

Devotional Meditations on the Book of Genesis

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Note: this is still a draft document in need of editing

#1 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 1

There is so much packed into this chapter it is impossible to include at all in a single, brief devotional meditation.

Genesis 1 is often read at the beginning of a new year when Bible reading schedules reset. How fitting! The world today looks very old to us. Genesis 1 is a reminder that at one time this whole universe was something brand new. God created something new out of nothing. God filled a formless void. God brought light out of darkness. He brought the Spirit of life to lifelessness. He held out the hope of eternal Sabbath rest after completing a course of work. All these were new and held out hope for things even “newer.”

Throughout the Bible these images are used to describe God’s later work of “new creation.” In some ways it would replicate the old work which God did in the beginning. But in other more important ways it would go beyond it. God created light, but the true light that it lightens every man would come into the world. Man’s sin brought death and lifelessness, but once again God’s Spirit and word would go forth into the void and bring righteousness and life. God created a first Adam in whom we all fail, but he would bring a last Adam who never failed. Just as we bore the image of the man of dust, those who trust in him will bear the image of the man of heaven.

In the new year this passage reminds us we need to be remade anew. That cannot happen simply by human “resolution”. How pitiful our commitments are! Our wills are weak. We quickly forget what we promised, let alone keep our word! But God’s word will never be broken. He promises to change us anew through the same power that was at work when he created the world: by Christ the living word and the Holy Spirit! Let us, then, commit ourselves to availing ourselves of that word throughout this year is that new creation May be at work within us.

#2 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 2

Genesis 1 is all about beginnings. But every beginning points toward an ending. In Genesis 2 we zoom into some more of the details regarding God's beginning work of creation. What we find is that from the beginning, God held out something greater for man. He was never to live eternally in the estate of innocence. Built into the beginning were signs of the ending.

We see this first in the principle of the Sabbath. Genesis two begins with the seventh day of the "creation week.

In it God takes a holy rest from his labors. For humans, the Sabbath principle serves in part to provide a time of psycho-physical rest from work. We get tired and worn out. We need seasons of refreshment where we put our work outside. But this does not apply to God. The Lord God never grows tired or weary. He never slumbers or sleeps. But God does work in history towards an ultimate goal or confirmation. The fact that God takes a holy rest at the end of the creation week points us to that ultimate end. Our lives function according to a cycle governed by the sabbath principle: six days of labor followed by one day of rest. That manifests itself weekly with one day set aside for worship and six days set aside for work. But it also manifests itself on the grand scale with history. This life will end with an eternal Sabbath rest for his people. When we pass into glory, we are blessed because we "rest from our labors and our works follow us."

But secondly, we also see it in the way God created man. In the beginning God first formed man from the dust of the ground. The language is quite beautiful and moving. The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Man thus has two sides to his being: one is earthly and the other is heavenly. His physical substance is from the dust of the ground, but his spiritual character comes from God himself. He has made in his image and likeness. Theologically speaking, this means he is created in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness with dominion over the creatures. He has a body that can die, but also a soul that can never die. In this way man has two sides: an earthly and heavenly. He must live out the first part of his existence on earth. But he also has a spiritual or "heavenly" side to his nature. This points him to the fact that there is something higher and greater with God in heaven.

Thirdly, note how God does not create man and woman together at the beginning. He first creates man. Then the man must go about the labors God has given him, naming all the animals. Adam surveys the vast array of creatures, obviously noting that they all had "a male and its mate." But after searching through all of creation, there is no suitable helper found for him. It is only after this that God causes a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he forms woman from the rib of his side. Adam's first waking words express his elation at arriving at the confirmation of his search: "At last! This is bone of my bones and

flesh of my flesh.” Here’s the point: Adam’s initial created state was not the end. He had to work through the process of his historical life in order to arrive at the goal of a married relationship.

Fourth, we also see better, future things in the two special trees God sets in the Garden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a tree that represented testing or “probation.” The next chapter will tell the sad story of how Adam failed that test. But what was the purpose of the test? This is seen in the second tree—the tree of life. As Genesis 3:22 indicates, this tree represented the idea of a confirmed, eternal life that would be attained after the successful completion of the work God gave him. This is, in part, why we call God’s covenant with Adam a “covenant of works.” God held out for Adam the promise of eternal life symbolized in this tree after the successful completion of the work he gave him.

