

GENESIS ROAD PRESENTS...



a look at the picture of God
in every chapter of
the 1st book of the Bible

Chapter 1

GOD IS LARGE AND IN CHARGE... SORT OF.

The Contemporary English Version of the Bible sheds a different kind of light on the creation story for me. I am used to the familiar version of the creation story, where God says, "Let there be..." But in the CEV, God says, "I command!" That gives a very authoritative flavor to the story of creation. It's immediately easy to picture God as One who is "large and in charge." Not to say that He's boorish, but He's definitely in control.

"I command light to shatter the darkness!"

"I command plants to spring up and trees to bud!"

"I command whales to appear in the ocean deep!"

That's why it struck me all the more when, on day six, after creating the animals, God suddenly stops commanding. He announces that He will now make human beings, and they will be like Him. And He will let them rule over the Earth. He will let them be in control. He will let them have command.

There is no doubt that God is absolutely in control of the elements. He can command anything He wants to, whenever He wants to. What a glorious thought it is, then, to know that He doesn't command US. If He was disinterested in love, He could easily command us:

"I command you to bow down to Me!"

"I command you to serve Me!"

"I command you to spend an eternity obeying My every whim!"

But God doesn't do that. He has imposed a self-boundary on His authoritative command of everything He creates. He has restricted Himself, limited His own control of the universe by creating intelligent beings with freedom to choose. And, though He is able to do it if He wanted to, He will not trample on the freedom He has given us.

Yes, the God who is able to control anything and everything chooses *not* to control us. What incredible *Self-control!*

Chapter 2

GOD IS ENTERPRISING.

When I was growing up, one of my favorite television programs was MacGyver. Every week, I was fascinated by Richard Dean Anderson, who played the wily agent who always seemed to find himself in a pickle. What fascinated me, however, was that no matter what situation he found himself in, MacGyver was somehow able to use what was at hand to rescue himself and others from certain doom.

Several years later, a comedy spoof about the show had the MacGyver character declare, “I made the Vienna Boys’ Choir out of a packet of gum and masking tape!” Thinking back to some of my favorite episodes, that didn’t seem too far off the mark.

So, what does that have to do with Genesis 2?

It occurred to me, as I continued reading the ever-familiar creation story, that God made people out of dirt. In fact, the Hebrew word for “man” comes from the same word as “soil.” Of course we know God made people out of dirt. But perhaps it has become so familiar a fact that we haven’t really *thought* about it for a while.

God can make anything He wants to out of whatever He wants to! God didn’t need to have body parts FedExed in to put a man together. He simply used what was at hand . . . dirt. And I got a glimpse

of God as a universal MacGyver, an enterprising, highly ingenious Creator who is adaptable to any and every situation He encounters. It doesn’t matter if all He has is dirt. He can make a beautiful human being from it.

We ought to remember that even now, as often, we come to God in a condition that seems a lot like dirt. Our sin leaves us degraded, debased, and feeling a lot like dirt — worthless, pointless, useless. But from the creation story, we know that God is NOT limited by what He has to work with. When we bring Him our dirt, He can shape us anew into a beautiful and perfect creature, made in His image.

Ever since we marred God’s perfect creation, He has been in the process of RE-creation. And He is a genius at it. He will adapt to us and, as far as we allow Him, will use what we are to heal us and renew us.

From dirt to people perfection. What a genius!

Chapter 3

GOD IS RESPONSIVE.

God is like a master chess player. He sees the whole layout of the board, knows every piece, knows every possible move. Not only does He know every possible move, but He knows every possible *outcome* of every possible move, and He knows the best counter moves to keep the game on track.

In case you think it sounds like I'm likening our existence to a game in which we're simply pawns, let me assure you, I'm not! We're not the chess pieces. Each of us is the other player. And in our relationship with God, we are making moves that affect the "game," just as He is. Sometimes we make stupid moves.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve made some pretty stupid moves. In fact, their moves have affected every move in the game since. But none of this limits God. Remember, not only does He know every possible move, but He knows every possible **outcome** of every possible move, and He knows the best counter moves to help keep our relationship on track. Genesis 3 is a prime example of this. Adam and Eve have really blown it. They have both made the decision to eat fruit from the tree God warned them to stay away from.

And here's an interesting tidbit. When it says, in verse 7, that they knew they were naked, the Hebrew word for naked is taken from a word that means to be subtle, be shrewd, be crafty. So, saying they were naked wasn't just a physical description. Rather, they knew they had made a stupid move.

Even more interesting is that this word which means to be subtle, be shrewd, be crafty is the SAME word which is related to the description of the snake in verse 1. This is *exactly* what the snake was like! So, we see that Adam and Eve rejected God's nature — the image they were originally created in — and put on the nature of the snake. That is, the nature of lies, sin, and death. Totally stupid move.

But thank God that He is the Grand Master of chess. He is totally responsive to EVERY move we make, and He will do whatever is necessary to keep the game viable. When Adam and Eve chose something other than the perfection He had created, God came looking for them and offered Plan B. And if they had rejected Plan B, He had a Plan C. He is not limited by the moves we make... He is only limited in our unwillingness to continue in the game.

Part of God's responsiveness to Adam and Eve's choice was to block their access to the tree of life. This means that one of the mercies God gave us was the opportunity to rest from the madness of this world. Often, we don't like looking forward to that rest, but God gave it to us as a mercy. Imagine if suffering could go on *forever!*

So, while we try to make the best moves possible, let's remember that we serve a God who is responsive to all of our choices and all of our needs. He knows just how to respond to every move we make.

Chapter 4

GOD IS A KEEPER.

In Genesis 4:9, Cain asks God the famous question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” It’s startling to see this attitude so near the beginning of the Bible, because it’s an attitude which still pervades the selfish, sin-riddled human heart. Sometimes, we don’t want to be bothered with anyone or anything else. We’ve got our own plans for our lives, and we expect people to just get out of our way.

Cain, knowing full well that he had just *killed* his brother, mouths off to God in that classic teenage mode: “How am I supposed to know where my brother is? Who died and made me his babysitter?”

The tough guy act.

But a few moments later, Cain’s not feeling so tough as God tells him that he won’t be able to work the land anymore. Because of the curse his actions have brought on the land, he’ll be a restless wanderer for the rest of his life. And poor Cain’s response is interesting: “This punishment is too hard . . . I have to wander about without a home, and *just anyone could kill me.*”

In other words, Cain is saying, there will be no one to keep me, to protect me. I will not have a keeper. Cain has just gotten done informing God that he certainly *is not* his brother’s keeper, but when the tables are turned and he feels like he’s about to be without a keeper, he’s not so cocky anymore.

But, even with such dire consequences for his actions, God doesn’t leave Cain alone. He doesn’t leave Him without a keeper. Instead, the Bible says that the Lord “put a mark on Cain to warn everyone not to kill him.” What sort of God is this, who treats an evildoer better than that person has just treated his own victim? It may not have been in Cain’s heart to protect his own brother, but it was still in God’s heart to protect Cain.

God is always *our* keeper. He shields us from just as much as He can — usually as much as we will allow Him. While He does not set aside the consequences of our actions, He still loves us even when we do wrong. And we can know that He is always looking out for us.

Chapter 5

GOD IS THE ROOT.

Genesis 5 is the first of many genealogies in the Bible. I have, no doubt, read this before, but I saw it in a new way today. In recent years, my mother has gotten heavy into genealogy, and as she continues to discover more about our family origins, we have been regaled time and time again with stories of our great (and some not-so-great) ancestors. It's interesting to find out where we came from, to trace back through the generations and discover more about those who came before us.

And that's what struck me about this chapter. When God wants to trace His family tree, He doesn't trace backwards, He traces forwards. He has no ancestors, only descendents. He is the root of the great, grand Tree of Life. He and He alone.

It brought to mind the words of Jesus in John 15: "I am the *vine* (root) and you are the *branches*."

Truly, God is the only root. If anyone is connected to Him, they are connected to Life. And if anyone is not connected to Him, they are not connected to Life. This highlights the other interesting observation from Genesis, chapter 5. There is a very repetitive pattern in the genealogy from Adam to Noah:

When {insert name} was {insert age}, he had a son named {insert name}. After that, he had more children, and he died.

But in God's genealogy, the father never dies. We could say, "When God was an infinite age, he had a daughter named Kelley. After that, He had more children, and . . . He's still alive."

God's genealogy is nearly the exact opposite of ours. Everything got its start in Him and keeps going because of Him. He is the root and we are the branches. He is the Creator and we are the created. We wither and perish, but He is Papa forever.

Chapter 6

GOD CREATES AND RELATES TO INDIVIDUALS.

In the Bible chapter where God announces that the world will be destroyed by a flood, we read about how all of life on earth had become totally corrupt. Verse 5 of *The Message* puts it this way: “God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil — evil, evil, evil from morning to night.”

Apparently, God’s creation had run seriously amok, and the evil was affecting everything: “As far as God was concerned, the Earth had become a sewer; there was violence everywhere. God took one look and saw how bad it was, everyone corrupt and corrupting — life itself corrupt to the core.” (vs 11-12)

Yet, in the midst of the evil and madness, God notices Noah. Verse 8 simply says, “*But Noah was different. God liked what He saw in Noah.*” Noah, who had come down through the genealogical line from Adam, had managed to maintain a connection with God, in the midst of his surroundings. When the whole of human society around him was shouting evil, Noah was still able to hear God’s good voice.

I like how Noah is singled out in this chapter. What it reveals to me is that God does not define us by our surroundings. He doesn’t define us by the culture in which we live. We may be in a place that seems dark and evil, but we need not adopt those characteristics. God sees us and relates to us as individuals, no matter our surrounding environment.

It’s unfortunate that so many on earth had lost the ability to hear God’s saving voice. It’s unfortunate that God knew He would only need a small boat. But, since God is able to read the heart, He sees us and knows us intimately, regardless of where we find ourselves.

My husband and I are at a large conference right now where we are definitely managing to stand out as individuals. And, surprisingly, we’re encountering some scorn because of it. You never know what you’ll find in your surroundings! But God has created us as individuals, and He relates to us as individuals. He doesn’t see us according to where we are, but according to who we are. And I hope, one day, they may write about me what was written about Noah:

But Noah was different. *God liked what He saw in Noah.*

Chapter 7

GOD KNOWS THE WAY OF LIFE.

Genesis 7 is the beginning of the story of the Great Flood. How familiar we are with this story! Perhaps because I know it so well, I tried to read it very carefully and intentionally . . . trying to see “with new eyes.”

