubt if anyone of us has every been as sorely and painfully tried as was this old man, Abraham.

You probably remember the circumstances surrounding the birth of Isaac, his son. Isaac was the miracle child, the child of promise. Abraham and Sarah had tried before to work out God’s promise of a baby in their own way and had been thwarted. When God told them that they would have a child in their old age they laughed, shook their heads, and struggled to believe. But then the unheard of thing had happened; Sarah had borne a son.

When this Isaac was growing up, Abraham was more than old enough to be his grandfather. You can imagine how that boy was the apple of his eye, the darling of his affections. All his heart strings were tangled up in the life of that precious Isaac. He had waited so long for him! But there was more to his feeling for the boy even than that. Years before Isaac’s birth, Abraham had become the father of another son by Hagar, Sarah’s maid. That boy’s name was Ishmael. But because of domestic tensions and jealousies, the old man finally had to send Ishmael away and that must have hurt him deeply. But he did it—all for Isaac’s sake.

Isaac was even more than the one son in his father’s household, or even than the cherished joy of his old age. Isaac was the bearer of Abraham’s hopes. As the old man smiled down at him, or played with him, the thought was never far away, “This is the one through whom God’s promise will be fulfilled. This is the child through whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed.” That’s how much this young child meant to his aged father. And God knew all about that; that’s what makes this divine command so hard to understand.

It came some years later. When Isaac was growing toward young manhood and Abraham was in the sunset years, one day this word from God broke into the family’s life and seemed to shatter everything: “Abraham!” And Abraham said, “Here am I.” “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

Offer him! Sacrifice him! Kill Isaac! Strangely, the narrative tells us nothing about what went on in Abraham’s heart and mind in that moment. That’s a part of Scripture’s wondrous restraint. It makes the scene all the more poignant for us. No one can really imagine what this father went through. To obey that word was not only to give up the boy upon whom his hopes were centered - that would have been crushing enough. But to do it with his own hand, to offer him as a sacrifice, a burnt offering of love and gratitude to God—that was far more painful. Has anyone else ever been tested like that?

I can picture this man out under a sky full of stars, bent with sorrow, convulsed with anguish. But somehow he had it out with God there on the slopes near Beersheba and came to his decision to give up that son of his to God.

The next day he rose up early and made ready for the trip. It was a long journey, almost three days. This was no hasty, spur-of-the-moment thing with Abraham. He had time to think about it. And how could he have thought about anything else?

On the third day Abraham could see the mountain looming in the distance. That was the place. He said to his servants, "You stay here with the animals. Isaac and I are going up there to worship and then we'll be back." How could he bring himself to say that? Abraham helped Isaac get a load of wood on his shoulders. Then the old man took a torch and a knife and they started out together. After they had walked awhile Isaac had one question: "Father." "Here I am, my son." "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" "God," said Abraham, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." That was all. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Now the narrative begins to slow down noticeably. Every action is described minutely. When they had come to the appointed place, Abraham built an altar, laid the wood in order, bound Isaac, laid him on the altar, reached out his hand, and took the knife. The final moment had come. Abraham raised his arm to slay his own son. And then came the voice from heaven that stayed his hand.

God had never wanted him or anyone else to offer a human sacrifice. But remember, that had been a widespread custom in Abraham's day. Many of his contemporaries felt that the sacrifice of one's first-born was the highest act of religious worship. Abraham knew that. And so the thing that he was asked to do, though it broke his heart, didn't necessarily war against his conscience. But here God showed to him and to all the world that He never required child sacrifice from anyone. But He did want something from Abraham. He wanted him in spirit to take the treasure of his life, renounce every claim upon it, and offer it up to God. And that is what Abraham did on that night he wrestled with God under the stars, on each grim step of the journey, and in all his preparations. Finally, in that mountain clearing, the sacrifice of the heart was complete. Then, in God's perfect time and way, the word came, "Do not lay your hand on the lad. Stop, Abraham! Now I know that you fear God."

The Provision

There was the test. God had been looking for something in Abraham and He found it. God had been searching for a heart of faith: a faith that believes His promise when everything seems to make it impossible, a faith that obeys Him when obedience is the hardest

thing in the world, a faith that knows deep down that nothing we surrender to the Lord is ever really lost to us.

And just as Abraham had said in his moving reply to Isaac, yet in a way beyond his expectations, God *did provide* a burnt offering. He supplied another sacrifice in the place of Isaac. So Abraham called the mountain by that very name: “The Lord will see” or “The Lord will provide.” And that is the message of hope for us in our every time of testing. In the common struggles of life, when prices are rising and jobs are insecure, when unexpected expenses pile up and we don’t know how in the world we’ll take care of everything, the promise comes, “The Lord will provide.” In our major crises, when we are pounded by waves of trouble and just about to go under, when we feel totally lacking in the resources to meet a rough situation, the word comes again, “The Lord will provide.” And it comes too at an even deeper level, in the most desperate and critical of all human needs. When we are guilty and mixed up and craving a new start, God will provide for us then. He *has* provided. That’s the greatest good news of all.

There’s a sequel, you know, to that moving account of Abraham and Isaac in the place of sacrifice. The whole of the gospel story is about another Father, another much-loved Son, and another mountain on which that Son was to be offered up. The Father is God Himself and the name of the Son is Jesus, whom we call Christ, God’s well-beloved. But this time there was no voice from heaven to halt the grim drama. God gave His Son to bring forgiveness and a new life to all who would trust Him. The sacrifice was complete. God provided Him as an offering for us all.

Let me ask you, has that provision of God become yours? Remember what Abraham said at the end of it all: “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” It was on the mountain of God’s appointment that the provision appeared. Right there, in the place of painful obedience, the beautiful thing happened. It’s often that way, isn’t it? The finances are really low but you keep on giving anyway and sure enough, your needs are met in a way that takes you by surprise! You’re shaking your head with wonder and joy. I have a friend who, not many years ago, was trying to support his family on only \$25 a week. Still, he continued to give a tenth, a tithe, of all he had to God’s work. When I talked to him about that, I got this reply: “When this is all we’re making, we can’t afford not to tithe!” And you know, God saw them through! He provided, as He said He would.