But we all know the sad story. The first Adam failed. He began in a garden paradise but it was exiled to a wilderness waste land. Yet God did not fully withdraw the hoped for heavenly rest. In Christ the second Adam we have one who succeeded where the first Adam failed. He obeyed God perfectly and suffered all the consequences of the first Adam’s sin. He brings us to the heavenly Eden and garden of God, to the eternal Sabbath rest in glory, gives us access to the tree of life, and invites us to the marriage supper of the lamb. Outside of him we only have the curse and death of the first Adam. In him we have the certain hope of blessedness and peace in heaven.

#3 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 3

In Genesis 1-2 God established a very clear order to his creation. The order was this: God over all, man and woman made after his image and likeness, with dominion over the rest of the creation.

Among mankind God also established a clear order. Man would be the leader, and the woman would be his suitable helper. He had the responsibility to care for and love his wife, she had the responsibility to follow his leadership under God. She was not his “inferior” as far as her nature, talents, gifts, or intellect was concerned. She was equally made in the image of God. But she was formed from man and for man. As Matthew Henry has pointed out, woman was not made out of Adam’s head to rule over him. She was not made out of his feet that he might tyrannize her. He was made out of his side that she may come alongside of him arm in arm. She was to be his suitable helper and partner in the service of their creator. They had a joint task to perform under God as their mutual head and Lord.

Here we see the perfect balance of equality and order. They are not the same, but we cannot say that the one is “better” than the other. Both were created by God for different roles and tasks. This is built into their biology. It is also celebrated by the Creator. God created man in his own image. Male and female he created them. These differences are basic to their constitutions and necessary for the fundamental tasks he has given them as image bearers (“be fruitful and multiply”). In this respect, he has given a role to the woman in childbearing that the man simply cannot perform.

Again, the order: is God, man, woman, animals.

But as sin enters the world notice how the order changes.

First, Satan enters into the world through a serpent. Serpents don’t talk. But non-image-bearing creature comes as one speaking as if he were an image bearer. Adam and Eve should have their guard up! Second, Satan comes as a serpent first to address the woman. The “leader” is nowhere to be found. Third, the woman then leads the man to commit the first sin when they both ate the forbidden fruit.

God’s good order has been reversed Through Satan’s evil! First we had: God, man, woman, animals. Now we have: animals, woman, man—with God entirely out of the picture!

But notice how God himself reestablishes the creation order. God comes to interrogate, and then to pronounce judgment. When he interrogates and questions them, the order is: man, woman, serpent. Although Satan reversed the order, God reestablishes it!

Then, when God pronounces curses, notice the order he follows. He speaks first to the serpent, then to the woman, and finally to the man.

This indicates that although sin has turned the world upside down, God has not abandoned his creation or his creatures. As Genesis 3:15 indicates, there is hope for a redeemer. A seed of the woman will come to crush the head of the serpent, reversing and completing what Satan undid.

Where God created life, Satan brought death. But the God who created something out of nothing, will also bring life out of death. Adam and Eve knew this and believe this. For in the midst of sin and death, what name does Adam give to his wife? He calls her "Eve...because she would be the mother of all the living." it's all through Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman, life comes to us in the midst of death.

Now a few thoughts on the temptation itself.

The devil's twisted words are designed to tempt Eve to think that the loving, benevolent creator is a harsh taskmaster: "Did God actually say, "you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" It comes in the form of a question because he wants her to begin to question God. The reality is, nothing could be farther from the truth. God allowed them to eat of any tree in the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Although Eve corrects him, Satan has succeeded in twisted her perspective of the Lord of all. She adds words that God did not actually say: "you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it...". This human addition to the divine word betrays a seed of sin in her heart. She is beginning to view her subordinate position as an unfairness—an injustice that must be rectified by human efforts. Social revolution is necessary from the ground up to bring true equality!

Now, there are plenty of times where human sin has brought injustice to individuals and groups of humans in communities throughout the world. The Bible has a lot to say about the sins of the powerful against the powerless. There are real oppressors who need to be brought to justice. My point is in no way to deny the importance of that aspect of biblical teaching. Instead, my point is to show how this mindset was instigated by Satan in a perfect and sinless world. It is good to point out sinful injustice, especially where it takes systemic root in human culture and life. But note the devils' ways: the

“injustices“ he identifies in the world of innocence or not to do to sin, but our instead a rebellion against the order that God has established by his creative hand.