Perhaps it’s because I’ve grown up in the age of blockbuster movies, with end-of-the-world flicks such as *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *2012*, but I got a little bit of that ominous, impending-doom feeling as I read this chapter again. I guess that’s because the Bible’s account of the flood sounds like a scene from a movie:

“In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month — on that day, all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.” (vs 11)

The springs of the great deep burst forth! When we think/talk about the Flood, we talk about it raining for forty days and nights, but we sort of forget about that little part that says the earth exploded! Some Bible versions say that all the underground springs erupted and the heavens split open. On day 2 of creation, God had gathered all the water into two places — into the oceans and into the heavens. And on the first day of the flood, all that water came gushing up and falling down. The earth literally exploded in a vast, overwhelming fountain.

God knew this was coming. Whether you subscribe to the belief that He literally caused it to happen or whether you subscribe to the belief that the effects of sin upon nature caused the Flood to happen, one thing is clear: God knew it was coming.

And the best part of the story is that God knew exactly what to do to preserve life on the earth. Can you imagine any government on earth actually being faced with the knowledge that a worldwide, end-of-life-as-we-know-it disaster was coming? Any efforts at preserving life would likely be fraught with chaos and disagreement. But in Genesis, God calmly tells Noah exactly what to do in order to survive the Flood.

To me, this is a fabulous lesson that God and God alone knows the way of life. When things look impossible and hopeless to us, He is not defeated. He is not outwitted. He views an impending disaster differently than we do. He knows exactly what needs to be done in order for us to survive and thrive. We never need to be afraid when we know God and listen to Him. Everything He does is aimed at preserving life.

Chapter 8

GOD CARES ABOUT OUR ATTITUDES .

After Noah and his family left the ark, Noah sacrificed some animals to the Lord. Verse 21 says it was “a pleasing odor” to God, and the Amplified Bible adds that it was “a scent of satisfaction to His heart.”

Does God like the smell of blood? Does He like the smell of flesh in the fire? No. The thing that was pleasing to God was that Noah prepared a sacrifice. Noah’s attitude toward God prompted him to do what he thought would be pleasing to the Lord. It was a sign of relationship, an act of gratitude.

This attitude was the thing that was pleasing to God. It was the thing that was satisfying to His heart. Can’t you identify with that? If you have children, you know how your heart aches when they are at odds with you. If there is any kind of barrier in the relationship, it brings pain. On the other hand, when you see your children making an effort to do what they believe will please you because they love you or are grateful to you, it warms your heart.

This is why Cain’s offering (in Genesis 4) was not “acceptable” to God. It’s not that God likes roasted meat more than He likes roasted vegetables. It was all about Cain’s attitude. Cain’s sacrifice wasn’t “pleasing” to God because there was a problem with the relationship. And God cares far more about our relationship with Him than with any ritual sacrifice we can offer!

We don’t have a distant Creator. The Ruler of the Universe is not an all-knowing, yet faraway Deity. Our God cares deeply about our relationship with Him. What we do *matters* to Him. It affects Him. By our choices, we can touch His very heart, either bringing Him pain or pleasure.

God is intimately connected to us, and He wants us to continue to have a relationship with Him. That’s why He cares deeply about our attitude toward Him. If we’re off track, He will confront us, as He did with Cain. And if we’re living to please Him, He will let us know that He is pleased with us. As we remember that, may we endeavor today — in all we say and do — to bring a scent of satisfaction to His heart!

Chapter 9

GOD IS A DIPLOMAT.

It seems that the book of Genesis is all about covenants. If you want to try something interesting, read it for yourself, as much as you can in one sitting. You will find that the theme of the covenant runs all the way through. In this book, God looks like a highly-motivated negotiator who runs around trying to make covenants with people.

We find the first of these in chapter 9. God says, “I am going to make my covenant with you and your descendants . . .” And He goes on to explain how the rainbow in the clouds is the sign of His promise that the whole earth will never again be overcome by a flood.

Isn’t it interesting that God is the one who comes to us and, out of the blue, starts making promises? When we stand back and look at the big picture, we see that *we* are the ones who have done the wrong things. We are the ones who have “offended,” and as such, we might think that we should be the ones figuring out how to make amends.

But, though God is the “offended” party, we see that He doesn’t wait around for us to approach Him. He comes right to us and establishes a new covenant. Though we have demonstrated that we are willing to break our promises to Him, He is not deterred. He comes to us and says, “Okay, let’s strike a new bargain. I’m willing to make a new deal.” And as many times as we need a new cove-

nant, He will provide it. The only thing that can limit the effectiveness of His approach is our utter unwillingness to listen to what He has to say.

As long as we have not shut the door completely to God, He will continue to come back again and again, offering us a new deal, giving us a new bargain, establishing a new covenant. And He will always give us signs to remember Him by, just as He remembers us. In verse 16, God says, “Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember . . .”

And so it must be that in our relationship to God, the only thing we must do is respond. When we think *we* are seeking God, we find that *He* has sought us first. When we think *we* are loving God, we find that *He* has loved us first. When we think *we* are pursuing a relationship with God, we find that *He* was pursuing us first. He is always coming to us!

Chapter 10

GOD KNOWS YOUR NAME AND. . .

I'm always amazed when I read the genealogies in the Bible. They're so succinct. Just a list of names that spans hundreds of years. Whole decades of time, whole communities of people are reduced to a single name. What can you learn from a name? As people, we are so complex . . . our name can't possibly begin to sum up what we're all about.

So here's what struck me as I read this list of names: God knows our names. He knows every single one of us by name. To Him, we are not just a group of people or one name/number in a vast sea of millions. In His eyes, each of us is a special, unique, one-of-a-kind creation. Nobody else can replace us. That's why, when it comes to God's genealogy, all of our names are on His list, because He is the Great Father of us all.

In this genealogy from Genesis 10, I was struck by so many of the names. The Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites . . . all of these were people who are eventually known as heathens, nations who don't know the Lord. Yet, the Lord knows their names. He remembers them, even if they don't remember Him.

And the wonderful thing about God is that He doesn't *just* know our name. He knows *everything* about us. He knows us intimately and loves us with an infinite love. Wherever God's list of special people is, you're on it . . . even if you're an avowed enemy of God. He loves you, and He knows your name.

Chapter 11

GOD TAKES NOTICE OF HIS CREATION.

In Genesis 11:4, some people decided to build a big tower. I had always thought (or heard) that this was because they wanted to save themselves from another possible flood. But actually, the text as it reads says, “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’”

It’s unclear why they were worried about being scattered all over the earth, but it is clear that they had two objectives: to build something that would reach to the heavens and to become famous.

And they accomplished their goals!

The very next verse says “God came down to look over the city and the tower those people had built.” Regardless of the actual height of the tower, it reached up into the heavens. God took notice and came down to see what they were doing. Regardless of their fame on the earth, they made a name for themselves with God. He paid attention to what they were doing.

Think of that! The Creator of the Universe takes notice of His creatures. His creation doesn’t just run amok, unsupervised, like unruly children whose parents have given up on them.

In the courts of Heaven, we have made a name for ourselves. We are famous with our God, who loves us and cares about us. He takes notice of all we do.

Chapter 12

GOD COMMUNICATES TRUTH.

So, Abram and Sarai went down to Egypt, and Abram decided to tell a little fib to better his situation. He knew that his wife was beautiful, and it seemed reasonable to him that Pharaoh would kill him so he could have Sarai.

It's incredible to me that neither Abram nor Sarai told Pharaoh the truth. Apparently, their trust in God was pretty weak, even though the chapter starts with God's promise that He is going to bless them and bring a great nation out of them.

Perhaps that promise was on Abram's mind as he told Sarai, "Say you are my sister, so that *I will be treated well* for your sake and my life will be spared." (vs 13) Sarai did what Abram said, and she was taken into Pharaoh's palace, as he had the intention of making her his wife. Again, this was apparently okay with both Abram and Sarai.

But it wasn't okay with God. God deals in truth and reality, and even when His ambassadors on this earth are less than truthful, God is never less than truthful! He always communicates truth, and He always knows how to communicate truth so we receive and understand the message.

Verse 17 says the Lord sent a "terrible plague" on Pharaoh's household because of Sarai. At first, this doesn't seem right, does it? After all, Pharaoh took

Sarai into the palace because Abram and Sarai were dishonest about their marital status. Why should God punish Pharaoh with a plague?

But right away, we see that the "plague" wasn't a punishment. It was a message, because in the very next verse, Pharaoh summons Abram and asks him why he was dishonest. Pharaoh got the message! He had been duped by Abram and Sarai, but God wasn't going to leave him in the dark.

Only God knows why it took a "plague" to communicate with Pharaoh. Perhaps, in Egyptian culture and folklore, there were certain rashes or marks that communicated certain things. Whatever it was, in this story, we see that it is God who communicates truth to us — in any way we are able to understand it. He loves to work through His agents on this earth, but He is certainly not limited by His agents on this earth, and He can and will communicate His truth to us no matter what situation we're in.

Chapter 13

GOD THINKS BIG.

Have you ever measured out a cup of sand and tried to count the grains? It might take a while. According to some highly unscientific research I did on the internet, depending on the size of the grain, the number of grains of sand that fit into one cup is anywhere between 2 million and 15 million. Wow! Millions of grains of sand in just a single cup. Now imagine how many cups of sand there are in a desert. We can't even count that high.

That's why I love God's statement to Abram in Genesis 13:16 — "I will give you more descendants than there are specks of dust on the earth, and someday it will be easier to count the specks of dust than to count your descendants." What's incredible, even funny, about this is that, at the time God said this, Abram was standing in the middle of a desert.

The beginning of the chapter says "Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev." The Negev was a desert, so when God told Abram that his descendants were going to far outnumber the specks of dust on the earth, Abram was looking at mounds and mounds of sand. For Abram, it must have seemed impossible. After the Flood, people had started having children earlier and earlier, but here was Abram, an old man, with not a single child. And God was saying that his descendants would outnumber the grains of sand in a desert!

God is a big thinker. He is always seeing bigger than we are. He is always thinking bigger than we are. He is capable of imagining much more than we

can ever dream of. For Abram, one child would have been a welcome blessing. But God's thoughts are never in the track of "just enough to get by." No, His thoughts run more toward "outrageous excess." In a culture where so much importance was placed on heirs, only God would promise more descendants than you could count!

Chapter 14

GOD SHAPES US.

Wow! What a difference two chapters makes! But what a beautiful example of how God takes us as we are and, as we cultivate a relationship with Him, He molds us into better people.

In Genesis 12, Abram heads down to Egypt with his wife, Sarai. While there, he decides to lie about being married to Sarai so he would be treated well. And he *was* treated well . . . very well, in fact. Genesis 12:16 says Abram “acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maid-servants, and cattle.” He became very wealthy while he was in Egypt.