Sometimes your soul feels as heavy as lead and God seems far away. But you keep on praying, and seeking Him, and somehow He refreshes you when you least expect it. Or you try to do what’s right even when it may mean losing something important, and lo and behold, God comes up with something better for you. Yes, and if you want His greatest provision, you need to stand in Abraham’s place, the place of trust, of surrender and

obedience, willingness to offer up all that you have to Him in trust. And there, through a cross which at first looks like death, you begin really to live. Like old Abraham, you make a break with the past and you put your future wholly in God's hands, trusting Him with it even when you can't see what it's going to be. And right there, in the mount of the Lord, trusting in what God does for you in Jesus Christ, your greatest needs are going to be met. So remember, friends, God may test you, and the test may be costly and difficult. It may break your heart. But believe God and go on with Him, and you will see. The Lord will provide.

Study Questions

1. How would you distinguish between *testing* and *temptation*?
2. What does this narrative indicate about the relationship between Abraham and Isaac?
3. How do you think this whole experience affected Abraham's life?
4. In what way does the New Testament illumine the meaning of this strange event?

Chapter Twelve

The Guided Life

The man bowed his head and worshiped the LORD, and said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me in the way to the house of my master’s kinsmen.”

Genesis 24:26-27 RSV

“**A**s for me, the LORD has led me in the way.” That’s the happy confession of Abraham’s servant, about whom we read in the 24th chapter of Genesis. He is celebrating the fact that when he went on his master’s errand to find a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac, the Lord led him in the way.

I want to think with you today about how that applies to each one of us, about the guided life. By that I mean a life directed by God Himself, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I suppose that everyone has a “guided life” in some sense. We all follow some direction; we all march to some drum beat. Maybe the guidance comes only from our own desires, our own whims and urges. Perhaps we get our direction from the prevailing culture, through a kind of social radar. You know what that’s like. “Find out what they’re thinking and think it! Find out what they’re wanting and want it! Find out what they’re doing, and do it!”

But there is also a life led by the One whom we call “The Good Shepherd”—into green pastures and beside still waters. At times, perhaps, He leads through the valley of the shadow of death, but always in a good way, always in paths of peace. This chapter in the Bible, Genesis 24, pictures in a beautiful, memorable way the guided life. Each character in it responds in his or her way to the Lord’s direction. There’s Abraham seeking a wife for his beloved son. There’s Isaac waiting at home for God’s provision. There’s the servant journeying afar to find the right girl. There’s Rebekah and her family recognizing God’s hand in what happens. All of these express facets of God’s direction in human life. It’s a

great story, fun to read and with down-to-earth, practical meaning for us. Let's see if we can learn from it some basic principles of the guided life.

Begin with God's Word

Here's one! The guided life begins with what God has already revealed of Himself, with His promises and commands. As old Abraham is about to send his servant to find a wife for Isaac he says this:

The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "To your descendants I will give this land," he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.

Notice that Abraham is recalling what God has promised. He's banking on it, trusting that God will keep His word. So convinced is he that Abraham won't accept any alternatives to this revealed plan. He tells his servant, "If the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." He knows that Isaac's destiny is in the land of God's promise.

Now that, friends, is a highly significant principle for God's guidance in your life and mine. The God who is to guide you in this coming week is the same God who has made Himself known in Christ and in the pages of Scripture. The Holy Spirit who leads us today is the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the Old Testament and the New. That's where we begin. The guidance He gives us now will accord with the light He has already given. So you don't need to ask for special guidance in matters about which God has already spoken. You start with His revealed Word.

Imagine now that you're on a basketball team and you've come to practice. The coach has posted on the bulletin board detailed instructions about your warm-up period: exercises you're to do, workouts you're to go through. Now you wouldn't go up to the coach at the beginning of practice and say, "What do you want me to do today, Coach?" would you? His response would probably be, "Have you checked the bulletin board?" You'd stammer a bit. You'd say, "Er, um, no, I haven't." And he would say, "Well, you look at that first and then if there's something you don't understand, come back and ask me."

Now God had indicated to Abraham that his son should marry within the circle of his own people. God has made that even more plain to us. Christians are to marry in the Lord. They are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. A Christian, therefore, shouldn't expect special guidance about that. Sometimes a believer may become emotionally

involved with someone who doesn't share his or her faith in Christ. That person may then begin to pray, "Lord, show me if this is Your will." But as we've been seeing, that's the wrong place to start. As the coach might say, "Check the bulletin board first." Yes, begin with what God has already said. The new light He gives won't contradict the old. But on the positive side, let God's promises support and encourage your faith that He will guide you. Listen to these promises of Scripture:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go. . . .(Psa. 32:8, NIV). Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (Prov. 3:5-6, KJV).

Again, hear this word of James in the New Testament,

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all *men* liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him (James 1:5, KJV).

He will teach us the way. He will direct our paths. He will give us the wisdom which in ourselves we lack.

Pray Confidently for Direction

Now for the second principle of the guided life. Not only does the guided life begin with what God has already revealed but it prays for guidance at each step of the way and looks for God's direction.

The servant is sent on his errand to Abraham's country and kindred to find a wife for Isaac. He doesn't need divine guidance to find that particular family. He can ask anyone about that when he arrives in the area. But the farther he goes, the more he feels the need of God's wisdom for his choice. When he gets near the place, he prays in this way:

O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me success today, I pray thee, and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the maiden to whom I shall say, "Pray, let down your jar that I may drink," and who shall say, "Drink, and I will water your camels"—let her be the one whom thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac. By this I shall know that thou hast shown steadfast love to my master (Gen. 24:12-14).

The servant prays. That's the first thing. I was amazed to find when I was a pastor that many people in the church never think about praying with regard to a choice like marriage. They seem to look at it this way: God might guide you in religious choices, say if you were to become a missionary. But whom you date, whom you court, whom you marry, that all seems to be just up to you. But the servant in seeking to arrange Isaac's marriage felt keenly the need of God's direction.

So he proposed a little test. "When I say to this young woman 'Thus and so' and when she obliges and offers to do something else for me, let her be the one." Try to envision the scene. There's a large, deep hole in the ground. You descend to it by steps. At the bottom of the steps is the well. At the top on level ground is a watering trough for animals. It was a distinct favor for anyone to bring down, to tip the heavy watering jar, to give a stranger a drink; it was a far greater favor to make several trips down to the well and up again to fill a watering trough for camels. In other words, the servant was looking for a girl who would be unusually generous and helpful. The servant would note first the girl's appearance, and then this little test would show something about her character.