Only here note that In a perfect and sinless world the devil succeeds in Creating a mindset in the woman in which she begins to view the world as inherently unfair. Again, there are times where humans create systems of government, society, and individual relationships which can truly be said to be “systemically“ unfair. The Bible teaches that those in positions of authority are not to use their authority for their own gain, but to serve those under their care.

But Satan is very shrewd. He is the craftiest creature! He knows how to use a half-truth to promote his evil lies. He knows how to be the victimizer masquerading as the victim: he is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Think about that image. There is no creature that evokes more sympathy than a helpless sheep.

Throughout history we see some great sins committed by those masquerading as a victim. Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce Joseph, but he refuses her mindful of God and flees. After being rejected by him, she then turns in lies and deceit to accuse him of sexual assault. The victimizer masquerades as a victim! To be sure, Satan’s lies and deceit knows no end. He is quite adept at manipulating this reality, too. This reality can also be used as a manipulative tool in the hand of the wicked to make true victims look like the perpetrators.

Thankfully, there is one promised who can save us from this deceit. There is one coming who can save us from the wolf in lamb-like clothing. It’s the true Lamb of God, Jesus! He was Lord overall, but became the true victim and sacrifice when he paid for our sins and crushed the head of the serpent. May we be mindful of his ways that we may not fall into temptation.

#4 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 4

The previous chapter ended with the hope of a redeemer. Adam and Eve are now surrounded by sin and death and banished from the Garden of God. But the Lord had promised that a “seed of the woman” would crush the head of the serpent. This “mother promise” contained in seed form everything God would do to deliver them from the tyranny of the devil and bring them back into the fellowship-paradise of God.

Genesis 4 begins with an expression of hope on Eve’s part that perhaps this seed has already arrived. Having conceived in borne Cain, Eve states: “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.” Perhaps he will be the one to save mankind. Perhaps this firstborn son will free us from the curse of sin!

The following story makes it abundantly plain that Eve’s anticipation was misplaced. The firstborn “seed of the woman” actually turns out to be the firstborn seed of the serpent. The crafty serpent is still at work, although now lurking in the shadows through sinful human agents.

And how brutal are the fruits of his work! Brother murders brother to death. And why? Because "the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."

It’s an old question as to why Abel’s offering was accepted but Cain’s was not. The best answer lies in the different natures of their sacrifices. Abel brought a blood sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock together with the fat portions. Cain brought what would later be called a “grain offering” from the ground. Theologically speaking, the blood sacrifices point us to Christ’s vicarious work whereby he becomes our substitute and sin bear. Grain offerings signify our life of consecration and devotion to God in good works.

In the book of Leviticus, it is highly significant that the first offering in our approach to God is the blood offering. Only later do we give green offerings. Our good works cannot be accepted as pleasing to God unless we first have a substitute who can cover over and forgive our sins. When we come to God trusting first in a blood sacrifice, we are depending upon him to make us righteous. If we come to God first with our grain offering, we are trusting in our good works to make us right before him.

Thus, Abel’s offering was by faith (Hebrews 11), trusting in God’s greater sacrifice to come. Cain’s offering was by works, trusting in his own strength and labors to bring redemption.

Abel himself becomes like the sacrifice he offers to God: his life is lost through death and his blood is spilled upon the ground. Cain shows the fruit of his self-righteousness in his response: pride in one's own accomplishments, followed by anger, jealousy, and resentment that he doesn't get the "credit" he deserves.

Does this sound familiar? That's the fruit of sin in our lives. We can be very active, get a lot of things done, and "sacrifice" for others in our lives. But when we don't get the recognition we desire or we are criticized we become furious and feel that we are not "appreciated." This is often just "code" for our sinful pride. We are making "sacrifices" but we are doing them in our own strength and not trusting the blood of the Lord. We secretly believe our works are meritorious and deserve praise from God and man. When we don't receive it, we are angry, bitter, resentful, and then seek to get even. Cain's actions here are just the full fruits of the same attitudes that are often in our hearts.