By the time we get to Genesis 14, however, it seems Abram has had a change of heart. Now, he is no longer someone willing to lie, steal, or cheat in order to get ahead. Rather, he is not even willing to take something that would be rightfully considered his!

When the king of Sodom offered Abram his share of bounty for helping win a war, Abram said, “I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’”

According to the custom of the time, Abram was well within his “rights” to have this share of the goods won in the war. But it seems Abram has learned a valuable lesson about wealth and integrity. How does such a change occur within a per-

son? It can only come from associating with God. Only He is capable of changing the human heart.

The wonderful thing is, we don’t have to come to God as “good” people, and we certainly don’t have to come as perfect people! God delights in taking us where we are, as we are, and then making something beautiful and wonderful from what we bring to Him. As we spend time with Him, we’ll find that God is definitely a shaper.

Chapter 15

GOD IS A PEACEMONGER.

Genesis 15 begins with the word of the Lord coming to Abram, and the first thing God says is, “Do not be afraid.”

If there was a way to sum up in one, short sentence the overarching message of God to humankind in the Bible, it would have to be this: *Do not be afraid.* It appears over and over and over again in the Scriptures. It is, quite literally, usually the first thing out of the mouth of God or His heavenly messengers to people on the earth time and time again.

In this chapter, God links His peace with two things: His protection and His provision.

First, He says, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield.” In other words, with God on our side, what do we have to fear in this world? Nothing can come between us and God. Nothing can pluck us out of His hands. As we remain with Him, He protects us from all harm, and He will gather us all to Himself on that glorious day when Jesus returns.

Second, God says, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your very great reward.” In other words, with such a giving God, what do we lack? Nothing! As David said in Psalm 23, with a shepherd like God, we don’t lack anything. God takes care of our every need (and most of our wants, too). He is generous and faithful, providing whatever we require.

God came to banish our fear and replace it with His peace. So, if you’re anxious about anything today, His message to you is the same as His message to Abram in Genesis 15: *Do not be afraid. I am protecting you. I am providing for you.*

Chapter 16

GOD SEES .

At the beginning of this blog, might I just say that things always go badly when we try to fulfill God's promises for Him! I think this is usually why God doesn't fill me in on anything that's happening in my life until it happens . . . because He knows that if I knew about anything ahead of time, I'd try to make it happen instead of just letting Him do His thing in His time.

But now, on to the salient point from this chapter. God sees you. You may think you're just a lone and lonely soul, lost in a sea of billions of people on this planet. But you're not lost. God sees you. You can never escape His notice.

The story of Hagar is such a marvelous example of this! For all intents and purposes, in her time and culture, Hagar was a nobody. First of all, women were nobodies, period. Second, she was a woman slave, "owned" by another, not in charge of her own destiny.

In fact, as a slave woman, she wouldn't even be able to keep her own baby. You see, Sarai didn't concoct this little scheme because she wanted *Abram* to have a child. No, *Sarai* wanted to have a child. That's why she said to Abram, "The Lord has not given me any children. Sleep with my slave, and if she has a child, *it will be mine.*" (vs 2) Hagar's womb was simply the vehicle Sarai was going to use to get God's work done.

Sarai uses Hagar. Abram uses Hagar. And then Sarai begins to abuse Hagar. In the eyes of the world at the time, Hagar was a nobody. But she wasn't a nobody to God. After Hagar ran away from home, God came and met her in the desert. And after that encounter, Hagar called Him "the God who sees me."

We have a God who sees us. When the world says we're slaves, God says we're free. When the world says we're worth nothing, God says we're priceless. And when the world curses us, God blesses us.

God sees you, right now, this very moment, no matter where you are, no matter who you are. He is the God who sees you, knows you, loves you.

Chapter 17

GOD IS FUNNY .

There are so many things I could write about God from this chapter of Genesis, but I've just got to write about God's sense of humor.

Are we sometimes lulled into thinking that God is a stern, distant Deity who frowns over us as we trudge through life? Even if we picture Him as one who wants to have a relationship with us, are we tempted to think that He is more like a harsh, exacting parent who keeps a watchful eye on his children, lest He see any hint of indiscretion?

Does God ever have fun? Does He ever laugh? Is He playful when it comes to relating with us? Does God have a sense of humor?

I love God's exchange with Abraham in this chapter. Thirteen years have passed since Abraham and Sarah concocted their plan to accomplish God's promise of a son. And God comes to Abraham again and says, "I will bless her [Sarah] and give her a son, and you will be the father." (Perhaps God wanted to spell out who *both* parents would be so there wouldn't be any confusion this time!)

Immediately, Abraham dismisses the thought. The very next verse says Abraham fell to the ground, laughing. And he thought to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (vs 17)

Abraham knows this is impossible, so he tries to talk God into giving His intended blessing to Ishmael instead. But God assures Abraham that Sarah

will have a son, and He tells Abraham to name the child Isaac.

Now, here's the funny part. The Hebrew word for the name "Isaac" is *Yitschaq*. And it is a direct derivative of *tsachaq*, the Hebrew word translated "laughed" in verse 17. So, the name Isaac literally means "he laughed."

So, God tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son in his old age. Abraham thinks that's hilarious, and he laughs. And God tells him to name his child Isaac so that, for the rest of his life, whenever he called his son by name, he would remember how he had laughed and laughed at what God said.

I don't know about you, but I think *that's* funny. A relationship takes two people, and God is definitely plugged into our relationship with Him! He interacts with us as *real* people, taking us as we are, relating to us as we are. And He meets our doubt and unbelief with humor and wit.

That's my kind of God!

Chapter 18

GOD ENCOURAGES INVOLVEMENT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP.

So, here is the famous story of Abraham bartering with God over what to do with the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps we have become so familiar with the story that we overlook some very obvious conclusions about the kind of person God is.

1) *God cares about our opinion of Him.*

This is not to say that God will change His behavior based on whether we like it or not, but it means that God cares what we think about Him. In verses 17-19 of this chapter, God wonders (either out loud or to Himself) if He ought to consult Abraham about the Sodom/Gomorrah situation. In verse 19, He reasons, “for I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just . . .”

God wants Abraham to act in a righteous and just way, and so it’s important to Him that we understand His actions. So, if He ends up destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, it’s important to Him to know how His friend, Abraham, will interpret that event.

2) *God values honesty.*

Abraham was God’s good friend, and because of this, he spoke boldly with God. In verse 25, he basically says, “Are you going to lump the righteous in with the wicked? You would never do that! Don’t you always do the right thing?!” I think God *loves* this kind of relational communication. He wants us to be REAL with Him, telling Him

honestly what’s on our minds, not hiding our thoughts from Him.

3) *God loves having friends.*

When it comes to our relationship with God, He prioritizes the *relationship* above His *sovereignty* or *authority*. Let me explain what I mean by this:

In the exchange God had with Abraham about Sodom/Gomorrah, God began by agreeing that He would not destroy the cities if there were 50 righteous people living there. As the conversation ensued, Abraham continued to barter with God over the cities, reducing the conditional number to 10 righteous people.

What’s startling about this is realizing that, from the start of the conversation, God knew *exactly* how many righteous people were in the cities! He knew there wasn’t 10 righteous people living there, let alone 50 righteous people! But He didn’t cut Abraham off at the knees. He didn’t say, “Abraham, I know there aren’t 50 righteous people in Sodom. That’s ridiculous. Let’s stop it with this wishful thinking. I’m God, and I know everything.”

God was more interested in His relationship with Abraham than He was in demonstrating His superior knowledge of what was going on in Sodom/Gomorrah. He didn’t just send Abraham a memo on what was going on with the wicked cities. He engaged Abraham in conversation, and He enjoys relating to us just like He did to Abraham.

Chapter 19

GOD SAVES THE WILLING.

Ah, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah . . . the cities Abraham lobbied for. We don't know how many people were living in the cities, but we do know that — at the very least — not ten of them were “righteous.” In the end, only three were found to be “righteous.” Almost four, but Lot's wife didn't quite make it. Her nostalgia for everything she was leaving behind cost her her life.

Sometimes the details of these stories get a little mixed up in our thinking. For instance, as the joke goes, one child wrote this about Lot's wife on a Bible class test: “*Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day and a ball of fire by night.*” Hmmmm . . . not quite.

How about the “righteous” detail in this story? Do we ever get that a little mixed up?

Here's a revelation I encountered during my reading today: Lot and his family weren't saved because they were righteous. They were saved because they were willing to leave.

How do I know Lot wasn't righteous? Check out verses 7-8, when Lot was trying to persuade the men of the city not to gang rape the visitors in his house: “No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and *you can do what you like with them.*” Gee, thanks Dad.

In other words, “My friends don't do *this* wicked thing. Do *this* wicked thing instead!” Lot's not

looking so “righteous” here, is he? But what makes Lot and his family different from all the other people in Sodom and Gomorrah was that they were willing to listen. At the very least, they were willing to be *dragged* out of the city.

So, what does this tell us about God? He saves those who are *willing* to be saved. God doesn't save us *because* we're righteous. (We're not, by the way.) He can only save us when we're *willing* to listen to Him, because only He is able to do the work of restoration that needs to be done in our lives.

That's why, in Romans 4, Paul equates faith with righteousness. When we trust God, when we are willing to listen to Him, He looks at us and sees righteousness. He will save *all* who are *willing* to be saved!

Chapter 20

GOD DOES NOT DEMAND PERFECTION .

Abraham, friend and prophet of God, was apparently a slow learner. It hadn't been *that* long since he and Sarah lived in Egypt, and here he is, once again, telling the same lies to Abimelech, king of Gerar.

I was genuinely puzzled by this chapter of the Bible. I mean, Abraham already went through this in Egypt with Pharaoh. He told the lie about Sarah because he was afraid of what would happen to him, and it ended up looking like God dealt more severely with Pharaoh instead of dealing with Abraham, who told the lies in the first place.

Okay, so maybe we can give Abraham the benefit of the doubt when it comes to Egypt. The first one's a freebie, right? But here he is, doing the same exact thing again! And what I want to know is, why does God say this *to Abimelech*: "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."

Abimelech doesn't know he has done anything wrong. It's *Abraham* who lied. Why isn't God visiting *him* in the middle of the night with some warnings about what *he* has done?!

It is clear from this story that Abraham has a problem with honesty, and he also apparently has a problem with judgment: Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place . . .'" (vs 11)

Boy, was he wrong about that one! Abimelech was revealed to have more "fear of God" than Abraham! I mean, Abimelech believed God and responded immediately to Him. What about Abraham? Where was his "fear of God"? How come he didn't respect God enough to believe that God was going to take care of him? Maybe it's part of the condition of the human heart that we think we "see" in others what is really in our own hearts.

