

# A POWERFUL TOOL TO HELP YOU KNOW YOUR BIBLE

You want—and need—to know your Bible. . . this book will help.

A fully illustrated, self-guided tour of God's Word, *Know Your Bible* is a brand-new, multi-level study of scripture, based on the two-million-selling handbook by the same name. This enhanced, fully illustrated edition includes one-, three-, six-, and twelve-month courses for you to choose the depth of study you want to pursue.

From a very basic overview of scripture to an intensive study of the great themes, characters, and stories of each Bible book, this exciting reference provides the framework you need to truly understand God's Word—to know your Bible.

**3:15** In his grace, God promised that the offspring of the woman would defeat Satan. He promised that he would take charge of the redemption of their lives and overcome the enemy. This is good news—the first mention of the gospel of grace that would eventually be fulfilled by the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

3:15

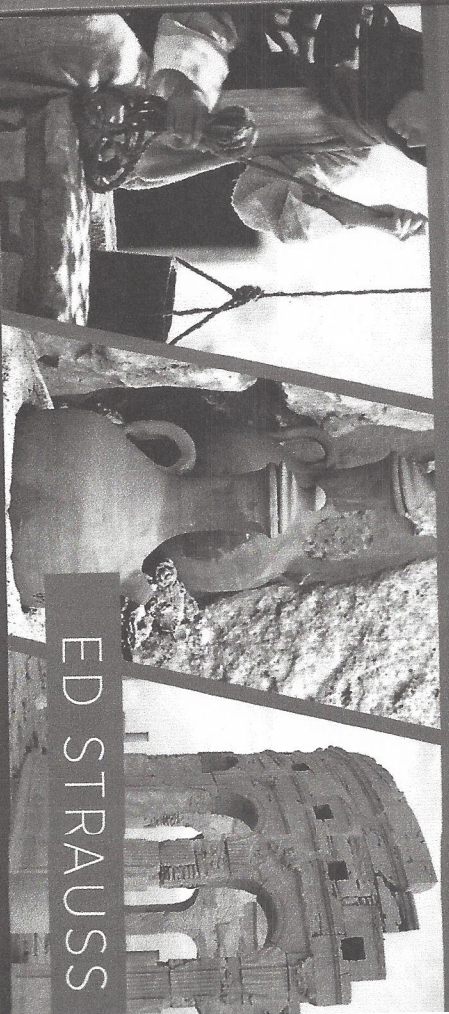
BRHB / Religion / Biblical Reference

Know Your Bible

Based on the 2 Million Copy Bestseller by **Paul Kent**

# KNOW YOUR BIBLE

A Self-Guided Tour through God's Word



ED STRAUSS



CREATION	+
(undated)	+
NOAH	+
ABRAM BORN	+
2166 B.C.	+
ABRAM ENTERS CANAAN	+
2091	+
ISAAC BORN	+
2066	+
JACOB & ESAU BORN	+
2006	+
JACOB FLEES TO HARAN	+
1929	+
JOSEPH BORN	+
1915	+
JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY	+
1898	+
JOSEPH RULES EGYPT	+
1885	+
JOSEPH DIES	+
1805	+

# Genesis

**WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT?** Firsts—the universe, people, families, nations. Genesis means “beginning,” and the book of Genesis is the foundation for the rest of the Bible.

**WHO WROTE IT?** Christian and Jewish traditions say the author was Moses.

**WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?** This book covers from the beginning of time up through the 1400s B.C.

**WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT?** At the head of the line, both historically and spiritually.

### THE BREAKDOWN

- Chapters 1–3: Creation; Adam and Eve; sin
- Chapters 4–5: Genealogies
- Chapters 6–9: Noah
- Chapters 10–11: Growth of nations; Tower of Babel
- Chapters 12–23: Abraham
- Chapters 24–26: Abraham and Isaac
- Chapters 27–36: Jacob
- Chapters 37–50: Joseph

**KEY CONCEPTS** The words *This is the account of...* are used often to mark off main sections of the book.

### SCORECARD

- **Adam:** The first man
- **Eve:** The first woman
- **Cain:** The first murderer
- **Noah:** God used him to save humans and animals.
- **Abraham:** God chose him to be the father of the Jewish people.
- **Isaac:** Abraham's son
- **Jacob:** Isaac's son; his name was changed to Israel
- **Joseph:** Jacob's favorite son; God used him to save Jacob's family from famine



### WORTH MEMORIZING

- **THE BIBLE'S OPENING WORDS IN 1:1.** In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
- **JOSEPH'S WORDS IN 50:20.** “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.”

### THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **WORK IS A GOOD THING.** God gave Adam an important job to do, and Adam did it well. It's no accident that men find fulfillment in their work; God designed it that way.
- **MARRIAGE IS A GOOD THING.** Adam was, in a sense, incomplete until God created Eve.
- **SIN IS A REALITY EVERYONE MUST FACE.** Since Adam and Eve sinned, we're all corrupted. This means we can't always trust our instincts about what's right and what's wrong. Instead, we need an independent moral rudder—God's Word.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF Genesis?

+++

God created people to have a relationship with him.





any of our modern words like *genes*, *genetics*, *generations*, and *genealogy*, come from the same root word as *Genesis*, meaning *origin* or *creation*. The book of Genesis reveals our beginnings. Here we have the beginnings of the universe, of the human race, of sin; the beginning of God's program of redemption and of the Jewish people, who were the ones through whom God would bring the Messiah into the world.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis focus on primeval history, while the rest of the book gives patriarchal history—the story of Abraham and his descendants. Genesis 1 through 11 describes four great events: The Creation, the Fall, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel, while Genesis 12 through 50 tell of four great persons—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

The book of Genesis sets the stage for the entire biblical story and provides foundational lessons for us. As we read Genesis, we're reminded that no matter what life brings or how evil intrudes, God has a plan; and His ultimate plan cannot be frustrated. Many of the events recorded in Genesis permanently affected life on earth. Yet in spite of those epic events, God's plan remained on schedule. We can trust His ability to make sense of our lives even if our world appears to be upside down. When we read the book of Genesis, we're reminded that our Creator-God is sovereign and He is always in control—from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation.

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KEY THOUGHT:

God is the origin of all things—the universe, the earth, life, humanity, the Jewish people, and the plan of redemption.

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KEY VERSES:

“As for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid.”  
Genesis 50:20-21

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KEY ACTION:

Remember that no matter what life brings or how evil intrudes, our Creator has a plan, His sovereignty cannot be thwarted, and His plan is right on schedule.

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KEY PRAYER:

Lord, help me to remember that You are in control of my life, from the beginning to the end.



## BASIC SURVEY

### GENESIS

**AUTHOR:** Not stated, but traditionally attributed to Moses.

**DATE:** Moses lived around the 1400s BC, but the events of Genesis date to the very beginning of time.

#### IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

God creates the world and chooses a special people.

#### DETAILS, PLEASE

The Bible's first book never explains God; it simply assumes His existence: "In the beginning God. . ." (1:1 KJV). Chapters 1 and 2 describe how God created the universe and everything in it, simply by speaking: "God said. . . and it was so" (1:6-7, 9, 11, 14-15 KJV). Humans, however, received special handling, as "God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (2:7 KJV), and woman was crafted from the man's rib. Those first two people, Adam and Eve, live in perfection, but the man's rib. Those first two people, Adam and Eve, live in perfection, but ruin paradise by disobeying God at the urging of a "subtil" (crafty, 3:1) serpent. Sin throws humans into a moral freefall, as the world's first child—Cain—murders his brother Abel. People become so bad that God decides to flood the entire planet, saving only the righteous Noah, his family, and an ark (boat) full of animals. After the earth repopulates, God chooses a man named Abram as patriarch of a specially blessed people, later called "Israel" after an alternative name of Abram's grandson Jacob. Genesis ends with Jacob's son Joseph, by a miraculous chain of events, ruling in Egypt—setting up the events of the following book of Exodus.

#### QUOTEABLE

- > And God said, Let there be light; and there was light (1:3 KJV).
- > Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9 NKJV).
- > But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD (6:8 KJV).
- > Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness (15:6 NIV).

#### UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

Genesis quickly introduces the concept of one God in multiple persons, a

concept later called the *Trinity*: "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (1:26 KJV, emphasis added). Also early on, God gives a hint of Jesus' future suffering and victory, when He curses the serpent for deceiving Eve: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (3:15 NIV).

#### SO WHAT?

Genesis answers the great question of "where did I come from?" Knowing that can give us meaning in a world that's otherwise hard to figure out.

#### READ GENESIS 1-2.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 14. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 9. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 9. →

## Passing the Buck

Genesis 3:8-13

THIRTY YEARS AGO, the conversation went like this:

"Tommy, where's your math assignment?"

"Uh, I think my dog ate it"

Today, it may be more like this:

"Honey, where are the car keys?"

"Uh, I think the baby must have hidden them somewhere."

Passing the buck has been a popular guy tradition for a long time. In fact, the origins of buck passing go back to the dawn of human history. Adam, the first man God created, was also the first man to avoid taking responsibility for his failures.

After God created the earth, he told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. "If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die," said God (Genesis 2:17).

But the serpent enticed Eve into eating the fruit. Then Eve persuaded Adam. This was the beginning of sin and disobedience on earth. Theologians call this event the Fall.

When God asked what happened, he was given history's first buck-passing session.

"Eve gave it to me," said Adam.

"The serpent deceived me," said Eve.

We can only imagine what might have happened if Adam had said, "God, I confess. I messed up. I'm sorry." He didn't, and he paid the price. So do we.



## HEART OF THE BOOK

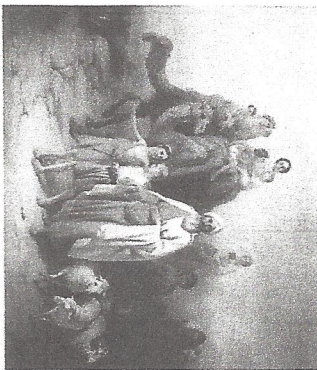
## ABRAHAM—FATHER OF A MULTITUDE

Abraham was a Hebrew, born in Ur in southern Babylonia. His father, Terah, led their family north to Haran, and after he died, God told Abraham to head to Canaan. There Abraham spent the next one hundred years as a shepherd, but God promised that his descendants would inherit the entire land of Canaan (Genesis 17:8)—and they later did.

Abraham had great faith. He believed that God could give him and Sarah a son in their old age (Genesis 15:1-5). The scripture says, “He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6 NKJV). Sure enough, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to a son called Isaac. When Isaac was a lad, God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22). Abraham passed the test, and Isaac, fortunately, was spared.

Abraham was originally named Abram (“high father”), but when he was ninety-nine, the Lord renamed him Abraham (“father of a multitude”). God said, “Your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5 NKJV). God promised: “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 22:18 NKJV). Paul explains, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached . . . All the nations will be blessed in you.” So “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants” (Galatians 3:8, 29 NASB).

Abraham is listed as a great hero in the Hall of Faith (see Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19).



Abraham, who is seen here in *Abraham's Journey from Ur to Canaan* by Israel Habicht (1821-1899), was told by God that he would be the father of many nations.

READ GENESIS 15 AND 22:1-19.

- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 14. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 10. →

## Living by Faith

Someone you should know

Abraham

NO NAME IN THE OLD TESTAMENT shines more brightly than that of Abraham.

The apostle Paul referred to Abraham as “the spiritual father of those who have faith” (Romans 4:11). Hundreds of years after Abraham’s death, Levite worship leaders lauded him as one who “had proved himself faithful” (Nehemiah 9:8). God himself called Abraham “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8).

Who was this man who willingly left a comfortable life to homestead in a strange land? And why did God promise to bless the whole world through him?

Abraham grew up in pagan Mesopotamia. During his early adult years, his father, Terah, took Abraham (then called Abram) and his young bride Sarai, westward toward Canaan. They got no farther than a town named Haran, however, and settled there, on the banks of a tributary of the Euphrates River.

Many years later, God called the 75-year-old Abraham to “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Abraham immediately got up and “went without knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). Because Abraham trusted God and obeyed him, the Lord gave Abraham an astonishing promise that continues to bless and shape the world today:

*“I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12:2-3)

Despite Sarai’s inability to have children (11:30), God promised Abraham that his descendants would become as numerous as the stars in the night sky—and Abraham “believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith” (15:6). In this way Abraham became the chief biblical example of a man who banked his whole future on the Lord’s promises. In the apostle Paul’s words,

Abraham is the chief biblical example of a man who banked his entire future on God’s promises.

Did this make him perfect? Did Abraham’s strong faith keep him from ever stepping out of God’s will? Far from it. The Bible forthrightly tells us, for example, that fear of a powerful ruler drove Abraham to lie about his relationship to his wife—not once, but twice (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18). Abraham and his wife also struggled when God seemed to delay keeping his promise. After ten years went by and they still had no son, they agreed to “help God out” by using a surrogate mother named Hagar. Nine months later, Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son—but it was

not God’s intention to honor his promise in this way (16:1-16). Not until another 14 years passed did God enable Sarah to have a son, Isaac, and so the promised child was finally born to a man who “figured his body was as good as dead” (Romans 4:19).

Abraham, perhaps more than any other Old Testament figure, shows us what a life of faith looks like. When we live by faith, we “share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith” (Galatians 3:9).

**THE POINT:** Faith means believing—and acting—on the promises of God.

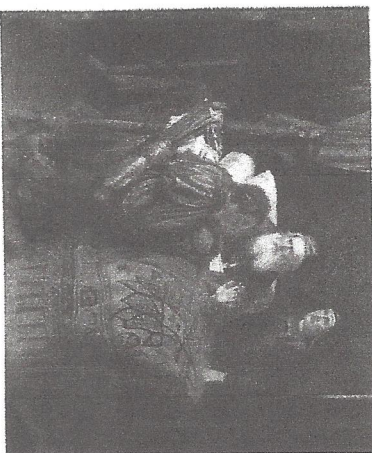


## CLOSER LOOK

## JACOB AND THE BIRTHRIGHT

In ancient times, the firstborn son was the chief heir of his father and ruled the family. This right was called the “birthright.” Godly fathers also conferred a blessing upon this son.

Isaac married Rebekah, and before their twin sons were born, God told her, “The older will serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23 NIV). The first son



Job depicted his father in order to gain Isaac's blessing, as shown in the painting *For Blessing Jacob* by Gerrit Willemse Hoort (c.1612–1652).

to be born was called Esau (“hairy”) because he was covered with reddish hair. The second son came out holding Esau’s heel, so he was called Jacob (“he grabs the heel”).

Esau was the firstborn, but he grew up into a self-centered, carnal man, caring little for God. He also didn’t take his role as firstborn seriously. So one day when he came home

famished from a long, exhausting hunt, he thoughtlessly promised his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a bowl of red lentil stew.

Years later when their blind father, Isaac, thought he was dying, he told Esau to go hunting and cook some of the venison for him. Then Isaac would give his blessing. Rebekah heard, quickly cooked two goats, and told Jacob to go to his father, pretending to be Esau. Jacob did, and Isaac pronounced the blessing of the firstborn over him.

Jacob inherited the birthright and blessing because he passionately defied them. The Bible warns, “Make sure that no one is immoral or godless like Esau, who traded his birthright as the firstborn son for a single meal” (Hebrews 12:16 NLT).

READ GENESIS 25:19–34 AND 27.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 11.



## CLOSER LOOK

## BUILDING A NATION

After Jacob deceptively gained Esau’s blessing, Esau was furious and wanted to kill him, so Rebekah talked Isaac into sending Jacob far north to Haran to “find a wife” from her own Hebrew relatives. When he arrived there, Jacob fell in love with Laban’s youngest daughter, Rachel, and arranged to work seven years in exchange for marrying her. But on Jacob’s wedding night, Laban slipped his older daughter, Leah, into the dark bridal chamber, and Jacob lay with her.

When Jacob realized the deception, it was too late, so he was forced to work another seven years for Rachel. He now had two wives. But though Jacob loved Rachel more, she bore no children. Leah, meanwhile, gave birth to several sons. In desperation, Rachel followed an ancient custom and gave her handmaid to Jacob as a wife, to bear children for her. It worked, and soon her handmaid was pregnant.