But God intervenes yet again. He brings judgment upon Cain. Just as Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden, so also Cain is now banished to wander in the wilderness.

And God does not forget Abel, whose blood cries out to him from the ground. And what word does that blood speak? It cries out for holy vengeance! How long, O Lord, until you avenge my blood and judge the earth! (cf. Rev. 6:10)

Yet Abel's sacrifice and death is a type of someone greater. His fate is a preview of the true seed of the woman who would later come. Filled with jealousy and resentment, Jesus's own Jewish brothers would betray him to death and spill his blood upon the ground.

But are we not thankful that the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12)? Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, but Jesus's blood cries out for forgiveness. Even while being crucified Jesus held out life to those who brought him death: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

In our lives in him must follow a clear order. We must first trust in his blood sacrifice—the only thing that can cover our sins and make us acceptable to God. But we must secondly devote all of our lives and works to his glory and service, becoming living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God.

Living this life of faith and obedience, God holds out the promise that the God of peace will soon crush Satan under our feet (Rom. 16:20).

#5 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 5

Genesis 4 introduces us to the division of the line of human history into two basic parts. Ever since Augustine, we have referred to these as the “city of God” and the “city of man.” The book of Genesis will proceed to tell the history of these two lines and their conflict with one another. Genesis 4-5 contains an outline of these two contrasting genealogies.

In Genesis 4, the principle of sin that was introduced through Adam and Eve bears ugly fruit in the murder of Abel by Cain. Cain’s line is then described in its development culminating (theologically speaking) in Lamech. Interestingly (if we count Adam as the first) Lamech would be the seventh generation from creation. The number seven represents fullness, so Lamech represents the culmination of wickedness flowing from the city of man.

This is manifested in Lamech’s two great sins: sexual immorality and murder. He is the first polygamist. He has two wives. In the beginning, God ordained marriage to be between one man and one woman in holy matrimony. He also murders a weaker person (a “young man”) merely for threatening and striking him, boasting in sinful bravado through some of the first recorded poetry. He does this self-consciously embracing his identity as a child of Cain and member of the city of man.

So it has ever been and still is today. The city of man flaunts its rebellion against God through sexual sin and brutal treatment of its fellow image-bearers.

At the same time, God’s mercy is upon the line of Abel through Seth and Enosh. It is in them that men begin to “call upon the name of the Lord.” Where the city of man lives to satisfy its sinful cravings, the city of God lives for the glory of their Creator and Redeemer.

In Genesis 5 we see the development of the city of God. This is the genealogy of Abel, which will lead to the seed of the woman. On one level, this genealogy gives clear evidence that although they are bound for holy heaven they remain sojourners on a sinful earth. A clear pattern emerges in this chapter. Each figure is born, lives so many years, has several sons and daughters, and then they die. Death punctuates the life of every fallen son of Adam, including those in the city of God. The refrain is powerful: “and he died... And he died... And he died...”.

As Paul summarizes in Romans chapter 5: “death reigned from Adam to Moses....”

In Lamech—the seventh from Adam—we saw the culmination of evil in the city of man. By contrast, note the seventh from Adam in the godly line of the city of God. His name is Enoch. Death is all around Enoch. All his fathers and mothers succumbed to it, and all his sons and daughters will be subject to it. Yet of him it says: “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.”

Enoch did not see death. We see in him a preview of the culmination of God’s promise to Adam and Eve after the fall. A seed of the woman would one day come and grant them access once again to the tree of life in the paradise garden of God.

This is the issue that must press upon us every day: one day this life will end in death as it has for nearly all the sons and daughters of Adam before us (Enoch and Elijah being two special exceptions). Every activity, every worry, every concern, every pursuit—all must be measured by the fact that one day we will pass through death and into a future life. How will we obtain blessedness and glory in that life to come? How shall we live in a way that prepares us for that great journey at life’s end? These are the most significant questions for human beings to wrestle with.

How will you deal with these great questions? There is only one answer: the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only way to escape eternal death and obtain everlasting life.

#6 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 6

Genesis 6 records the story of the worldwide flood that marked the end of the “pre-diluvian” (or “pre-flood”) world, and its repopulation through Noah and his family. It begins by outlining the blurring of the two lines of humanity (the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men”) through intermarriage. The text indicates that the motivation was purely from the passions of man. Their interests were only in physical beauty and sexual gratification. It also hints at polygamous marriages (“...they took as their wives any they chose”).