The servant has scarcely finished praying when Rebekah appears. He asks his question. Rebekah responds. He watches in silence. Then he asks who she is and discovers that she is indeed of Abraham's kinfolk. At that, the servant is elated. He recognizes God's leading in the situation and offers praise. That's the guided life. You pray for God's direction in everyday things. You're on the lookout for practical common sense indications of it, and you praise Him when they come. That's the life to live, isn't it?

Act on the Light You Have

Here is one more principle. The guided life acts promptly on the guidance received. This servant of Abraham, when he goes to Rebekah's house, won't even eat until he has told his errand. The next day he wants to take her back without any delay. Rebekah, on her part, responds to God's direction and is immediately ready to go. And Isaac, when Rebekah arrives, promptly welcomes her. In other words, God's guidance is given us so that we can follow it. That seems obvious enough, doesn't it? The guidance of the Lord is not for the curious. We can imagine an unspoken attitude something like this: "I think I'll find out what God wants, and then decide if I'd like to do it." That may sound reasonable, but it doesn't work. That way we'll never really know what the Lord wants. Seeking His guidance from the heart is a bridge-burning experience. It's a commitment. It's saying to Him, "Whatever it is, Lord, wherever You're leading, I'm ready to follow. Here I am." There's room for patience, plenty of it, as seen in Isaac. He's waiting, waiting for God to guide and provide.

When it's clear, though, that God is leading you, and that He's made the way plain, that's the time to act, to venture, to follow without delay. And as you obey, more light is given. "I being in the way," says the servant, "the Lord led me." One step at a time, in other words, He showed me the path.

Now think about that, friends. Let's go over the ground one more time. The guided life begins with what God has already revealed, with His commands and promises. Second, the guided life prays at each step of the way and looks confidently for God's direction. And third, the guided life acts promptly on the light received.

Trust the Guide

Now in talking about it that way, I'm obviously taking something for granted. Before any of this will make any sense for us, you and I will need to know the Guide. We need to put our trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the One who has made Himself known as Father through His Son Jesus Christ. We need to repent of our sins and believe in the Savior, Jesus, who died and rose again for us. We need to turn over our lives unreservedly to His lordship. Then we will receive the gift of God's Spirit, and He will be from then on our faithful, personal Guide.

Also, if you are seriously to seek God's guidance, you need to have an over-arching conviction that His will for you is good. You won't want to be guided by God unless you believe that He knows what's best and that He wants the best for you. It's when we see His love so marvelously manifested to us in the gift of Jesus Christ, when we realize that He loved us and gave Himself for us, that we become sure that the way in which He guides us will always be a good way.

Is living a guided life really important? Oh, friends, more than we dream. Our practical decisions, although they don't seem at times very big, yet serve God's eternal purpose. There is an amazing potential in one human life under God's direction. It's the guided life that really serves God's kingdom in this world, that brings to fulfillment His high purpose. Nothing, it seems to me, can be more exciting than that, or more desirable. Best of all, the guided life, in Jesus Christ by the power of His Spirit, can be your life — beginning right now!

Study Questions

1. What help do the Scriptures provide in finding God's will for your life? Do they provide specific guidance for every situation? Explain.
2. How is the Spirit's guidance related to God's written Word?
3. What place does prayer have in the whole process? What other steps do you believe should accompany prayers for guidance?
4. What kind of attitude toward God's will is needed if we are to discover it? Why is this so?

Chapter Thirteen

Bargain or Blunder?

Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Genesis 25:29-34 RSV

There is much about Esau that we can admire. In many respects he was a man's man. Jacob his brother was of a quiet sort, who liked to stay around his tent. Jacob probably was not too impressive a specimen physically. But here was Esau the hunter, man of the open spaces who could wrestle wild beasts, run like a deer, and shoot an arrow straight and far. He was a gruff, masculine type, rough and ready. He loved the out-of-doors, delighted in sports, excelled in the active life. Later on in his life story, we see him as a brother who has been offended but who is still willing to forgive. He doesn't keep on nursing a grudge, doesn't go on seeking for revenge.

But in spite of all this attractiveness, Esau remains a tragic figure. He is spoken of in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews as an "irreligious," "godless" man. He appears there as the very antithesis, the opposite, of what it means to live by faith. What was Esau's difficulty, his downfall? It comes to focus in this incident from Genesis, chapter 25. Listen:

Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished! . . ." Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said. "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Do you get the picture? Esau has been out in the fields, hot on the chase all day long. So caught up was he in the excitement of the hunt that he forgot about eating and came home ravenously hungry. His brother Jacob, a more domestic type, had been puttering around the kitchen, boiling some pottage for himself, a thick kind of soup. Esau craved it. "Let me eat some of that red stuff. I'm famished!" Jacob, a wily man, had been looking for a chance like this. "Sure, Esau, be my guest, but there's one small thing. If I'm going to do you a favor, why don't you sell me your birthright? You know, just turn over to me the rights of the first-born son. I just happen to have the papers here with me right now. Why don't you sign right by that 'X' there?"

Esau shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Man, I'm about to starve to death. What good is that birthright going to do me?" And he started to dig into that red pottage. "No, Esau," said Jacob. "We first have to make it official. You swear to me. You sign on the dotted line. Then you can eat all you want." Esau agreed without any further argument. He sat down, devoured the red soup, got up and went his way.

Everything Now

That incident, small as it may have seemed, was a kind of turning point in Esau's life. There a number of things about his character come to light. First, Esau appears here as a man who has to have everything *now*.

Some time ago on a New Year's Eve, I was talking about the importance of living in the "now" rather than being preoccupied either with the past or the future. Now Esau agreed with that philosophy a hundred percent. Live in the now!—that was his motto. But the problem was in his idea of what it means to "live." For him that meant "get what you can" now. Consume what you can now. Experience what you can right now. He was the perfect beer commercial man: "Grab all the gusto you can"—right now. For all his muscular physique, Esau was a weak man. He was a slave of his appetites, his impulses. He was a pushover for his own body chemistry. His mother Rebekah in this instance would certainly have given him something to eat eventually. He wouldn't have starved without that red soup of Jacob's. But he couldn't wait. He had to have it right then.

In Bunyan's fascinating allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian meets two interesting characters in the House of the Interpreter. Their names are Passion and Patience. Passion is all upset; Patience seems calm and composed. It turns out that Passion is unhappy because he has learned that he has to wait for something until the next year. You know, he can't open

his presents until Christmas. Passion keeps on storming until finally someone brings him a bag of treasure. Then he leaps in the air for glee and laughs at poor Patience who doesn't have anything like that.