I don't pretend to have all the answers to this, but here's one thing we can learn for sure about God: *He definitely doesn't demand perfection when it comes to His prophets and friends.* He definitely allows us to make mistakes, and apparently, the same ones over and over!

Maybe this is even more startling than the fact that God appears to be getting all uppity with the wrong person in the story. He allows Abraham to bear His name, to be His ambassador on the earth, even though Abraham is seriously flawed. (Granted, finding a not-seriously-flawed person on the face of the earth by this time would have been a challenge. But still . . .)

God doesn't have a checklist of requirements we must attain to before He will be friends with us. All He needs is a willing and teachable heart. All He needs is a person who will allow himself to be humbled by God and redirected, when necessary, to a new path. Apparently, even for all his flaws, Abraham had that kind of heart. I hope I do, too.

Chapter 21

GOD IS WILLING TO MODIFY HIS PLANS.

As I read today, there was one part that really struck me. God tells Abraham, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant . . . *I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.*” (vs 12-13)

God had told Abraham that He would make him into a great nation. He promised that, in her old age, Sarah would give birth to a son, and his descendants would far outnumber the grains of sand on the earth. While Abraham accepted God’s promise, he and Sarah set about to fulfill the promise for Him. In so doing, Abraham ended up with a son he was never supposed to have.

Yet, regardless of all that Abraham and Sarah did, the Bible says that Abraham had Isaac “at the very time God had promised him.” (vs 2) The couple’s mistakes in running ahead of God’s promise didn’t *cancel* the promise He had made to them. On the contrary, in verses 12 and 13, we see that God actually incorporated *their mistakes* into *His plan!* Though it wasn’t His Plan A, God told Abraham that He would turn Ishmael into a great nation as well, since Ishmael was also Abraham’s offspring.

What kind of God is this? A God who is willing to modify His plans and promises based on our response to Him, even based on our mistakes? Once again, this is proof that God is not some distant and disconnected Deity who runs the universe and expects us to “just get in line.” He takes us seriously, He takes our relationship seriously, and He takes what we do seriously. He interacts with us,

working out His plan for our lives — both in His time and in His way, while also taking our actions into consideration.

Chapter 22

GOD REVEALS WHAT IS IN THE HEART.

This is one of the chapters in the Bible that we become very familiar with. A lot of questions swirl around this story. Why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? Why would Abraham do it, even without asking a single question?

Regardless of the reasons why, I think this chapter tells us something very important about God: He knows what's in the heart, and He knows how to reveal it.

It's similar to the story in Genesis 20, where Abraham "judges" that there's nobody in Abimelech's kingdom who would fear, or respect, God. It doesn't take long for Abraham to realize that he's totally wrong about that, as Abimelech both hears *and* obeys God's instructions!

Abimelech was revealed as one who respected the Lord. And in this story with Abraham and Isaac, Abraham was revealed as one who would listen to and obey the Lord . . . even given what was an impossible-to-fathom assignment.

This is the same Abraham who has lied and schemed, trying to preserve his life and carry on his family. Throughout many of the preceding chapters, Abraham hasn't made a very good name for himself . . . or for God.

But what if there has been a change in Abraham? What if his association and friendship with God has changed him from someone who feels like he must have full control over his life to someone

who is willing to trust God? Given the preceding evidence, how would anyone ever guess that such a change had occurred in Abraham?

The only way for anyone to know about such a thing (outside of God, of course, who can read the heart) would be for it to be revealed through circumstances. You see, circumstances don't *shape* our character; circumstances *reveal* our character. Have you ever thought about that? The only way another person can *truly* know what's in your heart is to see what you do when you're confronted with something you can't control.

And no matter why God had Abraham take Isaac up that mountain, one thing is clear: Abraham was finally revealed as a person who trusted in God and was determined to follow His way, even if it meant losing something dear to him. God *knew* that attitude was already in Abraham's heart — that's why He could ask him to do what he did.

Sometimes, circumstances are also the only way *we* can see what's in our own hearts! Often, we might think we're better than we are revealed to be, or vice versa. But God knows just how to reveal our hearts — to us and others. And He can transform us from people who only "look out for number one" to people who are willing to listen to Him.

Chapter 23

GOD'S TIMING IS DIFFERENT THAN OURS.

As I was reading this chapter, it dawned on me that the first part of Canaan that Abraham possessed with a burial plot. Doesn't this seem odd, given what God said in Genesis 15:18-21?

"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite.'"

God had *promised* the land to Abraham and his descendants. In fact, in the text, He doesn't say, "I will give you this land . . ." He says, "I *have given* you this land." As in, it's a done deal.

So it's interesting, then, that when Sarah dies, Abraham goes to Ephron (a Hittite) and *purchases* a burial plot. God told Abraham that He was going to *give* the land to Abraham. So, why was it taking Him so long to fulfill His promise?

It might seem like Abraham was, once again, disregarding God's promise since he went about buying what God was going to give him. On the contrary, though, I think Abraham's purchase of the burial property was like an investment in God's promise.

Abraham had finally come to the place where he trusted God, where he believed that God would do what was right by him, even if he couldn't see the

big picture or know how God was going to fulfill the promise. You see, in the experience with Isaac on the mountain, Abraham learned that God "already had the ram in the thicket." He knew that even when it looks hopeless, God has a way to make a way.

And even in this chapter, when Sarah has died without seeing God's promise fulfilled, Abraham doesn't think that the "Promised Land" is a lost cause. In buying a family burial plot, he decided to invest in Canaan. He decided to "cast his vote of faith" on the side of God's promise and bury Sarah (and eventually himself) at Machpelah, believing that God was going to follow through on His promise to give Canaan to his offspring.

God's promises are sure because God is trustworthy. Therefore, just like Abraham, we can be sure that God is working out what He has promised, even if it looks like things could never work out like God said. God's timing is often different than ours, but let's remember that His timing is *perfect!* We can trust Him to make good on all His promises!

Chapter 24

GOD, THE ORIGINAL GPS.

I have become totally addicted to the GPS in my car. Especially on long trips where I'm going someplace I haven't been before, I love to put on the GPS and . . . relax. I don't have to worry about looking for the right highway. I don't have to worry about missing a turn. All I have to do is listen for the little voice with the British accent that says, "After two miles, take the exit right . . ."

What did people do before such technology?

Well, we get a small glimpse of the answer to that question in Genesis 24. In the story of how the servant finds a wife for Isaac, we see that God is the original GPS. And He's not only a GPS for the places you know you want to go. He's also the GPS to get you to the place you need to be when you don't even *know* where you need to be.

Imagine this servant going back to what would now be a strange and foreign land. He hoped to accomplish the assignment Abraham gave him; finding someone from the family would have just been an added bonus, but he had no idea where to begin looking.

And, surprise! We find that he didn't *need* to have an idea of where to begin looking! God was working behind the scenes to take him to just the right place at just the right time to find just the right woman for Isaac.

What an incredible story! And maybe it's just the kind of good news you've been looking for. Un-

sure of where you're headed in life? Don't know where you're supposed to be, or are you thinking maybe you missed a turn somewhere? Forget about your GPS. Instead, remember the **God Positioning System**.

God knows all about you. He knows exactly what you need and where you can find it. And He knows exactly how to get you to where you need to be. You don't need a GPS or a set of tarot cards or a fortune teller. You just need to know Him.

Have you consulted Him lately about the direction of your life?

Chapter 25

GOD KNOWS.

Stories like this one fascinate me. In Genesis 25:23, the Lord informs Rebekah that the older of her two sons would “serve the younger.” Of course, this wasn’t the normal course of events in Rebekah’s culture. The firstborn son was the heir to *everything*, the one responsible to carry on the family. Thus, it was customary for all the younger children to “serve” the oldest.

As the story unfolds, of course, we see that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob for a meal. Why did he do that? Did God say what He did to Rachel because He knew that Esau would eventually sell his birthright? (Is that even what God meant by saying that the “older will serve the younger”?) Or had the story of what God said been repeated through the years, so that when Jacob saw an opportunity to take over the birthright, he took advantage of it? Perhaps he had tried to interpret what God meant and “make it happen.”

No matter what category this particular story falls into, there are many stories in the Bible that describe God’s uncanny ability to know what’s going to happen before it happens. There are mixed reactions to this. For many people, the fact that “God knows everything before it happens” gives them comfort that God will never be caught off guard or surprised by anything. On the other hand, some argue that if we are truly free, God couldn’t know beforehand what we will choose.

Both are interesting perspectives. I’ve oscillated back and forth between them both. Certainly, there

are things in the Bible that seem to support them *both*. But as I’ve come to learn more about the realities of time and space, I’m wondering if discussing God’s foreknowledge is something we are equipped to do.

If you haven’t seen it already, check out this video called [Powers of Ten](#).

Though it’s not shown on this particular version, at home, I have a version that includes two clocks. One of the clocks shows time as it passes on earth. The other clock shows time as it is experienced by the “space” traveler. To try to make a complicated story uncomplicated, as the “space” traveler goes faster and faster (approaching the speed of light), all of a sudden, the earth clock starts to speed up. Eventually, for every 10 seconds of time the “space” traveler experiences, 100,000 years go by on earth.

God describes Himself as light. At what “speed” does He travel? And how does this affect His relationship to “time”?

There are a lot of questions — more, I’m sure, than we’ll ever answer in a lifetime. But what is comforting, to me at least, is to know that *God knows*. While maintaining our personal freedom, He is definitely not surprised or caught off guard at what happens in our lives. He knows and sees what happens to us and is already prepared to help us deal with it.

Chapter 26

GOD IS REASSURING.

Ever since Adam and Eve chose to believe the serpent at the tree, relations between human beings have been ruled by fear. This chapter is a great example. Isaac takes his family down to Gerar, and Abimelech is still the king (as he was in Abraham's time). And, continuing the time-honored family tradition of dishonesty, Isaac told the same lie about Rebekah that his father had told about Sarah — and for exactly the same reason. He was afraid.

Poor Abimelech. He ought to have been expecting it by then!

But later in the same chapter, when Isaac's wealth and power has increased, Abimelech comes to Isaac and asks him if they can make a treaty of peace. Because, he says, I "saw clearly that the Lord was with you; so we said, 'There ought to be a sworn agreement between us'-between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm.'" (vs 28-29)

Isaac is afraid of Abimelech. Abimelech is afraid of Isaac. And interjected in the midst of all this fear is the God who comes to Isaac and says, "Do not be afraid." He promises Isaac that he will be with him and bless him. So why should Isaac be afraid of anyone or anything?