She found that two could play that game, however, when Leah also gave her handmaid to Jacob as a wife. Within thirteen years, Jacob had four wives, twelve sons, and an unknown number of descendants. By the time Jacob entered Egypt, many years later, he had a whole tribe of descendants. Then “the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7 NKJV). After 430 years in Egypt, the Hebrews were a nation about two million people strong.

READ GENESIS 29:1–30:24.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 14.



27:33 At this point Isaac realized he had blessed Jacob instead of Esau, but he could not take his blessing back. Jacob would receive the inheritance and blessing of the firstborn son. It became clear that it was God’s plan that Jacob should be the recipient of God’s promises to Abraham, so Isaac acquiesced to God’s will. There are often times when God, through circumstances, will veto our plans. Through grace, he often delivers us from making bad choices and protects us from the terrible consequences. However, we must continually surrender our will to God if we are to progress spiritually.

27:34-40 Here, Esau demonstrated tearful remorse, but according to Hebrews 12:16-17, it was too late. As a young man he had sold his future for a bowl of stew. Now he had to suffer the consequences for not waiting to fill his hungry stomach. He chose to sell his future for immediate satisfaction, for something to dull the pain he felt inside. Some of us may have done something similar, compromising the good future God intended for the fleeting pleasures of sin. But even though time has been lost, there is hope for those of us who are willing to confess our sins, accept responsibility for our actions, let go of what has been lost, and ask God to redeem our lives.



## HIDDEN TREASURE

## ISAAC—THE MIRACLE CHILD

When God told Abraham that ninety-year-old Sarah would become pregnant, Abraham fell to the ground laughing at the idea (Genesis 17:17). He likely staggered with mirth before he actually fell over. Despite this reaction, however, he “staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (Romans 4:20 KJV). Later, when the Lord visited Abraham’s camp disguised as a passing stranger and announced that Sarah would give birth, Sarah laughed, too. But God had the last laugh, because Sarah did indeed become pregnant and give birth. She said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (Genesis 21:6 NIV). This is why Abraham named his son Isaac (“laughter”).

Abraham was told by strangers that Sarah was expecting a child. The scene is depicted in the painting *Abraham and the Angels* by Aert de Gelder (1695–1727).



READ GENESIS 17:15–21, 18:1–15, 21:1–7.

## HIDDEN TREASURE

## JACOB WRESTLES AN ANGEL

After twenty years away from home, Jacob was returning to Canaan. When he heard that Esau was riding to meet him with four hundred armed men, Jacob became sick with fear. Sending his flocks and family ahead, he stayed behind to pray. That night, a stranger attacked him. Jacob began fighting with him, and their struggle lasted till dawn. Eventually, Jacob realized the stranger was an angel, so even after he threw Jacob’s hip out of joint, Jacob refused to let go until he blessed him. For this reason the angel said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel [Prince with God]: for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28 NKJV).



This image by Gustave Doré (1832–1883) is titled *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, and it illustrates the pivotal moment in Jacob’s role in Israel’s future.

READ GENESIS 32–33.

## HIDDEN TREASURE

## JOSEPH’S PRIDE

Jacob had a son by his favorite wife, Rachel, and named him Joseph. Jacob showed preferential treatment to Joseph and gave him “a coat of many colors” (Genesis 37:3 KJV). This aroused his older brothers’ jealousy. To make matters worse, Joseph brought bad reports about his brothers’ shepherding to their father. Finally, Joseph began having vivid prophetic dreams about his brothers bowing down before him. Unfortunately, because of his pride, he couldn’t resist telling them his dreams. So one day they ripped his cloak from him, threw him into a pit, then sold him as a slave to some Midianite merchants going down to Egypt. There God blessed Joseph then humbled him by allowing him to be falsely accused and thrown into prison.

READ GENESIS 37 AND 39.

## HIDDEN TREASURE

## GOD EXALTS JOSEPH

One night, Pharaoh had disturbing dreams. In one, seven starved cows rose out of the Nile and devoured seven well-fed cows. In the other, seven shriveled heads of wheat ate up seven full heads of wheat. None of Pharaoh’s wise men could explain the dreams. Then his cup-bearer (who had been in prison with Joseph) told him that Joseph could interpret them, so Joseph was rushed from prison. He informed Pharaoh that God was warning that there would be seven prosperous years followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh therefore made Joseph vizier to prepare Egypt. Overnight, Joseph became the second most powerful man in the land. Later, his brothers came to Egypt to buy grain and did indeed bow down to him (Genesis 42:6–9).

READ GENESIS 41–42.



Joseph gained power in Egypt when he interpreted dreams for Pharaoh, which is illustrated in the painting *Joseph Interpreting Pharaoh’s Dream* by Peter von Cornelius (1783–1867).



# Coming in First

## Adam

**MOST OF THE TIME**, it's good to come in first.

It feels great when you're the first with a creative solution to a tough problem.

It feels great when you're the first to taste some fabulous new dish.

It feels great when you're the first to explore new territory, to harvest a unique plant,

to watch a sunset from a breathtakingly beautiful perch.

Adam, the first human being ever to open his eyes, experienced all of these firsts, as well as countless more. As the original representative of a new race, Adam became the first to hold a steady job (Genesis 2:15), to play the name game (2:19-20), to enjoy a

dynammic relationship with God (2:15ff), and to get married (2:21-25). God had created Adam to reflect something of his own divine magnificence (1:26-27), and as a result,

this first man and his wife enjoyed a unique role as rulers over every other creature

living on earth (1:26). Had the *Guinness Book of World Records* existed in Adam's day, he would have filled it with a dazzling multitude of exploits.

Too bad he didn't stop while he was ahead.

Most of us would like to forget the one first for which Adam is most remembered.

But we can't, since the results of that first continue to harass us to this day. Adam chose to disobey the explicit instructions of God—and as a

consequence, he earned himself and his posterity the death penalty (2:16-17; 3:17-19).

### The Bible

fingers Adam

as the one

responsible

for bringing sin

and chaos into

the world.

While the Bible fingers Adam as the one responsible for

bringing sin and chaos into the world, some guys would rather blame Eve. Adam's wife, who did in fact break God's command

before her husband did. They wonder, *Why does the Bible lay the fault squarely at Adam's feet?* Scripture offers two primary

answers: First, God gave his commandment directly to Adam, not to Eve; and second, while a devilish deception hoodwinked

Eve into disobedience, Adam consciously and willingly decided to disobey (1 Timothy 2:14). For this reason, the apostle Paul

says, "When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death

spread to everyone, for everyone sinned" (Romans 5:12).

We'll never know what might have happened had Adam chosen God over sin. In the end, Adam returned to the ground from which he was taken after his death at a whopping

930 years of age (Genesis 3:19; 5:5).

And yet, was it really "the end"? No. The Bible is nothing if not a book of hope, and it tells us of a "last Adam," Jesus Christ, who through a first of his own has undone for us

what Adam did to us: "Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life" (1 Corinthians 15:22). As "the first to rise

from the dead," Christ proclaims "light to Jews and Gentiles alike" (Acts 26:23)—a light that allows us, through faith in him, to enter a kind of life superior even to that which

Adam forfeited so long ago.

**THE POINT:** It's good to be first—but only in the right things.

# Trouble in Paradise

## Cain

A JOKE PRINTED in the *St. Louis Pennant* back in 1840 serves as the first known record of a phrase still in use today.

"Why have we every reason to believe that Adam and Eve were both rowdies?" asked the editors.

"Because . . . they both raised Cain."

Today the phrase "raise Cain" means to cause a lot of trouble—as the biblical Cain surely did. This first human baby, the eldest child of Adam and Eve, grew up to become the world's first cold-blooded murderer (Genesis 4:1-8).

What drove Cain to kill his younger brother, Abel? Uncontrolled anger. And what caused

his anger? The Bible gives a surprising answer: religion.

Scripture tells us that while Cain raised crops, his brother managed livestock. At some

point both men wanted to offer the results of their labor as a sacrifice to God. But while God accepted Abel's offering, he rejected Cain's—an event that led directly to the world's

first homicide.