But soon, as we might expect, Passion has thrown it all away. He's broken all his toys, and he has nothing left to look forward to. Can you identify at all with this figure Passion and with Esau? Can I? Sometimes we have to have something right now, don't we? I've got to have my fun, my kicks now. I've got to get money, big money, right away. My spouse has to satisfy my needs immediately. I've got to get what I'm after and I don't want any delays. I want this and I mean to have it now.

The problem with this impatience that must have everything right away, these demanding wants of ours, is that they often blind us to far more important things. We think of present satisfaction and not of long-range health. We think of having our desires gratified, not of building deep, loving relationships. We think of present fun, not future usefulness.

Selling Your Birthright

That was the deeper tragedy of Esau's impatience. It revealed a sadly misguided sense of values. Imagine it! To have one fleeting satisfaction on demand, Esau sold away his birthright.

Now the birthright in the ancient world had great value. It involved not only the status of the first-born but also the headship of the entire family. The first-born always got the largest share of the family inheritance, and sometimes he got it all.

In Esau's family, the birthright had a vastly greater significance. This, remember, was the line of God's promise to Abraham. The birthright expressed the pledge of a divine destiny, a share in the outworking of God's great saving purpose. It was this that Esau despised. He didn't reject or renounce it. He simply disregarded it. That is, he considered it of little value. He was ready to trade it away for a trifle.

Some of us may think, "Esau, what a fool you are to barter all that for one wretched meal!" But there's some of that same folly, that madness, in all of us. We usually think we're pretty smart people, but what bad bargains we sometimes make! A young man wastes away his opportunities for study and training. He has them at his finger tips but doesn't use them. No; he's got to have his fun, his kicks, his leisure. So he trades his vocational hopes for that. "What good is all that to me?" he says, like Esau.

Oh, the pathos of it! There are those who barter away a lifetime of health for a few heavy drug trips. There are some who sell their consciences and endanger their hopes for happy marriage by giving way to their sexual impulses now. There are men in business who

compromise their honesty, forget their relationship with God, just to make some extra money. Whenever, friends, we forget about God's purpose for our lives and concentrate on getting something in the present moment, we play the fool. This, you see, is a failure of faith. When we do it, we are simply refusing to believe that what God has to give us is supremely worthwhile. We don't trust, in other words, His promise.

The Sadness of Regret

The end of the story is quite sad. It's some time later now and Esau's father Isaac feels that he may soon die. The hunter is Isaac's favorite and he wants to be sure that Esau gets the fatherly blessing of the first-born. So Isaac sends him out to get game so that he can eat, be refreshed, and bless his favorite son before he dies. Rebekah overhears this interchange. She and Jacob work their little scheme and Jacob manages to steal away his brother's blessing.

Esau, meanwhile, must have been congratulating himself. He knew that he had sold his birthright but now it appeared that Isaac was going to give him the birthright blessing anyway. We see him next bringing the food he's prepared to his father and then learning what had happened. Esau cries out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, "Bless me, me too, O my father!" He blames Jacob for taking away his birthright and his blessing.

Those are some of the saddest things in life, aren't they, when we live to regret our bad bargains? We let opportunities slip. We make foolish choices and live to reap what we sow. And then we look around for someone to blame. Think of the rich young ruler. He doesn't believe in the truly valuable gifts that Jesus promises if he will only abandon his riches and follow. So he goes away sorrowing.

You and I are being faced with significant choices like that from time to time. In a sense we can translate them all like this: "Choose which master you will serve." Will it be the tyrant of your own whims and desires? Or will it be Jesus Christ the true Lord? His service is freedom and joy, while allegiance to self always turns out to be disappointing, always brings a bitter sadness.

When I became a Christian as a high school senior, one of the convictions God gave me was that His purpose is good and worth waiting for. I had several friends who were also struggling with the decision whether to live for Christ or to go along with the godless pressures around them. I was trying to talk with some of them about God's will, about how God's way leads to real joy. But there came for some of us a parting of the ways.

And when I think of the fulfillment that has come to me and my family in seeking to follow Christ and waiting for Him and then of what others have missed and how they've

sometimes entangled themselves in sorrows, I feel both sadness and a wondering gratitude. Waiting for God's will, friends, trying to please Him, while all the world is lightheartedly going the other way, may seem foolish. It may seem a blunder, ridiculous, but it really isn't. Living for yourself, getting for yourself, may seem smart, wise. But don't believe it. Whatever loosens your grip on God's future for your life is a bad bargain. Don't sell the real treasure of your life—Christ and the gospel—for anything. You always lose. Along that road is Esau's "great and exceedingly bitter cry."

The Blessing That Remains

And you know, there's a bright note for us amid the tragedy of Esau's story. His father Isaac had only one real blessing to bestow. After giving it to Jacob, he had little more to give Esau. Esau through his own fault had lost his chance, as have we. But if you will go to Jesus Christ and through Him to the Father of mercies, no matter how much you've lost, how much you've played the fool, there is a blessing still of pardon and restoration for you. Go to Him today without delay. We've all gone our own way like Esau. Confess that to the Lord. Accept the forgiveness He won for you in His death and resurrection. And then trust His grace never to make the bad bargain again, always to prize Christ and the gospel and His purpose for your life.

Study Questions

1. If anyone could observe your actions carefully over a long period of time, what would he probably decide that your chief values are? Explain your answer.
2. In what sense is it a good thing to "live totally in the present"? In what sense is it unwise?
3. Evaluate this statement of missionary martyr Jim Elliott: "He is no fool who loses what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."
4. How are faith and patience related to each other?

Chapter Fourteen

When You Meet God

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 the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." 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." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Genesis 32:24-28 RSV

One of the most memorable things in life for most of us is meeting a very famous person. I recall a couple of experiences of mine like that. When I lived in Chicago, I once met and conversed briefly with Billy Graham. I still remember his engaging smile and how when I shook hands with him, I was impressed at how slim his hand seemed to be, almost frail. Funny how details like that stick with you.

On another occasion when I was visiting in our nation's capital, a friend introduced me to Senator Mark Hatfield. I remember that well also. The distinguished senator seemed calm, friendly and approachable.

But these experiences, though I recall them vividly, had very little effect upon my life. That's probably because neither led to a continuing relationship. I never had opportunity to meet either man personally again. We never exchanged a further word.