And why should we? God comes to us with the same message: *Do not be afraid*. What a wonderful God! He knows that our natures are sinful and that our relationships are ruled by fear. And because of

that, whenever He approaches us, the first thing He says is, "Don't worry. Do not be afraid. I am with you. There's no reason to be anxious."

Chapter 27

GOD BLESSES EVERYONE.

What a contrast this story of Jacob and Esau is to God's benevolent character! Here in this chapter, we have the climax of Jacob and Rebekah's deception, when they decide to steal Isaac's blessing away from Esau.

So, after Esau has left to hunt some wild game for his father, Jacob goes in to see Isaac (with some tasty food and furry clothes his mother gave him) and spends quite some time convincing his father that he is Esau. After Isaac is sufficiently convinced, he gives Jacob "the blessing."

Afterwards, Esau comes in to receive the blessing and . . . *dob!* He learns that wily ol' Jacob was just there. But don't you find the following conversation between Esau and Isaac interesting?

"Esau said, 'Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birth-right, and now he's taken my blessing!' Then he asked, 'Haven't you reserved any blessing for me?' Isaac answered Esau, 'I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So *what can I possibly do for you, my son?*'" (vs 36-37)

I don't know about you, but that just struck me as being awfully sad. I don't know how the ins and outs of blessings worked in the Old Testament cultures, but apparently, a father only had one "blessing" to give to one of his children. And once it was gone, it was gone.

Isn't that nearly the direct opposite of God?! He stands in total contrast to this idea that blessing was reserved for only one of a father's children. God blesses *everyone*. Jesus said this plainly in Matthew 5: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?" (vs 44-46)

A perfect, practical example of this is the story we looked at several days ago in Genesis 17. When Sarah concocted the plan to get Hagar pregnant with Abraham's son, she didn't succeed in fulfilling God's plan, only in screwing things up and making them complicated.

Yet, when it came right down to it, God didn't say, "I only have enough blessing for one of these boys. Since I intended to bless Isaac, I must curse Ishmael." No! God isn't like that. He said, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will also make him into a great nation." (vs 20)

God isn't the God of limited blessings. He has *unlimited* blessings. He has more than enough blessings to go around, and whenever we come to Him, we will find ourselves incredibly blessed in His presence.

Chapter 28

GOD BLESSES WITHOUT CONDITION.

There is something *so* interesting in this chapter, and it is the comparison between God's promises and our promises.

As Jacob is journeying to find a wife, God renews His promise to make a great nation from Jacob's descendents. He says, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (vs 13-15)

Jacob liked what God had to say, and in verse 20, he made a responsive promise: "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

Did you notice the difference between God's promise and Jacob's promise? When God makes promises, He doesn't use the word *if*. There was no condition on God's promise. He didn't say, "Jacob, *if* you do what I tell you and remain faithful to me, then I will give you the land you're lying

on." No, He just outright promised it. That's what God is like. He just lives to give.

On the other hand, Jacob — though he is obviously inclined to be faithful — attaches a little condition to his promise. He says, "*If* God will be with me and do all these things for me, then I'll let Him be my God forever."

I'm glad God doesn't use the word *if*. I'm glad He doesn't say, "I'll love you *if* you love Me." Or "I'll be good to you *if* you choose Me." God is good and God loves us all the time. Just because. Just because that's how He is.

He is totally good. Totally God. Without condition.

Chapter 29

GOD HAS A SOFT SPOT FOR THE UNLOVED.

“When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.” (vs 31)

I suppose there could be many ways to interpret such a verse. We could feel sorry for Rachel. Why should she be barren? It’s not her fault that Jacob was so in love with her. Then again, it’s not Leah’s fault that her father tricked Jacob into marrying her either.

How should we understand such a verse? Was God trying to punish Rachel because she was loved? Some people might try to pass this off as the writer’s interpretation of why Leah had so many babies and Rachel had so few. In a culture where the god was seen as responsible for everything, if a woman was barren, certainly it had to be God’s doing.

Regardless of the interpretation, I love how the writer of Genesis places God squarely in line with loving the unloved. He has a tender spot for the neglected. He has sympathy for the brokenhearted. And I love the idea that God comforted Leah all He could by blessing her with children . . . and male children to boot!

One of my favorite songs is a ballad by Wayne Watson called, “Friend of a Wounded Heart.” Whenever we’re lonely or feel beaten down, neglected, or unloved, we should remember that our

God has “been there, done that.” He knows what it means to be cast aside. He knows what it means to be ignored. And there is a special place in His heart for anyone who has ever been unloved.

Chapter 30

GOD WORKS WHILE WE SCHEME.

Somehow, one of the things we have come to believe about God is that His blessings are directly related to our behavior. If we behave like obedient children, then He blesses us. If we misbehave like disobedient children, then He will withhold His blessings. Isn't that what we believe?

So how is one supposed to read/interpret this chapter? First of all, I don't believe there was any "innocent" party in the tangled mess that was Jacob's family. Both Leah and Rachel end up scheming against one another to see who can bear more children for Jacob. Leah is jealous of Rachel. Rachel is jealous of Leah. They're both offering up their maids to sleep with Jacob in order to increase their personal child count. Sheesh. Who needs *Jerry Springer* when you can read the Bible?

Yet, even in the midst of all their scheming, they're having children. God doesn't say, "I refuse to let you have children if you're going to go about things this way." His blessings are at work in the midst of their scheming.

This is even more evident later in the chapter when Jacob works to build up his flocks. Laban says he knows that the Lord has blessed him because Jacob has been tending his flocks (vs 30), so it is at least obvious to Laban that Jacob is receiving God's blessings. So why doesn't Jacob rest in that knowledge when it comes to building up his own personal flock?

Instead of resting in God's provision, Jacob devises a scheme to end up with greater numbers of the kinds of sheep he'll be taking with him when he leaves Laban's house. The Bible describes how he put striped sticks in front of the watering troughs while the animals were mating and how he made the animals look at the "right coloring" while they were mating . . . as if any of that could influence the type of coloring an animal had when it was born! Yet, the Bible says that *in this way*, Jacob grew prosperous and rich.

So, was it Jacob's scheming that led to these huge flocks? Of course not. We know that the methods Jacob used had absolutely no scientific bearing on the type of animals that were born. (For example, I can't have a purple-skinned baby simply by surrounding myself with purple objects during conception.) If that's the case, how did Jacob end up with so many sheep that had this rare type of coloring? Because God was blessing him! And obviously, He was blessing him even though Jacob was, at the same time, scheming about how to make God's blessings come to pass.

It's obvious, then, that God works even while we scheme. He doesn't simply bless the faithful and not bless the schemers. We might like to believe that God never blesses a person who schemes, but what about Jacob? We better be glad that God blesses even those who try to "help themselves," because that means He is willing to bless even us!

Chapter 31

GOD'S BLESSINGS ARE CONSTANT.

In this chapter, Jacob complains that Laban has changed his wages ten times. “However,” Jacob said, “God has not allowed him to harm me. If he said, ‘The speckled ones will be your wages,’ then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, ‘The streaked ones will be your wages,’ then all the flocks bore streaked young.” (vs 7-8)

After Jacob had worked fourteen years for Rachel and Leah, he worked another six years for Laban, in an effort to build up his flocks before he moved away with his wives and children. Lambs are born twice a year. In the first year, Laban observed how Jacob was beginning to acquire more flocks (and thereby more wealth) according to their agreement. Thus, over the course of the next five years, he “changed Jacob’s wages ten times.” That means that every time a flock of lambs was born, Laban would change the terms of the agreement for the next flock.

But, as Jacob told his wives later, it didn’t matter what Laban did. When he saw that a flock of speckled sheep had been born, he declared that — in the next flock — speckled sheep would belong to him. And when the next flock produced streaked sheep instead, he would change the agreement yet again. For five years, Laban tried to find a way to weasel himself into Jacob’s blessings. And for five years, it didn’t work.

So, what should this tell us about God? His blessings are constant, even in the midst of changing situations. God isn’t dependent upon the integrity

of those around us in order to send us blessings — thank goodness! Even when we’re being treated unfairly, even when somebody keeps “changing the story” to try to benefit themselves, God is more than able to adapt His work to bring blessing to us.

We should not get upset when people deal with us in less-than-honest ways. Instead, we should remember that our God is able, in all things, to bless us and bring good to us — no matter what anybody else is doing or not doing. He is the one constant in the midst of a changing world!

Chapter 32

GOD ENJOYS A GOOD STRUGGLE?

In this chapter, Jacob took his wives, children, and possessions and headed for home. While on the way, one night, he met a man who wrestled with him till dawn. During the struggle, Jacob didn't give up. In fact, at one point, he demanded a blessing before he would let go. (vs 26)

The "man" Jacob wrestled with turned out to be God. And, after the WWF match was over, God changed Jacob's name to Israel.

Name-changing is an important thing in the Bible, because names were very important things! Today, kids get named all sorts of crazy names for crazy reasons. But in Bible times, every name meant something, and often, a person's name would somehow figure into their life's choices in some way. (Jacob is a perfect example of this. Is it coincidence that "Jacob" means "one who deceives"?)

So, for God to change Jacob's name to something else meant something important. And I think it's very significant that God changed his name to Israel. Now, Israel was going to become the father of the Israelites. This was going to be God's chosen nation, a group of people that were to be God's ambassadors on earth.

We would expect, then, that "Israel" would be a very special name with a very special meaning. And it was.

"Israel" means "he struggles with God."

How interesting! When God named His special people, the ones who would be His beacon to the heathen nations of the world, He put the idea of struggling with Him at the very center of their identity. God could have named them anything He wanted. He could have called them a name that meant "he worships and adores God." It could have been a name that meant "he acknowledges God's everlasting power." Instead, wrestling was to be the signifying mark of God's people.

Is this surprising? Should it be? It is still so easy for us to think of God as an all-powerful Deity who just wants us to get in line. But maybe God is more concerned about people who will *wrestle* with Him. Maybe He wants friends who will *be real* with Him, even if it means questions or arguments from time to time.

God was *proud* of Jacob for wrestling with Him, proud enough to memorialize the event in the name of His people for all time. And so, after reading this chapter, I'm left wondering, when was the last time I really *wrestled* with Him?

Chapter 33

GOD HEALS HEARTS.

After reading this chapter, I'm left with one question: *what in the heck happened to Esau?* It would have been nice if the Bible writers had bothered to mention *something* about his journey during the 20 years Jacob lived in the house of Laban.