Why did God reject Cain's sacrifice? Apparently it had little to do with the actual items offered. Rather, it came down to the watershed issue that always separates true religion from its deadly counterfeit: faith in God versus confidence in self. The book of Hebrews

tells us that Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain "by faith" (Hebrews 11:4). His genuine faith prompted him to

give to God not second-rate leftovers but the very first and best of his flocks (Genesis 4:4). Cain, meanwhile, hoped to

impress God and to earn divine favor with his own gifts, but discovered that God cannot be bought. The divine rejection

made him so angry that he took out his rage on his brother, then lied about his crime (4:8-9).

Mannmade religion—that is, trying to impress God by what we have done—always ends in disaster. We all have a choice

when God warns us against trying to impress him with our

puny efforts. Will we listen to him, trust him instead of trying to woe him, and do things his way? Or will we insist on our own plans, get angry when they don't work, blame God

for our failures, and then strike out at others?

Make no mistake: We face this choice every day. The New Testament writer Jude warned his readers against following "in the footsteps of Cain" (Jude 1:11). He meant

that we always face the temptation of choosing self-aggrandizing effort over genuine faith. Every one of us must repeatedly make scores of decisions about whether to trust

God and follow his instructions, or depend on ourselves and our ability to get God to stand and applaud.

Some time before Cain struck down his brother, God advised him to do what was right

and warned him that he stood in a precarious place. Cain ignored the warning and wound up a murderer. If we ignore similar warnings, do we really think we'll wind up any better?

**THE POINT:** Nothing impresses God except genuine faith.



# A Bright Star in a Dark Sky



**VIOLENCE IN THE STREETS.** Corruption in the halls of power. Greed. Hatred. Debauchery. All in all, a stinking cesspool of evil and wickedness.

Welcome to the time of Noah.

We may bemoan the collapse of morality in our own age, and rightly so, but human society in Noah's time had so degenerated that God looked down and saw that "everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil" (Genesis 6:5, emphasis added). Human behavior had so badly decayed that "the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart" (6:6). And so the holy God of the universe decided to unleash a worldwide flood to wipe humanity from the face of the earth—all, that is, except for one exceptional man and his family. Scripture introduces him simply: *But Noah found favor with the Lord* (6:8).

In the middle of a violent, corrupt, and sordid society, what was different about Noah? The Bible describes three personal traits that set him apart:

- He was "a righteous man."
- He was "the only blameless person living on earth."
- He "walked in close fellowship with God" (6:9).

When God told him to build an enormous ship in which his family and a pair of every kind of animal might safely ride out the flood—even though the gargantuan vessel would remain landlocked until the deluge came—Noah obeyed.

**Noah lived among a vile people, yet managed to resist their corrupt influences.**

"Noah did everything exactly as God had commanded him" (6:22). Scripture says, Noah wasn't perfect; no one is. But because of his faith, God declared Noah righteous. The writer of Hebrews says, "It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before. By his faith Noah condemned the rest of the world, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

We can only imagine the ridicule and abuse that Noah endured before "the underground waters erupted from the earth, and the rain fell in mighty torrents from the sky" (Genesis 7:1,1). Noah lived among a vile people, yet he managed to resist their corrupt influence. How? By walking with God. Noah's life was a wonderful example of the kind of life all believers are exhorted to live in 1 Peter 4:2-5:

*You won't spend the rest of your lives chasing your own desires, but you will be anxious to do the will of God. . . .*

*Of course, your former friends are surprised when you no longer plunge into the flood of wild and destructive things they do. So they slander you. But remember that they will have to face God, who stands ready to judge everyone, both the living and the dead.*

In spite of his culture, Noah continued to walk with God. Noah is an ancient role model for us, as through a living faith we strive to live "clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people" (Philippians 2:15).

**THE POINT:** A vital walk with God enables a man to find God's favor.

# Too Close to the Edge



A LOT OF MEN today like to live on the edge. Tired of routine and bored with a seatbelted culture, they seek out the daring, the daunting, and the dangerous.

Lot would have felt right at home with guys like this. But when he applied this attitude to his spiritual life, he paid a tremendous price.

Lot grew up in the care of his grandfather, Terah, after his father died. When Terah moved his family to Haran, Lot went along, and when Abraham and Sarah left for the Promised Land, Lot accompanied them (Genesis 11:28, 31; 12:4).

Both Lot and Abraham prospered along the way, and soon Abraham had to say to his nephew, in essence, "Boy, this town ain't big enough for the both of us. Which way do you want to go?" (13:8-9). Lot looked over his options, then took his livestock in the direction of a town named Sodom.

Yes, that Sodom. As in, "Sodom and Gomorrah."

We notice a sad progression in Lot's fascination with living on the edge. At first he lives in tents outside the city. Then he owns a house inside the city walls. And before we know it, we see him sitting at the entrance to the city (19:1), an indication of Lot's importance and high status in the community. Lot seems to have embraced Sodom's evil culture—even though "the people of this area were extremely wicked and constantly sinned against the Lord" (13:13).

**There is a sad progression in Lot's fascination with living on the edge.**

Eventually God decided to put an end to Sodom. He sent two angels to drag Lot and his family out of the doomed city. Lot tried to warn his two future sons-in-law of their peril, but they laughed at him and assumed he was joking. As zero hour approached, Lot hesitated and tried to delay his departure; finally, the angels literally grabbed his wrist and forced him to leave, along with his wife and two daughters. And even when the angels told him to flee to the mountains, Lot tried to negotiate a better deal: "I cannot go to the mountains. Disaster would catch up to me there. . . . See, there is a small village nearby. Please let me go there instead" (19:19, 20). During their flight, Lot's wife disobeyed the angels' instructions and looked back at the home they were leaving. Her refusal to let go of her life in sinful Sodom was instantly and severely punished as God turned her into a pillar of salt (19:26).

Soon after Sodom and Gomorrah went up in smoke, Lot took his two daughters to live in a cave. Shortly thereafter, the girls decide to carry on their family line. But with no other men around, they faithlessly chose to get Lot drunk and into bed with each of them. (You didn't think the Bible would mention incest?) The girls gave birth to illegitimate sons who founded two nations, Moab and Ammon, which would ultimately harass Israel for centuries to come.

That's what can happen when you live too fast and too dangerously. And keep in mind that Lot was a believer. Peter calls him "a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him" (2 Peter 2:7).

Even a man like Lot can be seduced by the flash and excitement of living on the edge. But beware! The drop-off may lie closer than you think.

**THE POINT:** When you live close to the edge, you're only a pebble away from falling.



# The Poster Child for Instant Gratification

## Esau

ESAU WOULD HAVE loved credit cards.

This expert hunter and man of the open country (Genesis 25:27) likely would not have blanched at the idea of mortgaging his future for the opportunity to grab a bunch of hunting gear and camping supplies now. As long as he could take his purchases home with him immediately, he'd think he'd made a good deal.

Scripture remembers Esau—the eldest of twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah—chiefly as the foolish man who sold his birthright for a little bread and a bowl of lentil stew (25:29-34). After coming home furnished from a day on the range, Esau found his brother, Jacob, preparing a meal. He asked for some food, and Jacob agreed—on one condition: that Esau sell him his birthright. In

**Esau's life was a pattern of indifference to things that truly matter.**

ancient times, the family name and titles passed from the father to the eldest son; the birthright also endowed a man with a significant spiritual position. All this, Esau deemed less important than a full stomach. "Look, I'm dying of starvation!" he exaggerated. "What good is my birthright to me now?" (25:32). In recalling this story, the author of Hebrews calls Esau "godless" (Hebrews 12:16). It may seem harsh to call a man "godless" just because he acted impulsively in a moment of acute hunger. But when we look a little further into Esau's life, we begin to see a pattern of indifference to things that truly matter. Consider his marital life.

Like his father, Esau waited until age forty to marry. But unlike his father, he not only married outside of his own extended clan, he chose two brides from among the Hittites, a pagan people with zero regard for the God of Abraham. The Scripture says that his two unbelieving wives "made life miserable for Isaac and Rebekah" (Genesis 26:35). Rebekah even told her husband, "I'm sick and tired of these local Hittite women! I would rather die than see Jacob marry one of them" (27:46).