Sometimes I compare that in my mind with the effects of meeting some less famous people who have later become my close friends. I contrast it supremely with the experience of meeting my wife. These were encounters that profoundly influenced me. They have been enriching my life ever since. They led, you see, to deep, continuing relationships.

Now when a person really meets God, both kinds of experience are combined. It's surely a memorable event: God is the supremely significant Person. And it is also powerfully

life-transforming because of the new relationship that follows. Today I want to look with you at an experience like that from the life of the patriarch Jacob. Let's learn from it what we can about what happens when a person meets God, as it were, face to face. That's how Jacob described his encounter with the Lord at the place he named "Peniel."

Listen to these words from the 32nd chapter of the book of Genesis, beginning at verse 24:

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 the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." 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." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

A Sense of Unworthiness

We learn earlier in this same chapter that when Jacob met God, he had a new awareness both of God's great love and of his own unworthiness. Listen to the prayer that he prayed when God became real to him (vv. 9-10):

"O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who didst say to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good.' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies."

This sense of personal unworthiness seems to be something new for Jacob. Up to this point he has appeared in the Scriptural record chiefly as a bargainer. He barter with his brother Esau to obtain the birthright. He haggles with Laban over flocks and herds. He even tries to make a deal with the Almighty. He says, in effect, "If You will do this for me, God, then I will do thus and so."

But now when Esau and his troops are approaching, when Jacob is under the pressure of danger, of felt need, a different attitude seems to be forming in him. "I am not worthy." That happens quite characteristically when people meet the living God. Remember Isaiah in the

temple? As he meets the exalted Lord, he cries out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).

Think of Peter by the Sea of Galilee, throwing himself down at Jesus’ feet: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Or think of the apostle John on the Isle of Patmos suddenly beholding the glory of the risen Jesus, “I fell down at his feet,” he writes, “as one dead.”

This is awe in the presence of the Holy One. This is not fright, as we normally think of it, but godly fear. Within it and behind it, for Jacob and for others, is the awareness that God is good, that He has been good to us and that all we have comes by His gift. His amazing kindness, as well as His majesty and holiness, make us feel unworthy, “Who am I?” Who am I that I should be known by, blessed by, brought into fellowship with, the Lord of all?

God Gets the Best of us

The next thing that strikes me here is that when God meets a person, there is a kind of struggle for mastery, and God wins. He gets the best of us.

When Jacob was all alone on the night before his momentous meeting with Esau, a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. This mysterious figure is never named, but when the experience is over, it is said of Jacob that he has “striven with God.” And in recalling later what happened, Jacob confesses, “I have seen God face to face.” This was the night on which the Almighty came down to wrestle with a man named Jacob.

What was the significance of this strange happening in the patriarch’s life? This was surely part of it: God was showing Jacob in that midnight encounter that all during his life God had been striving with him, struggling with him to bring him, Jacob, to yield himself to God. He was now about to step into the promise of God for his future, but once again, as he had done so many times before, Jacob wanted to do it his way, by his own clever methods, without dependence upon God. Jacob had never learned what it was really to trust in the Lord and to allow Him to work things out in His way. It always had to be Jacob’s way before. And even if it involved cutting some corners, if it took dishonesty, a deviation here and there in moral conduct, that seemed to be all right with Jacob. Perhaps he said to himself, “After all: don’t I have a worthy aim? Don’t I want to inherit the blessing that God has promised me? It’s surely all right for me to cut a few corners. If I’m going to get what God wants me to have, I need to keep my wits about me.”

Now God shows him that through all of his life he had been striving with Jacob to make him a different kind of man, and Jacob had been resisting all along. When Jacob seeks now to enter in and inherit everything promised to him, God stands squarely in his path. God

strives with him. All night long in that wrestling, Jacob must have expended his total energies. He tried every trick he knew, but he couldn't get past that Adversary.

Then as dawn drew near, the silent Foe touched the strongest muscle in Jacob's body and it shriveled to impotence. Jacob, as a man utterly without strength, fell down and clung to the feet of his Conqueror.

In that moment, I think, when God touched Jacob in the seat of his strength, Jacob knew who it was that he had been wrestling with. Suddenly it became clear to him as never before that all his lifetime he had been somehow fighting against God. When he thought he was making his own way, when he thought he was being a clever success, he was really struggling against the Lord, and God had been striving with him.

But the Lord had not wanted to subdue Jacob by brute force. He never wants to overpower us and compel us to do His will. God never yet sought to gain the heart of a man or a woman by sheer omnipotence. The Lord was striving with Jacob to bring him to willing, brokenhearted surrender.

Now, when Jacob felt the strength leave his body at the touch of his Adversary, suddenly his eyes were opened to see what his whole life had been—one long contest of rebellion against God. And when God touched him in the strongest part of his body, He touched something more profound and personal. He touched the strength of the old Jacob-nature, as it were, within the man. He touched him at the place of his self-confidence, the place of his wilfulness, the place of his pride and ambition. God broke Jacob in that moment. For the rest of his days, Jacob bore more than a limp because of that meeting. In the inmost depths of his life he had gone down before God.

That's what happens to us when we meet Him. Something gives way deep inside us. We lay down the arms of our rebellion and surrender to Him.

We Wrestle with God—and Win

But that's not all. After God wins, Jacob also wins. Listen again.

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." 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." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Now Jacob has become the active wrestler. God said, "Let me go." But Jacob saw now that God was his treasure, that God was the One whom he needed, that God was everything

in his life. And so he wouldn't let the Lord go. And, in the cry of helplessness and need, Jacob prevailed with God.

Did you know that prayer can overcome the Lord? Did you know that prayer can somehow vanquish Him? Yes, the prayer of a man or woman who has been broken by God can prevail with Him. God apparently will give Himself to the one who has first given way in the secret place of the soul to God's will. He will give everything to the believing prayer of someone who has been overwhelmed by His love and has surrendered his life to God's rule. "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

What was the result of it? The mysterious Antagonist now become friend said to Jacob, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." And as he said it, perhaps there flashed across his mind all the trickery and deceit of the past years in which he had lived up to that name: the "supplanter." Now something new has happened. God acknowledges it by giving him a new name. "From now on you won't be Jacob the supplanter, but Israel, for as a prince you have striven with God."