The last we heard from Esau was in chapter 27, verse 41, when he consoled his wounded pride by plotting his brother's murder: "He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'"

How strange it seems, then, that at their next meeting, all ill will is forgotten. Jacob is clearly nervous and afraid about meeting up with his older brother again, but when the dreaded moment comes, Esau treats him as though there was never any bad blood between them.

So, even though we don't know the particulars of Esau's story, what does this exchange tell us about God? That with time and our willingness, God can transform our hearts from ones that plot evil into ones that plan kindness. Only God can help us understand that getting revenge is not the way to deal with the wrongs that others have done to us.

Though God is not specifically mentioned in this chapter in that regard, I believe that Esau could not have experienced such a change of heart without God's transforming power. But how encourag-

ing it is to see such a plain example of how God can turn us around, even when we're headed far down the wrong path!

Chapter 34

GOD'S DISCIPLINE IS THE BEST KIND.

Poor Dinah. She goes out to meet up with her girlfriends and is ambushed and raped. Then, her attacker apparently falls in love with her, and he compels her to stay in his house while his father (Hamor) goes to her father (Jacob) to try and negotiate a marriage settlement.

What a mess.

Dinah's brothers hear about how she has been violated and are outraged. They devise a clever plan, convincing all the men in town to get circumcised (yeeouch!) so they can allow Dinah to marry the man who raped her. Three days later, while all the men are lying around groaning in pain, Dinah's brothers enter the city, kill every man, take her back from Shechem's house, and also steal all the women, children, and anything that will fetch a price. Thus, Dinah's honor is avenged.

What a mess.

This is astounding to me. I'm trying to understand the logic (if you can call it logic) that Dinah's brothers were operating under. One man rapes a woman. Therefore, *naturally*, it would make sense that every man in the town must die and all the women and children should become slaves. Also, all the valuable property is seized for punitive damages.

Against this kind of insipid nonsense, God's command that there be "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Ex 21:24) looks stunningly *reasonable*.

Usually, this command by God is used to make *God* look like the barbarian. I mean, how could "demanding" exact revenge be a loving act? Um, I guess it would be a start, when you're dealing with people like Dinah's brothers, that is. I suppose they thought that the appropriate revenge for rape was the slaughter of an entire city.

That's why I love the fact that when God comes to us, He takes us step by step. When dealing with people who will happily strap on a sword and go on a rampage, God says, "Okay. Let's begin by limiting our response. When someone slaps you across the face, you slap them back. *You don't kill their whole family.*"

Once our vengeful tendencies have been curbed by that notion, after a while, God can say, "Okay. Now, let's graduate to 'Love your enemy.' When someone slaps you across the face, turn the other cheek."

I'm thankful for the "eye for an eye"! We ought not try to dismiss it or explain it away as something a "loving God" wouldn't say. Rather, we should *praise* God for His discipline! It's the best kind . . . certainly better than the methods we come up with when left to our own devices.

We should praise God for being a master discipliner, for knowing the best methods of reaching us and teaching us, and for being willing to bear with us as we journey through our less attractive moments.

Chapter 35

GOD REMEMBERS.

It seems as though Jacob had a bit of a short memory. In Genesis 28, God appeared to him for the first time and made His covenant with Jacob.

That's when Jacob made his famous conditional promise: **IF** God did what He said, Jacob would return to Bethel and give God a tenth of his wealth.

Fast forward more than 20 years, and Jacob still hasn't returned to Bethel, even though he's been gone from Laban's house for quite some time. Not only that, but Genesis 35:2 indicates that Jacob had conveniently forgotten about God and had allowed foreign gods to take up residence in his home.

I can sympathize with Jacob, I guess. After all, I forget a lot of things. But I bet I wouldn't forget a personal visit from the Sovereign of the Universe! At least I think I wouldn't . . .

But even if I *would*, that makes the message about God in this chapter of Genesis all the more important. And we find that message in the very first verse: "Then God said to Jacob, 'Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.'"

You see, Jacob may have forgotten all about God and the promise he made to Him, but *God had not forgotten about Jacob and the promise He made to him.* God *always* remembers us, even when we don't

remember Him. He always pursues us, even when we're trying to ignore Him or get away from Him.

Even if God is out of our sight, we're not out of His mind. He remembers His children. He remembers His promises. And even if we've taken up residence with foreign gods, He keeps coming to remind us that *He's* never forgotten about *us*.

Chapter 36

GOD FULFILLS PROMISES CREATIVELY.

The land of Canaan had been promised to Jacob and the future Israelites. It was the Promised Land, the land that God planned to give to the descendants of Abraham.

However, when the rivalry between Jacob and Esau could have put a wrench in things. Instead of trusting in God's promises, Jacob devised a way to get what he thought was rightfully his (the birth-right and his father's blessing). Esau was initially jealous and angry and even sought to kill his brother.

But in Genesis 36, we find that God has creative ways of fulfilling all His promises. Over the course of time, the animosity between Esau and Jacob is dissolved. Esau has forgiven Jacob, and the two reunite as brothers. Esau has been blessed by God with a massive amount of wealth, just as Jacob has.

It is because of those blessings that the fulfillment of God's promise comes to pass: "Esau took his wives and sons and daughters and all the members of his household, as well as his livestock and all his other animals and all the goods he had acquired in Canaan, and moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob. *Their possessions were too great for them to remain together*; the land where they were staying could not support them both because of their livestock. So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir." (vs 6-8)

God didn't have to curse Esau in order to bless Jacob. He didn't have to squash down one of His children in order to be gracious to another. We so often think that if God is going to bless us, He must curse someone else. But God is not limited. He fulfills promises in *creative* ways, ways we might never be able to imagine.

In this case, He fulfilled His promise of blessing to Jacob by blessing *both* Jacob and Esau — blessing them both so much, in fact, that they couldn't live too closely together.

So, the next time you're worried about how something is going to work out in your life, trust it to God. He has so many ways of taking care of our problems and fulfilling His promises!

Chapter 37

GOD IS NEVER CAUGHT OFF GUARD.

And so now we come to the story of Joseph, the son whom Jacob loved more than all the others, the son who began having dreams. Joseph and his brothers had grown up in an environment where they were exposed to jealousy and rivalry, so it's no surprise that Joseph's brothers don't much like the dreams he tells them about. Even Jacob takes a little offense: "Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" (vs 10)

We could debate the wisdom of Joseph's relating these dreams to his brothers, but there is no debating the fact that God knew exactly what He was doing. Since we live on the other side of the story, we now know that the dreams Joseph was having were entirely accurate. As the man who would save millions of people from starvation, he would literally be in a position of great authority — even over his own family.

This wasn't a surprise to God. In fact, it well may be that Joseph's relating these dreams to his brothers was only the first step in the actual fulfillment of the dreams! At the very least, it ignited his brothers' jealousies and ended up getting Joseph sent to Egypt. Not that there wasn't another way God could have gotten Joseph to Egypt, but it is interesting that the brothers' reaction to Joseph's dreams moved Joseph one step closer to making those dreams a reality (even though *they* didn't know that at the time). Hmmmm...

One thing this should definitely tell us about God is that He is never caught off guard by anything. He doesn't get surprised or ambushed. He is prepared for whatever comes up, and He goes about also trying to prepare us for what's to come. Sometimes, like Joseph, we don't understand much until later. But when we do understand, we can look back and see that God knew all along what was coming.

I don't know about you, but this gives me great comfort — especially since I'm not an all-knowing, all-sensing being. I don't know what's going to come to me today, but God does. And because He knows and He is able to handle whatever comes my way, I don't have to worry. I can relax and trust Him. Though we may get surprised by life sometimes, God is never caught off guard

Chapter 38

GOD DOES NOT “STACK” THE FAMILY DECK.

When you do genealogy, sometimes you uncover family “secrets” you wish you had left buried. Without the benefit of being able to ask questions, sometimes we’re left to our own speculation. For instance, I have my own genealogy “mystery” waiting to be revealed some hundreds of years down the line. I recently had my most special Bible rebound in leather (because it was starting to fall apart), and when I did, I had my name engraved on the front. Of course, it’s my married name, yet the handwritten inscription from my father in the front of the Bible is dated 2002. Anybody who has access to my marriage license will know that I wasn’t a Lorencin in 2002. Let the speculation begin.

We all have a certain amount of skeletons in the “family closet,” I suppose. After all, you don’t decide what family you’re going to be born into. You just get born into it, and then your relatives are your relatives, for better or worse.

So, what does all this have to do with Genesis 38? Well, Genesis 38 seems to be abruptly stuck into the story of Joseph, and it’s quite a sordid little chapter. There’s a lot of dubious things going on — most of them involving some sort of sexual impropriety. Two young men are even singled out in this chapter as having been “put to death” by God because of their wickedness. In a world full of wicked people, if you are *called out* on account of your wickedness, you must be *extremely* wicked!

I couldn’t help but think that the very next chapter of Genesis would deal, by contrast, with Joseph’s *sexual integrity* and *honesty*. He will refuse to sleep with Potiphar’s wife, even though it means he will be slandered and sent unjustly to prison. It certainly does seem that — in the family of Israel — Joseph *is* most definitely the golden child. He has values, integrity, and ingenuity. He is upstanding and righteous. God is going to use him in a mighty way to save a lot of people.

Does it surprise you to realize, then, that in selecting a line of ancestors for Himself, God *doesn’t* choose Joseph? Rather, He chooses . . . *Judah!* Can you believe that?! At the end of Genesis 38, Tamar (who has posed as a prostitute in order to get pregnant by her father-in-law, who is doing the wrong thing by withholding his youngest son from her — somebody call the *Jakob Springer Show*) gives birth to twins, and the eldest (Perez) became the great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather of King David. And as you know, Jesus was a little further on down the line in this family tree.

We don’t get to choose which families we will be born into, but *God* certainly had His choice of which human beings would be called His ancestors. If anyone had a choice, it was God! Why in the world would you choose Judah’s messed-up family over Joseph’s?

Oh, when will we stop believing that God loves and only wants to associate with those who are perfect and always do the right thing? From this example, it should be clear enough that God is no respecter of persons, that He is willing **to** associate Himself with the worst of us.

Somebody once said that simply becoming human would have been an infinite humiliation for God . . . and still, He chooses a group of ancestors for Himself that are some of the worst in the bunch.

Now, put *that* in your pulpit and preach it!

Chapter 39

GOD WORKS UNHINDERED.