Amazingly, for a long time Esau didn't even notice his parents' anguish. Only after Jacob moved away to find a wife among his mother's clan did Esau recognize "that his father did not like the local Canaanite women" (28:8). And how did he try to "solve" the problem? He married yet another woman, this time from the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar!

Such a man should not expect great blessing from God—and in fact, Esau lost his father's blessing when Jacob tricked him out of it (27:1-40). As a warning to us, the author of Hebrews writes, "Make sure that no one is immoral or godless like Esau, who traded his birthright as the firstborn son for a single meal. You know that afterward, when he wanted his father's blessing, he was rejected. It was too late for repentance, even though he begged with bitter tears" (Hebrews 12:16-17).

The credit cards finally come due. When any of us choose the immediate over the significant, tears often result—but tears will never pay the bills.

**THE POINT: We gain nothing by choosing the immediate over the significant.**

# The Only Life Worth Living

## Jacob

PERHAPS IF MORE MEN became familiar with the life of Jacob, they'd gain a better perspective on what life with God really entails—both the highs and the lows.

On the high side, Jacob proves to us that God loves to shed his grace on the most undeserving. Think of it: God chose a man who was worthy of the lamentable name he was given (Jacob means "the deceiver") to build a nation God would call his own. God worked so tirelessly and graciously in Jacob's life that this man finally turned a corner, exchanging a career of deception for a life focused on the Lord. Through the family line of Jacob, Jesus Christ came into the world to become the Savior of all humanity.

On the down side, Jacob shows us that the methods God uses to turn us into godly men often cause tremendous pain. God demonstrates through Jacob that he cares far more about transforming us into people who resemble his Son than he does about making us comfortable.

Jacob entered this world grasping the heel of his older twin brother, Esau (Genesis 25:24-26). As a young adult, Jacob bought his brother's rights as firstborn (25:29-34), and then through tricky secured from his father a blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau (27:1-40). Fearing Esau's threats of vengeance, Jacob fled to the tents of his uncle

**Jacob gradually traded his life of deceit for a commitment to seeking God.**

Laban. In Laban Jacob found a man every bit as capable of deception and manipulation as he. Laban tricked Jacob into laboring for 14 years in exchange for the privilege of marrying his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. During his time with Laban, Jacob fathered 11 sons and a daughter and became quite wealthy.

When he finally left his uncle to return home, Jacob again resorted to deception in an attempt to avoid Laban's wrath (chapter 31). Finally, even though many years had passed since he had cheated Esau out of their father's blessing, Jacob still feared his brother. So he constructed an elaborate means of appeasing Esau, depending largely on bribery (32:1-21).

And then God stepped in. In one of the stranger accounts of God's direct intervention, Jacob wrestled all night with someone he first considered only "a man" (32:24). Toward daybreak this man "touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket" (32:25), leaving Jacob with a limp. Only after the man blessed him did Jacob realize his adversary's identity. He called the place of his wrestling match Peniel, meaning "face of God," and said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared" (32:30).

From that moment on, Jacob's life started to change. He gradually traded his life of deceit for a life of commitment to God.

Given this history, it seems fitting that God would change Jacob's name to Israel ("God fights," 32:28; 35:10). His new name would remind him that the God he had fought against would now be fighting for him. Jacob's struggles were far from over, but his struggles against God had come to an end. A life of faith is a life of struggle—but it's also the only life worth living.

**THE POINT: A life of faith is a life of struggle.**



# No Wonder He Laughs



MIDDLE CHILDREN AREN'T the only ones who sometimes get overlooked. Middle patriarchs can suffer the same fate.

About two dozen times the Bible uses some form of the phrase, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Abraham we know fairly well, and Jacob we remember as the father of 12 sons who founded the 12 tribes of Israel. But Isaac? Isaac who? That's too bad, because in one sense, everything depends on Isaac.

Isaac was the only son of Abraham and Sarah, born miraculously to the couple when they were "too old" to have children. Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was only 10 years younger. In addition, Sarah had been barren (Genesis 17:17; Romans 4:19; Hebrews 11:11) her whole life. Yet God had promised the couple a son. And a son he gave them, despite their advanced years and despite their doubts (Genesis 17:17; 18:12).

Can you imagine being Isaac? From your earliest days, you hear over and over from your elderly parents how you are a living miracle. Your father tells you how God promised a son . . . yet waited a quarter of a century to fulfill his promise. Your mother tells you how both she and your dad chuckled in disbelief at God's announcement of your coming birth . . . and then how they both laughed tears of joy at your arrival. Even your name, Isaac, has meaning: "he laughs."

Then, after all of that, one day your aged father tells you to get prepared for a trip. You are going to a sacred place to make a sacrifice, he says. You notice that he seems especially troubled on this three-day journey, yet you mark it down as fatigue from the journey or just your imagination. And anyway, who are you, a mere boy, to question this venerable soul who receives promises direct from the lips of God? Still, it bothers you that he has not brought an animal to sacrifice, and you ask him about it. "God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son," he replies, then goes silent (22:8).

You reach your destination. And your beloved father—the one who has told you again and again about your destiny and about his love for you—binds you with strong rope, places you on the altar he has built, and raises his knife above your chest! Then your terror changes to a tidal wave of relief when an unseen voice calls out from heaven, "Don't lay a hand on the boy! . . . Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son" (22:12).

Isaac, of course, lived to be 180 years old and fathered Jacob, thus continuing the unbroken line that eventually led to Jesus Christ. And because of Christ, the apostle Paul can say to us, "And you, dear brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, just like Isaac" (Galatians 4:28).

So with this kind of heritage, it probably wouldn't bother Isaac too much that we sometimes forget his story. It would take a lot more than that to bother this son of promise whose name means "he laughs."

**THE POINT: When God promises, he delivers.**

# Abraham Didn't Stop to Ask Directions

Genesis 12:1-9

**GOD GAVE ABRAHAM** an unusual assignment: "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family and go to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).

Abraham (who was going by the name Abram at the time) didn't wait around for God to give him a detailed map and itinerary. And back then, they didn't have GPS technology to pinpoint their location.

Instead, Abraham told his wife and family to pack up and hit the road without asking for further directions. "Abram departed as the Lord had instructed," says Genesis 12:4.

For centuries, women have been criticizing men who set out on a trip without consulting a map and refuse to stop and ask for help. Is it possible that this near-universal male trait is ancient Abraham's legacy to modern man?

Perhaps, but there's a bigger message to be found by examining Abraham's travel habits. More than anything else, he took God at his word. He believed God, and he based his life on that belief.

That's why the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews praises Abraham as a model of faith. "It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8).

That doesn't mean women are always wrong when they ask men if they know where they're going. But there may be times in a man's life when he must follow God into uncharted territory.

# Too Hot to Handle

Genesis 39

**JOSEPH WAS** the kind of good-looking guy who created ripples whenever he walked into a room. Men like Joseph face temptations that don't typically afflict the rest of us, especially when there's a sexually aggressive woman on the prowl.

Joseph had been sold into slavery by his insanely jealous brothers. Soon, he became a slave in the house of Potiphar, a powerful Egyptian military officer who served the all-powerful Pharaoh.

Before long, Potiphar's wife took a liking to Joseph and tried to lure him into her bed. Joseph, a righteous guy and diligent worker, resisted her.

"It would be a great sin against God," he told her. (Genesis 39:9). But she kept after him anyway. One day, the two were alone in the house. Potiphar's wife used this opportunity to approach Joseph once again. He resisted her, as usual, but she grabbed his shirt as he ran out the door. Before Joseph knew it, he was charged with attempted rape and thrown into prison.

The workplace today, as in Joseph's time, puts us in close proximity to women, not all of whom have pure intentions. While we can take certain precautions in scheduling our meetings and business travel, temptations may arise in spite of us. In such a moment, too many men have rationalized, "Well, hey, she was coming on to me, and what was I supposed to do? I'm a guy, you know!"

That's no excuse. The story of Joseph teaches us that responsibility for moral integrity is still ours, regardless of what an aggressive woman does, or says afterward. Run as fast as you can, and if you get ridiculed or lied about later, so be it. No potential consequence of avoiding sin will ever be as bad as the consequence of giving in.