In that night of meeting with the Lord, Jacob became a new man, a different person. How often God gives a new name to the one who receives a new calling, a new nature, and a new heart! Simon, the man of sand, becomes Peter, the rock. Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the apostle. And here Jacob the supplanter becomes Israel, the prince who strives with God and prevails.

When he arose from that struggle, in one sense Jacob was weaker than he had ever been before. All the strength of his self-will had been leveled in the dust before God. But he arose a man of God, a man of faith, a prince, as it were, in the kingdom of heaven. He had met God, he had been conquered by Him, and had prevailed with Him. Now he was the man whom God could use for the furtherance of His purposes, to be the Father of His chosen people.

I wonder if anything like that has ever happened in your life? Of course, it wouldn't be under exactly the same circumstances. But the same God is still at work today. Have you come to the place where you pray the prayer that Jacob did, "I am not worthy"? That's the first step.

And can you say, "I have met Him face to face"? Have the curtains ever opened for you and has it ever been made clear that in all your past God has been striving to bring you to a place of real commitment? And realizing that, have you ever cried from your heart, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in Thee I find"?

There is a special place where God meets us today. Our encounter with Him may come about in a thousand ways, but the place is always the same: a hill outside Jerusalem. There we see our unworthiness and His great love. There we see the story of our long rebellion.

There we are conquered. There we learn to cling, to trust, and pray. There we receive a new nature and a new name. May that be so for you as you meet the living God through His crucified and risen Son, Jesus.

Study Questions

1. What produces feelings of “unworthiness”? Under what circumstances are they desirable?
2. What do you think the Bible means by “The fear of the Lord”?
3. As you look back on your past life, can you identify points at which you were resisting God’s lordship over your life? What about now?
4. If you feel that you have met God in a personal way, what would you say is the most significant change that He has brought about in your life? What further change would you most like to see?

Chapter Fifteen

The Invincible Dream

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they only hated him the more. He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words.

Genesis 37:5-8 RSV

Man with a Dream

“**Y**ou gotta have a dream. If you don’t have a dream, how you gonna have your dream come true?” Those lines from the play “South Pacific” have stayed with me for years. Joseph, one of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, really had a dream. It was a dream of greatness, honor, significance, high destiny. He dreamed, for one thing, that he and his brothers were binding sheaves in a field, and suddenly his sheaf arose and stood upright, while those of his brethren gathered around it and bowed down. Then he dreamed that he was in the center again, and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were all bowing down to him.

How would you evaluate such dreams? Were they merely expressions of personal ambition? Did they represent Joseph’s inner evaluation of his own gifts and potential? Were they simply assertions of pride? Well, whatever else there may have been in that dreaming of his, there was surely something of God also.

Remember, friends, that in the book of Genesis, the great leaders of God’s people are seen not merely as isolated individuals but also as representative people. Think of Abraham. He is the father and type of all the faithful ones. Remember also Jacob who became Israel. Once the “supplanter,” he came to strive with God and men and to prevail. He is the

patriarch of the twelve tribes. Now in these latter chapters of Genesis, the spotlight falls on Joseph. He is clearly an individual, but he also represents the people of God in their life and pilgrimage. In some measure, all of us share Joseph's dream.

That's one of the things that happens in us when we hear God's call—we begin to have a dream. Or perhaps the dreams we've known before are somehow transformed, redirected. We sense new stirrings, yearnings, glimpses of what our lives are meant to be; of what God wants to accomplish through us. As we say, "we have a dream."

Here again, much of it may be tied up with personal ambition, with ego needs, if you will. Some of our dreaming may spring from a new sense of what our gifts and potential are. It can certainly be that pride and egotism get mixed in with it. Yet in every believing heart there is also something of God in the dream. He puts it in our hearts. We dream of lives that are somehow great for Him, for His loving purposes in the world.

In my teens, when I had first responded to the gospel of Christ, I went to hear a man preach once in a small church near my home. "God's looking for a man!" the preacher said. That's all I remember. Those words went like an arrow to my heart. I remember standing out under the stars one night soon after that, making myself available, telling God I wanted to be the man He had in mind. I'm sure there was adolescent sentimentality in that, but there was also something deeper, something more.

And so for many of us, a conviction dawns one day that there's a person we are to be, a something we are to do, a contribution we're to make, a significance we are to have for God and His purposes. Oh, brothers and sisters, don't be ashamed of that. Don't make light of it. Every human being is in the depths a dreamer and every human heart called and claimed by the Lord has a dream of new and profound meaning.

This Is No Dream-world

But the dream is only the beginning. We have our dreams in this world, but the world itself is not a dream world, is it? It's a world full of harsh realities, a world that seems at times to mock and defy our best dreams. Joseph's dreams, you remember, got him in trouble right away with his brothers. Envy, spite, malice followed after them. This may have been partly the fault of Joseph's father, Jacob. He loved him more than all the others and let it be known. He gave to Joseph a splendid coat with long sleeves.

Still, the dreams were the biggest cause of Joseph's trouble. It's interesting to notice that they were met with anger instead of ridicule. The brothers didn't laugh at what they heard. They sensed something of the potential in their young brother.

It often happens that the dreams of God's people are threatening. Think of the dream expressed by Martin Luther King. It challenged the status quo because it spoke of change, of overturning, of a new social order. There are always forces at work to get rid of dreamers. We've seen that. We've heard it in the assassins' bullets that have cut down dreamers in our generation.

Think again about Joseph. How much happened to him that seemed to make nonsense of his dream! By his own brothers, he was thrown into a dark pit and left to die. All his opportunities were cut off. He was surrounded by darkness, hemmed in on every side, forgotten, rejected, alone. He had felt destined to rule but came to be sold as a slave. Sometimes our circumstances turn out the very opposite of what we had hoped for.

Later on, when Joseph had come to a place of leadership in Potiphar's house, he was falsely accused by his master's wife. His good was evil spoken of. His worthy motives were misunderstood. Trying to serve God and to keep a good conscience, he got nothing but abuse for it. He was thrown into prison for his trouble. Things went from bad to worse.

Once in jail, Joseph encouraged a fellow prisoner who was soon to be released and pleaded with him to be remembered for the help he gave. But even after his kindness and helpfulness, he was forgotten and left to languish in the dungeon for weeks, months, years more. He must have had many days when discouragement settled over him like a heavy cloud. Where were his dreams now? They must have seemed at times to him like a cruel joke. These longings, these aspirations, had been awakened in him, and now this!