There is something so beautiful and almost funny about the straightforward relating of events in Genesis 39. First, Joseph is taken into Potiphar's house. And the Bible says that the Lord was with Joseph, so both Joseph and Potiphar prospered while Joseph was in charge of things. Potiphar didn't have to worry about anything because "the Lord gave [Joseph] success in everything he did." (vs 3)

Then, a rather unfortunate turn of events befalls Joseph. Potiphar's wife tries repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) to seduce Joseph, but Joseph won't have any of it. He refuses to sleep with her, and even eventually refuses to be in the same room with her. So, Potiphar's wife cooks up a scheme to get back at Joseph and he ends up being thrown into prison.

And, as if nothing has happened, the Bible narrative continues in just the same manner: "So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did." (vs 22-23)

Joseph had success in whatever he did *no matter where he was* — whether he was in Potiphar's house or in jail. God was with him no matter where he went. God was not limited in bringing blessing and success to Joseph. He blessed Joseph as easily in prison as he had in his master's house.

There's almost a comical quality behind this. It's as if God is standing there pouring blessings on Joseph's head, and well, it doesn't matter if somebody wants to move Joseph somewhere else, God just swings the blessing bucket around and continues pouring out those blessings on Joseph.

Our vision is so small that it's difficult for us to see how God is able to work in every circumstance. But God isn't hindered or hampered by changing situations and circumstances. His blessings are constant. His presence with us is constant. In every way, on every day, He works unhindered!

Chapter 40

GOD IS NOT A HOARDER.

How should we expect an all-knowing, all-powerful Deity to act? As a dictator? A celebrity? A self-absorbed ruler?

No matter what we expect, God blows the expectations out of the water time and time again. In this chapter of Genesis, what I see is a God who is more concerned with making His *creatures* look good, a God who shares His honor with His subordinates.

Joseph is still in prison, and actually, this is the first time I've ever realized that he is in *Potiphar's* prison. Verse 3 says that the cupbearer and baker were put "in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined." Chapter 39 identifies the captain of the guard as Potiphar. After a little research into Egyptian culture, it sounds like this would have been a prison, or dungeon, underneath Potiphar's house.

No wonder Joseph got put in charge of the prison! And in this chapter, too, it says that it was the "captain of the guard" (Potiphar) who assigned the cupbearer and baker to Joseph. All of this makes one wonder if Potiphar *really* believed what his wife had accused Joseph of. In any event, Potiphar certainly knew where the good help was! If Joseph wasn't going to be in charge of the "upstairs" any longer, he could rule over the dungeon below.

Here was Joseph, an outsider to Egyptian culture, a slave, and now apparently a "criminal," being promoted to power and authority no matter where he

goes. Furthermore, after the cupbearer and baker have been in prison for a while, they start having dreams and (*surprise, surprise!*) Joseph has the correct interpretations.

Undoubtedly, God was beginning to communicate to the Egyptians that He was the true God, and He was doing that through Joseph. But there were lots of ways God could have communicated. He could have found a way to come down and dazzle the Egyptians, saying, "Look at Me!" Instead, He communicated about who He was by blessing and honoring Joseph to such an extent that people started to sit up and take notice.

God isn't a dictator or a celebrity or an ego-maniac. He doesn't reserve honor and glory for Himself. Instead, He freely shares it with us. He honors us. He blesses us. He makes us shine with His glory. The more glory we can handle, the more He will give. He is definitely *not* a hoarder!

Chapter 41

GOD KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING.

It's difficult to read Genesis 41 and not just see God in charge all over the place! He's sending dreams to Pharaoh. He's got His ready-made interpreter (Joseph) in place. He's gearing up to save the whole world from a terrible famine, and He knows just how to do it.

One of the things that strikes me so deeply in this chapter is that *God is perfectly able to communicate with Pharaoh*. I mean, this is a man who is deeply, deeply entrenched in a heathen culture. He worships everything — from the sun to the river to the animals. Yet, God knows just what to do in order to talk to Pharaoh.

He sends dreams with images that Pharaoh can understand and relate to, dreams that wake him up (pun intended). And, when these dreams trouble Pharaoh and nobody can help him out, God has already prepared a way for Pharaoh to discover Joseph — through Joseph's interpretation of the cupbearer's and baker's dreams.

And of course, all of this is designed to help Pharaoh understand an even bigger message — that there is a God greater than all the gods in Egypt. There is a God who can actually discern the future and provide help in times of trouble. None of those Egyptian gods told Pharaoh about the impending famine, even though he worshipped them and sacrificed to them every single day. No, it was only the God of heaven who knew . . . and approached Pharaoh in order to let him know.

God isn't offended when we are ignorant of His existence or even when we ignore Him. And He's not even limited by the fact that we don't know Him. He can come to us anytime, anywhere and make Himself known. He knows just how to communicate so we can hear and see and understand.

With such a God, we are *never* at a disadvantage. In all things, He definitely knows *exactly* what He's doing!

Chapter 42

GOD TAKES THE BLAME.

Chapter 42 of Genesis is illuminating in what it tells us about how people in Joseph's day perceived God. In verse 25, it says, "Joseph gave orders to fill [his brothers'] bags with grain, to put each man's silver back in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey." So, Joseph basically gave his brothers grain for free by putting their payments back in their sacks.

Of course, when the brothers discovered this, they were afraid. *Old Testament shoplifting!* If someone thought they were trying to steal grain from Egypt, the world's superpower, they were going to be in big trouble.

So, knowing that Joseph was the one who arranged that little scenario, it's interesting to note what the brothers say in verse 28: "Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, 'What is this that *God* has done to us?'"

It's always God's fault, isn't it? Have you ever noticed that in the Bible? (Especially in the Old Testament!) If there's anything good going on, it's because God caused it. And if there's anything evil going on, it's because God caused it. And if anybody's winning a war, it's because God was with them. And if anybody's losing a war, it's because God wasn't with them. God gets blamed for *everything*.

And the thing is, God *takes* the blame for everything. He is more than willing to begin with us wherever *we* are willing to begin. And if our knowl-

edge of God is such that we think He causes everything — good or bad — in our lives directly, then that's where He'll start. And if our knowledge of God is such that we think He is totally "hands off" when it comes to this life and can't lift a finger in any intervening capacity, then that's where He'll start.

Apparently, God has decided that His shoulders are big enough to carry the blame — even for things He may not have done. (In this case, it's something that the *text itself* tells us He didn't do!) We still have a tendency to do this today, don't we? Ever heard the phrase *Act of God*? This generally refers to floods, tornados, earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, hurricanes, and anything else we don't have control over.

How much or how little God is involved in the events of our lives is something that I believe we continue to discover more about throughout the course of our lives. Regardless, God is willing to take all the blame we can heap on Him as He continues to work for our salvation.

Chapter 43

GOD'S TEARS FOR FEARS.

One of the things this chapter does so well is draw a big distinction between the way *our* mind works and the way *God's* mind works.

I see an awful lot of God in Joseph, particularly in this point in the story. He knows now that his older brothers and father are still alive. He's not so sure about his younger brother. Certainly, he hasn't forgotten about being sold into slavery. Yet, Joseph never harbors any ill will toward his brothers for what they have done *to him*. He treats them kindly, though he must wonder if they have tried to get rid of Benjamin (Rachel's other child) as they got rid of him.

For everyone else in this chapter, there is just a whole lotta fear going on. Jacob can't bear to think of sending Benjamin down to Egypt for fear that he won't come back. In verse 6, he even rebukes his sons for *telling the truth*: "Why did you bring this trouble on me by telling the man you had another brother?" In other words, *how come you didn't just lie?* What happened to Jacob's faith in God?! Had it ever *truly* been there to begin with?

But Jacob's not the only one who's afraid. Later, when the brothers returned to Egypt with Benjamin and were taken into Joseph's house, immediately they were scared: "Now the men were frightened when they were taken to his house. They thought, 'We were brought here because of the silver that was put back into our sacks the first time. He wants to *attack us and overpower us and seize us as slaves* and take our donkeys.'"

Hmmm . . . isn't that interesting? The brothers ended up totally afraid that *what they had done to Joseph was going to be done to them*. Because of their lack of faith in God, they lived in constant fear, *expecting* bad things to happen to them. This is inevitable. Faith and fear don't mix. You are either fearful or you're not. You either have faith or you don't.

In the midst of all this fear, there is Joseph, going about his business with the best intentions of loving, caring for, and being good to his family — even the brothers who sold him into slavery. That doesn't seem to matter to Joseph now. He is lavishing gifts on his brothers.

And that is just like God. We live in fear — fear of this world, fear of things happening to us, fear of God Himself. And all the while, God is going about His business with the best intentions of loving, caring for, and being good to us. When He sees us, He is filled up with compassion, weeping for joy over our homecoming. Though we may fear reprisals for our bad past behavior, the only thing on God's mind is how to bless us better and give us more.

God puts His tears of joy in place of our fears. Over and over again, He surprises us with kindness. "Vengeance is mine," God says, "I will repay." Indeed, He *does* repay. He repays the *evil* we have done to Him with *blessings!*

Chapter 44

GOD MEDIATES... TO US.

One of the central tenets of Christianity is that Jesus is the mediator between God and man. Since the root of “mediator” is “media,” we can see that there is an element of communication involved in such a role. But often, Christianity gets confused about *what* Jesus is communicating and *to whom*.

So why does Jesus play the role of mediator? And what the heck does any of this have to do with Genesis 44?

In this chapter, Judah places himself between Joseph and Benjamin. In other words, he begins to mediate, to try to negotiate Benjamin’s release and return home. If Joseph will let Benjamin go, Judah says, he will remain in Egypt as Joseph’s slave instead.

Judah has had a rough life. You know, evil really does have its own consequences, and I wonder how difficult it was for Judah to live with the guilt of what he did to his brother. He gives a hint in his conversation with Joseph when he says, “How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! *Do not let me see the misery* that would come upon my father.” (vs 34)

I’m sure, in that moment of anger and annoyance when Judah made the rash suggestion to sell Joseph into slavery, he never stopped to consider what it would be like to have to tell his father that

Joseph was never coming home. I’m sure Judah spent every day being run down by guilt, haunted by the decision he made.

Here’s a revelation: Judah suffered more because of his evil than Joseph did.

Yet, in this chapter, not having a clue of who he’s really talking to, Judah throws himself at Joseph’s feet and begs for mercy. Somewhere along the line, even though the Bible records such wicked behavior in Judah’s life, Judah has had a change of heart. Now, he is no longer willing to “get rid” of someone else for his own convenience. Instead, he is willing to lay down his own life to spare someone else.

In verses 18-34, Judah lays out what we would call a *prima facie* case, a convincing argument of why he should be allowed to take Benjamin’s place as the slave. Undoubtedly, his arguments would have convinced any stranger to the family who was only intent on making sure “justice was served.” As long as somebody “paid” for the crime, what did it matter which brother stayed behind?