# Joseph

## Faithful Despite Hardships

HAD YOU BEEN on the outside looking in, you might have completely misjudged Joseph's situation. You might have observed his sequence of extreme hardships and thought, *A good-looking young man, sold into slavery by his brothers, tossed into prison on a bum charge, and forgotten for years by a man who promised to help him? Sounds like God's judgment to me!*

Joseph's story disproves the theory that nice things always happen to good little boys. But his life also confirms that "God is not unjust. He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other believers, as you still do" (Hebrews 6:10).

Joseph grew up as the favored son of Jacob's 12 boys. Jacob even gave him an expensive robe that set him apart from his siblings (Genesis 37:3). As a teenager Joseph unwisely recounted to his family two dreams that seemed to place him in a position above them all—even his parents (37:1-11). Soon his brothers' jealousy turned into hatred.

Joseph's brothers seized him and sold him to slave traders (37:28). A rich Egyptian named Potiphar bought Joseph. Before long, Potiphar put him in charge of his estate (39:1-6). Joseph refused the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife, so she accused him of attempted rape. Furious, Potiphar threw Joseph into prison (39:7-20).

During his incarceration he won the favor of the warden and successfully interpreted the dreams of two of Pharaoh's jailed workers, correctly predicting that one would be executed and the other freed (40:1-22). The latter man promised to help Joseph upon his release, a pledge he promptly forgot (40:23). Not until two years later, when Pharaoh himself had a troubling dream, did the man remember Joseph. At last Joseph was able to win his own release from prison by correctly interpreting

for the king the meaning of his dream (41:1-36). Joseph told Pharaoh that his dream foretold a seven-year famine that would decimate the kingdom unless extra crops were stored up beforehand. The king was so impressed with Joseph that he put him in charge of the crop-storage program, making him second-in-command over the whole kingdom (41:39-57).

During the famine, Joseph's estranged brothers came to Egypt seeking food for their starving families. They did not recognize Joseph, but he recognized them! Through a series of harrowing encounters, Joseph finally revealed his identity. With the secret out, his brothers immediately feared for their lives, terrified that Joseph might use his enormous power to exact revenge.

But Joseph knew that despite his hardships, God had been with him. He had remained faithful to the Lord so he could tell his trembling brothers, "Don't be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people" (50:19-20).

**THE POINT:** God may not shield you from hardships, but he will use you through them—if you let him.

## A Model of Leadership

# Pharaoh

THE UNNAMED PHARAOH who ruled Egypt in the time of Joseph showed himself to be a terrific leader, one from whom we can learn several valuable lessons about how to effectively show the way to others. Note how he demonstrated effective leadership:

1. *Pharaoh recognized a genuinely spiritual issue when he saw one.*

Although so far as we know Pharaoh never personally trusted in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he did recognize the gravity and significance of a spiritual issue when it came to his attention. When he had a disturbing dream that he did not understand, he immediately called in expert help. While his usual spiritual advisers could offer no assistance, nevertheless he correctly identified his dream as an important spiritual concern (Genesis 41:1-13).

2. *Pharaoh remained open to receiving help wherever he could get it.*

Many leaders refuse to "stoop" to take help from those they consider inferior. But Pharaoh gladly accepted help from whom ever could give it, even a Hebrew slave (41:14-32).

3. *Pharaoh quickly recognized talent and put it to use.*

Some leaders feel threatened by men and women with obvious talent. But no sooner had Pharaoh met Joseph and heard his explanation of the dream than he said to his court, "Can we find anyone else like this man so obviously filled with the spirit of God?" (41:38). Without delay he named Joseph second-in-command of his empire, entrusting to him the details and the authority necessary to keep Egypt from ruin.

Pharaoh knew that he could never accomplish what Joseph could. Not only did Pharaoh have no ability to interpret dreams, he also could not run the administration of a nationwide food assistance program nearly as effectively as could Joseph. So when his hungry people came to him during the famine to plead for food, he told them plainly, "Go to Joseph, and do whatever he tells you" (41:55).

4. *Pharaoh recognized his limitations.*

Pharaoh knew that he could never accomplish what Joseph could. Not only did Pharaoh have no ability to interpret dreams, he also could not run the administration of a nationwide food assistance program nearly as effectively as could Joseph. So when his hungry people came to him during the famine to plead for food, he told them plainly, "Go to Joseph, and do whatever he tells you" (41:55).

5. *Pharaoh showed great gratitude to Joseph for his effective service.*

Many leaders find it almost impossible to recognize the accomplishments of underlings, and certainly do not go out of their way to show their appreciation for a job well done. Pharaoh looked for ways to honor and thank Joseph for his effective service. When Joseph's family arrived in Egypt from famine-plagued Canaan, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Now that your father and brothers have joined you here, choose any place in the entire land of Egypt for them to live. Give them the best land of Egypt" (47:5-6, emphasis added).

Through his skillful and humble leadership, Pharaoh spared his people from starvation. In the process, he became more powerful than ever and assured his legacy for generations to come (47:14, 19-20).

**THE POINT:** Humble leaders make good leaders.



# Turbulent Waters

## Reuben

IN MANY WAYS, Reuben seemed like the ideal firstborn son: strong, loyal, considerate, and a natural leader. Yet his failure in one area of his life—his sexual urges—cost him the high position that rightfully belonged to him.

Reuben was the son of Leah, Jacob's first wife. From the beginning Reuben gave his mother comfort in a difficult marriage (Reuben sounds like the Hebrew word for "he has seen my misery"). Reuben helped his mom by bringing her some aphrodisiac mandrake roots he had found in a field (Genesis 30:14).

Many years later, it was Reuben who prevented nine of his younger brothers from killing Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, when the boy came to visit his siblings in a remote area as they grazed the family's flocks; he didn't tell them that he hoped to rescue the boy and take him back to his father (37:22).

Unfortunately, he left the scene only to discover upon his return that his brothers had sold Joseph to a traveling band of slave traders. "The boy is gone!" he lamented. "What will I do now?" (37:30). When he felt no other option lay open to him, he agreed to go along with his brothers' plan to make it appear as though Joseph had been killed by a wild beast; that was the story he told his heartbroken father. Jacob no doubt blamed Reuben, as his eldest, for the loss of Joseph. And he probably found it easier to blame him after what Reuben had done years before. Genesis puts it bluntly: "Reuben had intercourse with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Jacob soon heard about it" (35:22).

While Jacob never formally punished Reuben for his illicit liaison, neither did he ever forget about it. Shortly before Jacob died, he pronounced a series of blessings and prophecies over each of his sons. As firstborn, Reuben might have expected to receive top honors. But listen to Jacob's words, prompted by God's own Spirit:

*"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my strength, . . .  
You are first in rank and first in power.  
But you are as unruly as a flood,  
and you will be first no longer.  
For you went to bed with my wife;  
you defiled my marriage couch." (49:3-4)*

Firstborn sons in the book of Genesis do not generally fare well. Cain murdered his brother, Abel. Ishmael lost his role of family leadership to his younger brother, Isaac. Esau sold his birthright to his younger twin, Jacob. And Reuben forfeited his place as leader of the clan to his brother, Judah, who received a remarkable prophecy regarding a distant descendant (49:8-12).

Thousands of years later, the apostle Paul would write, "Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18). And sometimes, such a sin costs you a delightful role that could have been yours.

**THE POINT:** One major slip-up in life can ruin a lot.

# Lessons in Irony

## Laban

SOMETIMES THE LORD shows a marvelous touch of irony. Take Laban as a case in point. We first see Laban hurrying out to meet Abraham's faithful servant, who had come in search of a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:28-51). Moments before, the servant had made contact with Rebekah, Laban's sister, and Laban wanted to show the visitor hospitality. The narrative suggests a close, loving relationship between Rebekah and Laban.

Many years later, Jacob, "the deceiver," fled to his uncle Laban on the advice of his mother, Rebekah. Jacob immediately fell in love with the younger of Laban's two daughters, Rachel, and agreed to work seven years in exchange for the right to marry her. Because of his love for her, those seven years flew by and "seemed to him but a few days" (29:20).