Holding On

But somehow, Joseph held on to God through all these disappointments and frustrations. He knew that God was holding on to him. Somehow, in spite of everything, his life was preserved. In Potiphar's house and later in prison, God was with him and made his life useful to those around him. Now and then he could see some evidence of God's hand of blessing, and he was kept from losing heart.

We can learn a lot from Joseph about "hanging in there," as it were, about how to handle difficult things in the interim while we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. For one thing, Joseph kept working. He stayed active. He looked around for some way to be useful. He tried to make the best of the discouraging circumstances that seemed to mock his dreams. Work is good therapy and it helps to keep hope alive, doesn't it?

Then too, Joseph refused to take matters into his own hand. He wouldn't compromise conscience and conviction to help fulfill his own dream. It might have seemed worldly-wise, for example, to dally with Potiphar's wife, but for Joseph it was out of the question "How

then can I do this great wickedness,” he cried, “and sin against God?” If that had to be the way to freedom and success, Joseph chose to continue instead as a servant.

This man Joseph, for all he was going through, kept thinking about others. He cared about his master, Potiphar. He cared about the man’s wife even as he rejected her advances. He was concerned for the men around him in prison. Even when his own hopes seemed blighted, he tried to help others fulfill theirs. Through it all, he held on to his own dreams and didn’t become cynical about those of others.

And because Joseph dealt with his circumstances in that way, God made of him the kind of person who could fulfill the dream. The dream itself was surely altered, purified, deepened. The man, sometimes painfully, was prepared. Then came the fulfillment.

God’s Fulfillment

And note this: the dream was fulfilled in such a way that God’s saving purpose was furthered. His people were preserved and fed. When Pharaoh had a very disturbing dream and no one could be found to interpret it, Pharaoh’s butler suddenly remembered Joseph, the one who had helped him so long before. He told his sovereign how Joseph had interpreted his dream and that of Pharaoh’s baker and how each had been precisely fulfilled.

Pharaoh had Joseph brought out of the dungeon. “I have heard it said of you,” he said, “that when you hear a dream, you can interpret it.” Joseph answered, “It is not in me. God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” And then Pharaoh told his dreams about the seven fat cows and the seven gaunt ones, about the seven full ears of grain and the seven withered ones. Without hesitation, Joseph told Pharaoh the meaning. There would be seven bountiful years of harvest, then seven more of famine. The repetition of the dream meant that the event was fixed by God and that He would shortly bring it about.

The interpretation and the advice that followed it had for Pharaoh the ring of truth. He made Joseph to be second only to him in authority and set him over all the land of Egypt. And so it came about that Joseph’s parents and all his elder brothers became dependent upon him and lived under his authority. The other sheaves indeed bowed down to his. The sun, the moon, and the stars did their obeisance. The dream, in an altogether stunning way, was finally fulfilled. Marvelous!

Oh, remember this: when you cling to God through all that seems to disappoint you, your dream proves invincible. It cannot be defeated. Someone has said, “They may kill the dreamer, but they cannot destroy the dream.”

Let that encourage you to keep on in the midst of frustrations and opposition. You dreamed of accomplishing something significant in your life, but now you’re limited

physically. You sought a promising career, but your hopes have all been frustrated. You had dreams about your marriage and all the happiness it could bring. But now misunderstanding and discord seem to have made a shambles of it. Yes, and what dreams you had for those children of yours and what they might become! But now everything has gone wrong. Their lives seem so different from what you had always wanted them to be.

Oh, friends, in the midst of all that, remember Joseph, and all he went through. And even more, remember Joseph's God. Remember the God who gave His Son to die for you, who offers to you eternal life, forgiveness, and acceptance as His child if you will simply trust Him. Your dreams for your life, for those you love, for your church, for a better world, those are glimpses, oh believe that, of heaven's design. So hold on to them. Work for them. Pray for them, and know that in God's time and way, He will make them come true. Yes, beyond your wildest dreams!

Study Questions

1. Does God want us to be ambitious? Explain your answer.
2. What kind of "dreaming" about our future is wholesome and productive? What kind is not?
3. How would you express the chief "dream" of your life? In what measure has it been fulfilled?
4. What basis is there for confidence that man's highest hopes and dreams will "come true"?

Chapter Sixteen

God's Hand over Man's Hand

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 which we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 'Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke of him. His brothers also came and fell down before him, and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Fear not, 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."

Genesis 50:15-20 RSV

In the Crucible

Try to imagine what it would do to a person to endure what Joseph, the Old Testament patriarch, went through. He was hated and rejected by his own brothers and sold by them into a life of slavery. Some of them had even wanted to kill him! Having arrived in Egypt, he served faithfully as a household slave, but was falsely accused there by his master's wife and put in prison for a crime of which he was completely innocent. While in jail, he notably befriended some of his fellow prisoners, only to be forgotten by them when they gained their freedom. What would prolonged treatment of that sort seem likely to do to a person? Surely if anything was calculated to ruin a man's life, to make him sour, hostile and cynical, it would be experiences like that. We might expect that they would crush everything noble and fine in him and destroy his trust in people. We might have expected Joseph to be a bitter, disillusioned, vengeful man.

Now try to picture the effect it would have on such a person if he were suddenly elevated to great prominence and power. The tables are turned now. Wouldn't you think that the one who had been persecuted and rejected would now leap at the chance to get back at his enemies? Surely the man unjustly accused will be bringing his accusers to justice, hunting down his tormentors and settling the score with so-called friends who had forgotten him.

Further, wouldn't this new-found power go to his head? Wouldn't he be inclined to see himself as a self-made man indebted to no one, who had made it to the top in the hard way, in spite of vicious enemies and traumatic experiences? We've seen the story played out in history many times. When the underdog gets on top, when the slave becomes king, his old enemies had better watch out!

Coming Forth as Gold

Now the strange thing is that none of this embittering or vengefulness seemed to occur in the experience of Joseph. As we watch his reactions under extreme stress, we can't understand them. We never see him getting hard or cynical. Whatever his situation, he keeps on acting in helpful, positive ways. As far as we know, he never sought revenge against anyone, never paid back with evil any evil he had received. Even when he became second to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, with the power of life and death over his subjects, he never used it vindictively.

As we read about his career in the closing chapters of the book of Genesis, we wonder if this man Joseph can possibly be "for real," if his character is even believable. Why in the world would he act in this amazingly magnanimous way? What kept him from being destroyed, poisoned, by what other people did to him?