But Joseph is no stranger to the family. He loved all the brothers who were standing in front of him. Joseph didn’t need a mediator. But the brothers, in their fear and bewilderment, didn’t know that.

The same thing is true for us and God. God is no stranger to the human family. He loves every single person on the face of this Earth. *God doesn't need a mediator!* But we, in our fear and bewilderment, don't know that.

So, yes, Jesus *does* act as a mediator . . . but He mediates *to us*, not *to God!* In Jesus (who *is* God and who came as a man to reveal God to us), we see the truth that God — in all Three Persons — is *always* mediating to us, negotiating with us, trying to secure our willingness to return home.

Judah is soon to find out that Joseph didn't need a mediator. When will we learn that lesson about God?

Chapter 45

GOD TRANSFORMS SUFFERING.

What a remarkable chapter! Joseph finally has a reunion with his long-lost brothers. He reveals to them that he is Joseph, and it's pretty apparent that he doesn't harbor any grudges against them for what they have done. He embraces and kisses each one of them, eagerly telling them how wonderful everything will be for them when they move to Egypt.

Also interesting in this chapter is what Joseph says about being sold into slavery: "God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your descendants survive. So it was not really you who sent me here, but God. He has made me the king's highest official. I am in charge of his whole country; I am the ruler of all Egypt." (vs 7-8)

What's going on here? Is Joseph trying to rewrite history? No. He hadn't forgotten what his brothers had done. They were planning evil for Joseph when they sold him into slavery. There's no doubt about that. But what Joseph can now understand is one of the most amazing things about God: He transforms suffering.

Suffering can come from a lot of different places in life. Sometimes it is brought on us by others. Sometimes it is brought on us by ourselves. But no matter where suffering comes from, *all of it passes through God*, and as it does, He transforms it from something awful into something He can use for good. Joseph is a perfect example of this. Being sold into slavery in Egypt was, I'm sure, no treat.

And then being falsely accused and sent to prison heaped a lot of insult on injury. But look at how God was able to take all of those *evil* things that were done to Joseph and use them for *good*.

This is how God works. He takes all the *evil* that comes to us and turns it into something *good*. He takes curses and turns them into blessings. This is what love does. And that's why evil has no power over good. That's why Satan has no power over God. Because the more evil Satan perpetrates, the more good God brings out of it by transforming it.

Does this mean we ought to go around causing people to suffer so God can transform that suffering into good? Of course not. But it *does* mean that we can be sure that God will take all the suffering we encounter in life — no matter where it comes from — and use it for our ultimate best good. He can even use it to bring ultimate good to others. And, like Joseph, we will be able to see how everything that came to us through evil intentions was used by God for the good of many.

It's awesome just to serve a God who is so willing to bless. It's doubly awesome to serve a God who can turn every *curse* into a *blessing*!

Chapter 46

GOD IS LIKE NO OTHER.

Perhaps a short one, but a good one, for today. There is no other god like God. We can learn this from Scripture even before we read God's various declarations to that effect. Genesis 46 is a good example. First, God calls to Jacob in the night, telling him not to be afraid to go down to Egypt. God renews His promise to make Jacob (Israel) into a great nation there.

Then He says, "I will go down to Egypt with you." (vs 4)

This God is turning out to be the total opposite of every other god that wins a mention in Scripture. He comes to His people, seeking them out. Then, He tells them that He's going to go with them where they go. This is contrary to other gods in Scripture, who never talk to their subjects (even when begged) and are never heard promising to take trips with them. (Of course, this is because they don't actually exist, but why let small details get in the way?)

Do we need to worry about the prospect of wandering in this life? No, the God of the Universe, the God who created us is always coming to us. He calls to us, He stays with us, and He journeys with us. There is no other god like Him.

Chapter 47

GOD IS NOT GREEDY.

So, what do we do when confronted with the reality that we are “not our own”? We were created by a God who rules over the entire universe. Everything came from Him, and everything belongs to Him . . . even our very lives. Every breath we take is a gracious gift from His hand. Without Him, nothing would be. That can be a somewhat daunting reality, huh?

No wonder there are many people in the world who would like to do away with the concept of a Creator! Suddenly, evolution might look like a very appealing alternative. If there is no Sovereign, then perhaps I am more “free” to live my life the way I want to, without worrying that a Cosmic Cop is looking over my shoulder.

So, how *should* we respond to this reality? I think we should begin by examining the character of this Creator. Does He make demands on us? If so, what are they?

I'd like to point out a little something related to this subject in reference to Genesis 47. God may be many things, but one thing He certainly *is not* is greedy. In Genesis 47, the famine was really pounding the people of Egypt. So much so that by the time it's over, the people literally have nothing left. They have sold their livestock, their land, even *themselves* to Pharaoh in order to buy the food that was stocked away for the famine. After buying their land for Pharaoh, Joseph says, “Now that I have . . . your land, here is seed for you so you can plant the ground. But when the crop comes in, give

a fifth of it to Pharaoh. The other four-fifths you may keep as seed for the fields and as food for yourselves and your households and your children.” (vs 23-24)

Pretty generous, eh? Pharaoh has kept them all from starving, and even though he now owns everything in the land of Egypt, he is only asking a 20 percent return on their livelihoods. Here's the amazing thing: this is *double* what God asks of us! God *truly* owns everything in the universe, and He spends His time pouring out blessings on all His creation. In return, He has asked us to return a portion of what we have to Him (to remind us that all we have is not ours). How much does He ask? *A meager 10 percent. That's only half of what Pharaoh — the “god” of Egypt — required from his people!*

So, next time you're tempted to shudder at the thought of a God who “owns it all,” remember that our God is not greedy. He gives far more than He ever asks (or gets) in return!

Chapter 48

GOD ROOTS FOR THE UNDERDOG.

So, we come to the story of Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim. And as he goes to bless the grandkids, Joseph gets upset because his right hand (apparently the hand of “greatest blessings”) is on the wrong boy’s head. He is getting ready to give Ephraim (the younger and, consequently, the lesser) the better blessing.

Joseph tries to correct his father, but Jacob makes it clear that he knows exactly what he’s doing: “But his father refused [to switch hands] and said, ‘I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations.’” (vs 19)

Do you see a pattern here? Almost from the very beginning of God’s interaction with His chosen people, there has been this curious interplay between the first- and second-born: Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his older brothers, and now Joseph’s two sons.

It seems that God is in the business of turning things on their heads. Whether it is our customs and traditions . . . or our perceptions. Perhaps we value the “firstborn,” but God makes it clear that birth rank doesn’t hold significance for Him. Perhaps we value the “wealthy,” but God consistently chooses the poorest of the poor and the least of the least.

I think God must love a good underdog story. After all, He has taken each one of us, found us in the pit, and catapulted us higher than we could have ever dreamed of going on our own. He doesn’t limit Himself to our perceptions . . . thankfully!

Chapter 49

GOD GIVES APPROPRIATE GIFTS.

I love the title of this blog. It makes it sound as though God has read *Emily Post* and knows which gifts to give for which wedding anniversary. Obviously, however, I've got something a little different in mind.

In this chapter, Jacob gives his final blessings to his 12 sons. Much has been written about the blessings, each so different, some surprising. I'm sure there have been umpteen parallel studies done to research how the "blessings" played out in history.

For instance, Jacob told Reuben that he would "no longer excel" because of the sin he committed when he slept with his step-mother. Quite literally, the birthright was taken away from him for his actions. And, when we look into the history (future) of the tribe of Reuben, we find that no king, no prophet, and no one of significance to the nation of Israel ever came from Reuben.

But I want to key in on this verse today: "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, giving each the blessing appropriate to him." (vs 28)

I see a little bit of God here. I love the statement, "giving each the blessing appropriate to him." God is in the business of *relationships*. And if there is one thing relationships certainly *are not*, it's identical! No two relationships are the same. Relationships

don't come from a cookie cutter. There is no "relationship mold."

And it's the same when it comes to God. He treats us each as an individual, and He knows just what we need at just the right time. He knows just how to bless us with the "blessing appropriate to us." He is a Master Parent.

On one hand, this is pretty cool, right? To know that we have a Heavenly Father who knows us intimately and is able to provide for our every, tailor-made need. On the other hand, we don't always like this very much, do we? We look at others around us and wonder why *we* don't have what *they* do.

Shortly after my father died last year, a good friend of mine had a crisis in her life with her father. He was in ICU, and they really couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. For a long time, it didn't look very good. We thought he might die. But, miraculously, he survived. God healed his body, and today, he has made a full recovery.

At the time, I remember marveling at the place God had brought me to in my life. I thought about how, just a short time ago, I might have demanded answers from God. *How come you healed her dad, God, but you didn't heal my dad?*

Thankfully, through a series of circumstances in my life (one of which was my father's illness and death), I have learned the important lesson that God gives "blessings appropriate to us." I know that if it was the right thing for my dad to have been healed, then he would have been.

God always does the absolutely right thing. Every day.
Every time. In every way.

He knows just what you need, and He's going to give it to you!

Chapter 50

GOD IS A NO-QUESTIONS-ASKED, NO-HOLDS-BARRED, UNCONDITIONAL, UNRELENTING FORGIVER.

What a vulnerable and moving picture of God in this chapter! “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, ‘What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?’ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father left these instructions before he died: “This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.” Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.’ When their message came to him, Joseph wept.” (vs 15-17)

Joseph’s brothers still didn’t get it! After all that time in Egypt, they *still* thought Joseph was being nice to them just because their father was alive. They thought he was “playing nice,” pretending, biding his time until Jacob popped off and he could *really* get down to the business of revenge.

It’s incredible to see just what they thought of Joseph . . . imagining that he would be unforgiving, unkind, holding a grudge after all this time. Perhaps they were seeing *in Joseph* what was in their own hearts. Perhaps this is why God says, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” *Perhaps it is because we see in others what is really in ourselves, and in “judging” them, we expose our own hearts.*

Joseph’s reaction is very moving to me. He wept. I imagine he must have thought, *After all this time . . . this is what you think of me? Do you know me at all?*

Does that sound like something God might be able to say to us? If we could pull our perceptions about God “out of our heads” and examine them, would we find it incredible to see just what we think of Him? Do we expect Him to be harboring up grudges for Judgment Day? Do we secretly cower, wondering when the “time of mercy” will be over and the retribution will start?

If that is what we think of Him, God has one response. He weeps. And He longs to reassure us, as Joseph reassured his brothers, that He has forgiven us long ago, that He loves us deeply and has done all He can to bless us.

He is a Forgiver.

He is a Lover.

That. Never. Changes.