As the long-awaited wedding approached, Laban threw a big party for the bride and groom. "But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her" (29:23). In the pitch-blackness of a Middle Eastern tent, Jacob apparently did not realize the bait-and-switch—until the sun came up the next morning. Jacob was understandably furious. "What have you done to me?" he demanded of Laban. "I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?" (29:25).

So the deceiver was deceived—and not for the last time. Jacob agreed to work for Laban another seven years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage, then stayed on still another six years to manage his uncle's flocks. In that time Jacob grew to be a wealthy man—yet the working relationship grew more strained as the years went by. Laban's attitude toward Jacob soured, and eventually Jacob decided to sneak back home. He explained his reasoning to his wives like this: "You know how hard I have worked for your father, but he has cheated me, changing my wages ten times" (31:6-7).

You can't help but wonder if God decided to cure Jacob's addiction to deception and cheating by forcing him to work for a man even more addicted. The ironic story reminds us of a verse written centuries afterwards: "They dig a deep pit to trap others, then fall into it themselves" (Psalm 7:15).

"You want to deceive and cheat?" God seemed to ask Jacob. "Fine—I'll show you what it feels like to be repeatedly deceived and cheated."

What can we learn from Laban? Perhaps the apostle Paul said it best: "The whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another" (Galatians 5:14-15).

**THE POINT:** God may use unexpected means to get us to change.



# Making a Man and a Woman

Genesis 1:27 and 2:15-25

**GOD MADE EVERYTHING** in the cosmos, from the microscopic amoeba and tiny insects to the vast planets and galaxies. But his work wasn't done until he had designed his most amazing creatures.

The first two chapters of Genesis give us two slightly different descriptions of the process God used to create humanity.

The sound bite in Genesis 1:27 tells us that people were created in God's own image. That doesn't mean humans are gods, but it does mean we have some of the Creator's characteristics—including our own kind of God-given creativity.

The longer Genesis 2 account provides more details about God's creation of Adam and Eve; Adam came first, and one of his ribs was used in the later creation of Eve.

People have argued about the Genesis creation stories for centuries. Skeptical scientists say the Bible is riddled with errors, but theologians say Genesis was never intended to be a science book.

Feminists and traditionalists have also fought bitter battles over these two brief passages. Feminists prefer Genesis 1, which supports their claims of gender equality, while those who support male leadership in the home and society prefer Genesis 2, which suggests women may have been dependent on men from the beginning of time.

These passages won't settle the raging scientific and moral debates, but they do make one thing perfectly clear: God created both the male and female and declared them "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Adam was pretty pleased, too. "At last!" he exclaimed when he first saw Eve (2:23).

# Naked and Unshamed

Genesis 2:25

**THE EARLY DAYS** in the Garden of Eden were a time of innocence and joy for humanity's first husband and wife. Wouldn't it be nice if we could bottle some of their happiness and pour it all over our own sex-saturated, love-starved world?

Here's how British thinker C. S. Lewis once described the problem of runaway sexual appetites:

"You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theater by simply bringing a covered plate onto the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there was something equally queer about the state of the sex instinct among us?"

That was half a century ago. Today, technology has accelerated the sale of sex, especially on the Internet, where anyone can view material once considered illegal or unthinkable.

Sex is the means by which humans and other creatures reproduce. But it's obvious that when God designed human sexuality, he added lots of interesting extra features. That's because there's more to human sexuality than breeding.

God created sex as a means for a man and a woman to experience a kind of soul-to-soul intimacy that can't be known any other way. Sex was also designed to make men and women praise God.

For Adam and Eve, sexuality was innocent and joyful. What would it take for us to experience sex in that way today?

# The First Family Squabbles

Genesis 4:1-12 and chapters 37-45

**YOU MAY THINK** you've seen major emotional meltdowns in your family, but your clan's squabbles are no match for the dysfunction and despair found in Old Testament accounts of some of the most famous biblical families.

Adam and Eve probably thought their sons Cain and Abel would be two bouncing bundles of joy. But that's not how things turned out.

Abel, a shepherd, wanted to honor God by giving him the best of his flock. Cain, a farmer, gave God a sacrifice of crops. God accepted Abel's gift but rejected Cain's—perhaps because Cain's motives were impure. Whatever the reason for God's decision, he gave Cain a chance to repent. Instead, Cain murdered his brother. Adam and Eve thus suffered the pain of burying their own child.

Things didn't go any better for Joseph, one of Jacob's sons and a great-grandson of Abraham. Joseph was an unusually gifted young man: good looking, intelligent, spiritually mature, and well organized. His jealous brothers grew resentful in the shadow of the superstar Joseph and hatched an evil plot. They sold Joseph into slavery and made it look like he had been killed.

Genesis devotes numerous chapters (37-45) to this astounding story. Joseph suffered greatly, but God ultimately made him one of the most powerful men in the world. In his position of power, Joseph was able to help the very brothers who had treated him so cruelly.

There's no cardboard cutout pattern for the families we find in the Bible. Some were happy, while others were miserable. Some found healing and redemption, while others self-destructed.

There's not necessarily any comfort to be found in the pain of others. But the next time your kids are going ballistic, remember that family squabbles have been raging for a very, very long time.

# Childless and Hopeless

Genesis 16 and 19:30-38

**GOD MADE A solemn promise** to Abraham and Sarah that he would give them a child. He promised that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But by the time Abraham and Sarah had reached the age for rocking chairs and walkers, they still hadn't been given a child.

Like many contemporary couples who experience difficulty conceiving, Abraham and Sarah probably went through their share of sadness, suffering, and self-doubts. Had God really promised them a child? If so, whose fault was it that no child had come?

Eventually, Sarah decided to take matters into her own hands. She had Abraham sleep with her servant Hagar, who gave birth to a son named Ishmael. By the time Abraham and Sarah's own son, Isaac, was born a few years later, this family's storyline was already more complicated than a soap opera.

Today, Jews consider themselves descendants of Isaac, while Arabs consider themselves descendants of Ishmael. Some have suggested that today's geopolitical tensions stretch back to Sarah's impatience to have a child.

You would think this experience would serve as a lesson. But some of Abraham's family members made similar errors later on. Jacob's wives convinced him to sleep with their servants to produce children, and his family became so dysfunctional that eventually ten of his sons sold their brother Joseph into slavery. Lot's daughters became so desperate for children that they slept with their own father, producing two more ethnic groups that tormented the people of Israel for centuries.

It is dangerous to lose faith in God and take matters into our own hands.



# Vegas in the Middle East

Genesis 18:17-19:29

**TAKE THE WORST** of gambling-obsessed Las Vegas, drug-crazed Amsterdam, and the sex-crazed red-light district of Bangkok. Now roll them all together. That will approximate the reputation of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In fact things were so bad that God decided to take action against the cities. Abraham pleaded with God to halt his plans as long as 50 righteous men could be found in these cities. Then Abraham and God negotiated, bringing the final number down to 10.

As chapter 19 shows, Abraham was being overly optimistic in hoping that 10 righteous men might be found in Sodom and Gomorrah. When God sent two angels to inspect the city of Sodom, Abraham's nephew Lot asked them to stay in his house for the night. A rowdy gang (19:4 says "all the men of Sodom, young and old") gathered outside the house and demanded that Lot bring out his guests so the mob could have sex with them. (This is where we get the term *sodomy*.) Lot had the decency to protect his guests, but his despicable response was to offer the men his daughters instead!

God had now had enough. He bombarded Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and sulfur, reducing these evil cities to piles of smoldering ash.

God mercifully allowed Lot and his family to escape the destruction, but they were reluctant to leave. Finally, the angels had to take their hands and all but drag them out of the city to safety. As they fled across the desert, Lot's wife wanted to take one last look back—even though she had been commanded not to. She knew she would miss her old home. As soon as she turned back to look, she turned into a pillar of salt.

Even an evil culture can feel like home to folks who grow accustomed to it.

# When Love of God and Love of Family Collide

Genesis 22:1-19

**PROMISE KEEPERS** and Focus on the Family tell men that to love God means to love your family. But what if duties to God and family collide?

They did for Abraham, who struggled with this disturbing dilemma nearly four millennia ago. Things didn't turn out like anybody expected.