God Meant it for Good

We can simply affirm, of course, that he was a man of outstanding character, or say that God put it in his heart to feel and react in this way. Both statements are true, but neither penetrates to the heart of the question. The key lies in these words which form the climax to the last 14 chapters of the book of Genesis. They are Joseph's to his guilty brothers. They fear that after their father Jacob's death, Joseph will take revenge against them.

"Fear not," says Joseph, "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

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provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he reassured them and comforted them.

Imagine that! He reassured them! Joseph, the wronged one, the grieved one, becomes a comforter to the brothers who had acted so wickedly toward him! And apparently he acted as he did because of the view he took of his life-history and how it fitted into God's plan. Here's the key: He saw *God's hand* in what had befallen him.

Now that isn't always easy to do. We may be able to see His hand fairly readily in the good things that happen to us, the happy circumstances. We can say, “God's hand was in this” when we have a new baby, when we get a promotion or a raise, when we experience a marvelous healing. And I suppose we can sometimes see the work of the Almighty in what the insurance companies call “acts of God”—natural disasters. Everyone must acknowledge that storms and floods, avalanches and volcanic eruptions are in some sense God's work. But when human agency is involved, it's more difficult, isn't it? When men and women around us are negligent, hostile, or cruel, it's hard to see God's hand in that.

And that's what Joseph saw. “You meant evil against me;” he said, “but God meant it for good.” He saw human agents active in what had happened to him. But God had acted too. They had planned it, but somehow God had planned it too. Their hands had been upon him with malice but God's with mercy. And God's hand was over man's hand.

For Joseph, that never meant that human beings weren't responsible, that his brothers, for example, weren't to be blamed. As we read this account in Genesis, we notice how Joseph labored long and wisely to bring his brothers to repentance. He put them through a number of testings to awaken conscience. No doubt about it—they had done these cruel things. They were guilty.

But for Joseph, God's role in the sequence of events put everything in a new light. He saw what his brothers had done against a larger background. The net result was that benefit eventually came to Joseph and to a whole people. He could say to his brethren, “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.” Imagine that! Joseph is saying that the important thing to remember and focus upon here is God's action and God's design. In the midst of the brothers' destructiveness, God had been savingly at work. He had blessing in view for many, many people in all that happened to His servant Joseph. And that was what this remarkable servant of God chose to remember.

I can imagine someone saying, “Well, that may be all right for him, but things don't always work out that way. There aren't always happy endings like this one. How do I know

that it will work out that way for me when I am wronged, abused, or neglected? How can I be sure that God has all these good things in mind for me and mine?"

The Final Clue

Well, if the account about Joseph stood alone in the Bible, it might be just a beautiful exception to what usually seems ugly, tragic and meaningless. It might be only a lovely tale, a happy coincidence. But remember, friends, the New Testament tells of One whose experience roughly parallels that of Joseph, yet goes far beyond it. The apostles bear witness to Another who was rejected by His brothers. He too was falsely accused and made to suffer unjustly. He also was deserted by ungrateful friends. Worse still, He was delivered up to die and bore the most terrible suffering imaginable.

Many hands, it seemed, were turned against Jesus. Think of the hand of the traitor Judas, moved by avarice. There were the hands of the priests, trembling almost with envy. There were those hands that Pilate tried to wash clean, acting as he did in cowardly self-interest. And what about the hands of the soldiers, brutal and violent? Yes, and all of us somehow had a hand in this, because Jesus was actually dying for our sins, suffering in our place, for our sake.

But after all that, listen to Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost. He's talking about this very event—the crucifixion of Jesus. "This Jesus," he says, "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). There it is: *you* did it. "You crucified and killed Him," Peter says. "Lawlessly, wickedly, responsibly, you put Him to death." But He was also delivered up according to the purpose of God. The Old Testament book of Isaiah mysteriously describes that:

It was the will of the LORD to bruise him. . . . The LORD has laid on him [the servant of the Lord] the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:10,6)

Here the deepest mystery—the Cross—is seen somehow to be God's doing, God's hand over man's.

So what we see at work in the life and experience of Joseph is not an isolated incident, not a random quirk of fate. It's something that runs through the heart of human history. In these words, "You meant it to me for evil; but God meant it for good," we find a clue to what God is up to in the whole human story. In the place where God reveals Himself most clearly, in the face of Jesus Christ, we see Him as a God of suffering love, taking upon

Himself the worst evil men can do, transforming it, and making it work for the salvation of many.

And that conviction, friends, awakened in our hearts by God's Spirit, can more and more do for us what it did for Joseph. It can make us patient in time of adversity, knowing that God hasn't forgotten us, that He's still at work behind the scenes. It can make us humbly thankful and full of wonder when success and prosperity may visit us. We receive this too from God's hand. And most remarkably, it can make us merciful, forgiving, gracious and kind to those who may have wronged us most.

It has become popular in our time to take a different view of God's relationship to the tragedies that blast our lives. Some, in an effort to defend God's character and affirm His loving concern for people, have argued that He has nothing to do with the disasters that overtake us. It is said not only that He does not send them, but also that He, in a sense, can do nothing about them. He is there only to support us, comfort us and help us pick up the pieces after the blow has fallen.

Now I honor the compassion and sensitivity behind that approach but I find it a form of comfort that is shallow and finally unsatisfying. Think of it, friends. If we live in a world out of God's control, where He stands helpless before evils that can swallow up His people, then those malignant forces of wickedness may finally destroy us all. I find in the words of Joseph here and supremely in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, a comfort more strange, perhaps, but strong. We can look at the most shattering evil now that ever befalls us and say without blinking, "Wicked hands have done this to me. The malice of men and the hatred of hell was behind it." But we can also affirm that somehow in the depths and with a breaking heart, God was at work there too. And He meant it, blessed be His name, for great and lasting good.

I may not see at the time what that good is. I may never see it in this life. And yet in the light of God's supreme self-revealing in Jesus Christ, I heartily believe it. And friends, I invite you to say to your unhappy circumstances, to the powers of wickedness, to cruel, hurting people, "You meant it to me for evil, *but* God meant it for good."

Study Questions

1. How can faith in God's providence help to guard us from bitterness?
2. How does Joseph's faith differ from fatalism?
3. According to this passage, can both God and man be responsible for the same happening? Explain.

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4. In what sense does the crucifixion of Christ provide a key for the understanding of God's providence?