Abraham had already demonstrated his deep faith in God. When God called him and told him to set out for a distant land, Abraham went, even though he didn't know exactly where he was going.

Years later, Abraham endured an even more difficult crucible of faith when God once again called him, delivering one of the most disturbing commands in the entire Bible: "Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and . . . sacrifice him as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2).

The passage doesn't record Abraham's inner torment at receiving this command. We aren't told whether or not Abraham talked to Sarah, who had waited so long to give her husband a son. All we get is this simple report: "The next morning Abraham got up early [and] saddled his donkey" (22:3).

He took Isaac with him. He also took a knife. He chopped some wood for the fire and ascended the mountain God had told him would be the site of the sacrifice.

But then, just when Abraham's hand was poised to kill Isaac, God intervened. "Don't lay a hand on the boy!" (22:12). Abraham was freed from his horrible predicament. Imagine his joy as he untied his son!

For his willingness to obey God no matter what the cost, Abraham was richly blessed.

# Shopping for a Wife

Genesis 24

**WHEN IT WAS** time for Abraham to find a wife for his son Isaac, he went to some extraordinary measures. Abraham didn't want his son to marry one of the local Canaanite girls; he wanted a woman from his homeland. More important, he wanted the woman God had planned. So Abraham sent his chief servant to the watering hole back home. This wasn't a seedy tavern with sticky beer on the floor and stale smoke in the air. It was an actual watering hole where locals brought their containers and camels.

Abraham's servant knew the importance of finding just the right woman for his master's son to marry. So he prayed this prayer: "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, . . . please give me success today" (Genesis 24:12).

To make sure he would find the right wife, the servant set up a unique test. He would ask one of the women for water, and if she gave some to him and also offered to water his camels, he would know she was the one.

Soon, a beautiful young woman named Rebekah came along. She passed the test with flying colors. But one thing still needed to happen before wedding bells could ring.

The servant journeyed with Rebekah to meet Bethuel, her father. He told Bethuel the whole story and asked if he would permit Rebekah to marry Isaac. "Please tell me yes or no, and then I'll know what to do next" (24:49).

After Bethuel gave his enthusiastic blessing, Rebekah left her home and traveled with Abraham's servant back to Canaan to marry Isaac.

Maybe more marriages would last longer today if men and women sought God's will for their lives and tried to work things out in advance with their future in-laws.

# From Onan to "Onanism"

Genesis 38:6-10

**FOR YEARS**, preachers who wanted to scare young men away from masturbation would turn to an obscure Old Testament figure named Onan, who spilled his semen on the ground and died because of it.

Most teenagers aren't biblical scholars. Few can read Hebrew. And fewer still are brave enough or stupid enough to disagree with preachers. So when they heard that God zapped someone for masturbating, they took it at face value.

But anyone who carefully examines this passage will quickly discover that it isn't talking about masturbation.

Onan had an older brother named Er, who had died. Judah, their father, instructed Onan to marry Er's widow, Tamar, so she could have a son to serve as Er's heir. But Onan didn't like the plan and so intentionally avoided impregnating Tamar. His disobedience of Judah's command offended God, who took Onan's life.

Somehow, out of this complex, ancient story, Onan became a modern-day poster boy for the dangers of masturbation, a subject that isn't specifically addressed anywhere in the Bible.

There are plenty of reasons for being cautious about masturbation. For one thing, a man who focuses on self-gratification may develop an inability to provide pleasure to his wife, which is part of the purpose God had in mind when he designed human sexuality. Further, some men's hunger for sexual gratification leads them into pornography, sexual addictions, and various ways of acting out their sexual fantasies.

Onan did a bad thing, and he was punished for it. But his sin wasn't the thing he's long been blamed for. Masturbation may not be advisable, but it's not a mortal sin.



# Personal Gold

from GORDON MACDONALD

## ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

I get the feeling we are a tired generation. Evidence abounds in a multitude of articles about health problems related to overwork and exhaustion. *Workaholicism* is a modern word. No matter how hard we are willing to work in our competitive world, there always seems to be someone willing to put in a few more hours than we are.

What is strange about our general fatigue is the fact that we are such a leisure-oriented society. We actually have what is called a leisure industry, and it is among the most profitable in our economy. Whole companies, organizations, and retail chain stores are committed to providing the goods with which people can pursue fun and good times. We probably have more time for leisure than we ever had before. So why is there so much exhaustion and fatigue today? Is it real? Imagined? Or is the contemporary form of exhaustion evidence that we no longer understand genuine rest, which is different from the pursuit of leisure?

There is a biblical view of rest that needs to be uncovered and examined. In fact, the Bible reveals God Himself to be the first "rester." "On the seventh day God had finished his work of creation, so he rested from all his work." An even more enlightening comment is made by Moses in Exodus 31:17—"For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day he stopped working and was refreshed" (NLT). The literal translation suggests the phrase "He refreshed himself."

Does God indeed need to rest? Of course not! But did God choose to rest? Yes. Why? Because God subjected creation to a rhythm of rest and work that he revealed by observing the rhythm himself, as a precedent for everyone else. In this way, he showed us a key to order in our private worlds.

This rest was not meant to be a luxury, but rather a necessity for those who want to have growth and maturity. Since we have not understood that rest is a necessity, we have perverted its meaning, substituting for the rest that God first demonstrated things called leisure or amusement.

I am not by any means critical of the pursuit of fun-filled moments, diversion, laughter, or recreation. I am proposing that these alone will not restore the soul in the way that we crave. Although they may provide a sort of momentary rest for the body, they will not satisfy the deep need for rest within the private world.

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## Take My Wife, Please!

Genesis 12:1-10-20 and chapter 20

JEWISH COMEDIAN Henry Youngman got his start during the vaudeville era, but he managed to survive and thrive in the age of TV, thanks to his fast-paced delivery and his corny jokes, many of them about his wife. "My wife told me the car wasn't running well," he said. "There was water in the carburetor. I asked where the car was and she told me in the lake."

Youngman may be best known for his famous one-liner, "Take my wife, please!"

"I take my wife everywhere," he said, "but she keeps finding her way back!"

Abraham wasn't trying to be funny when he said something similar to the king of Egypt. The results may seem funny now, but they could have been tragic.

Traveling through Egypt, Abraham grew afraid that the Egyptians would kill him so they could take his beautiful wife, Sarah. To avoid this, Abraham told people that Sarah was his sister. The plan backfired when Pharaoh saw Sarah and decided he wanted her for the royal harem. God straightened things out by sending a plague to Pharaoh's household.

Abraham later played a similar trick on a king named Abimelech, with near-disastrous results. It took Abraham a while to learn how to care for his wife. Wives deserve to be honored and respected—especially in dangerous situations. You certainly don't try to survive by splitting up. Stick together no matter what. And by the way, telling jokes about your wife is not a good way to begin!

## A Botched Blessing

Genesis 27

IN ANCIENT TIMES, people didn't invest in mutual funds, 401(k) plans, or trust funds. Instead, their wealth was their land, farms, and animals, all of which was passed along from father to son.

When Isaac had reached advanced senior citizen status, he had gone blind. He knew it was time to give his blessing to Esau, his firstborn son. So he told Esau to fix a meal for him and prepare to receive his blessing.

But Isaac's wife, Rebekah, helped play a cruel trick on Isaac. She conspired with Jacob to steal Esau's blessing. They even devised an elaborate costume that would make Isaac think he was blessing Esau, who had much more hair than his brother.

While Esau was out hunting for game to prepare for his father's meal, Jacob donned his costume and went in to see Isaac with a meal his mother had prepared. After Isaac ate the meal, he blessed Jacob, giving him the right to inherit the family's wealth.

When Esau arrived a short time later seeking the blessing that was rightfully his, Isaac realized his mistake. "O my father, what about me? Bless me, too!" pleaded Esau (Genesis 27:34). But it was too late. Isaac could not give a second blessing.

Today, the tradition of giving blessings is less common than it was in Isaac's day, but children still compete with each other for their parents' care and affection. Perhaps it would be best if parents blessed all their children, lavishing care and concern on them without distinction.

And families would certainly be happier and healthier if husbands and wives worked together instead of trying to trick each other. Hoodwinking your spouse is a sure way to turn a good situation bad and make a bad situation worse.