Throughout the Old Testament, God forbids the nation of Israel to intermarry with the foreign nations. The concern here is not cultural or national, much less is it racial or a matter of skin color. The reason for the prohibition is not to preserve national, cultural, or racial purity. Great evils have resulted from these false interpretations. Instead, the reason for the prohibition is religious in nature. In the New Testament era, the church becomes an international community, no longer limited to a single nation. The rule of the New Testament is that a Christian can only marry another Christian (one man and one woman in the lifelong bonds of holy matrimony).

The next paragraph supplements a description of mankind’s sexual sins with the violence that had begun to fill the earth. Interestingly, these were the two sins of Lamech in the previous chapter. So it is with the city of man ever since. It glorifies sexually immoral pleasures and violent brutality as an expression of power. And so we see human relationships and society filled with these twin evils.

This chapter also contains an important verse outlining the source of these sins: the deeply evil character of the human heart: “...every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Many try to argue that human beings are inherently good but only do evil because of their circumstances. When someone sins we often say: “Well, they messed up, but this is an isolated instance. They are really a good person and this is just a blip in an otherwise good life.” The Biblical writers are more honest and sobering: our hearts are continually motivated by evil inclinations. We have evil hearts! That evil runs deep: every intention of the thoughts of our hearts is evil. That evil runs long: those intentions are only evil continually.

If you don’t believe that, try this test. If someone does something to bother you, is your initial, automatic reaction one that you would call “good” or “bad?” If you’re like me, you are probably naturally inclined to get irritated with other people around you when they do things you don’t like. And it probably takes you a little bit of concerted effort to not succumb to that knee-jerk temptation. That’s because we are all born with sinful hearts. We are naturally inclined to things like lust, anger, evil desire, and greed.

This radical evil of the heart revealed in man's violent corruption had spread far and wide. The first part of the chapter reads like a survey of evidence in a trial. Following the consideration of such evidence comes the verdict and the judgment of the court. In this case, the judgment is a worldwide flood to destroy the whole world.

If this is a troubling thought for you, keep in mind that a worldwide judgment is not just something God did in the past, but also something he will do in the future. 2 Peter tells us that even as "the world that then was" was destroyed by a flood, "present world" is awaiting judgment by fire. Thankfully, in both instances, there is a pathway to salvation through Christ by repentance and faith in him.

Just as God gave Noah a warning of that judgment to come, he gave a way of escape. God gave him an Ark of salvation that would carry him safely through the great flood and bring him safely to a new world. So also in Christ and his church we have an Ark to rescue us—not simply from the sins of the world around us, but from the flood of evil coming out of our own sinful hearts.

#7 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 7

In Genesis 7 we read the story of the flood that covered the entire earth in the days of Noah. God commands Noah to bring seven pairs of all clean animals and one pair of all unclean animals. The clean animals would be for sacrifice and worship, hence the greater number of those. In the new creation that would come forth from the flood, the worship of the one true God was to be central. And he could not approach the Lord without blood sacrifice. In the context of a water judgment like the flood, this is also a reminder that redemption comes by both “water and blood.” There must be a substitute and a bloody death to atone for sin.

This is a reminder that the textual references to Noah as a “righteous man” are not a reference to his inherent merit. In 7:1 God describes Noah as “righteous before me in this generation.”

This is no basis for the idea of meritorious works. It is instead a reference to the righteousness of his faith which expresses itself in obedience and good works. We are forgiven and justified by faith as we receive and rest upon Christ. That faith shows its vitality and truth in good works of service and worship.

The Bible itself interprets the passage in terms of faith, and not in terms of merit. Looking to unseen things, Noah built an ark. Hebrews 11 tells us that in doing this he “became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” Noah was righteous by faith, not by works.

This faith that receives God’s promise and rests upon Christ is not a dead faith. Good works must and will flow from true faith. And so it was with Noah. He trusted in God’s future, eternal grace. He put his hope in a greater sacrifice to come. And he showed that in acts of radical obedience.

So it is with every believer. We trust in Christ alone for salvation. We put no hope in our good works as if they were meritorious before God. But we live our lives zealously pursuing the glory of God in every part of our lives. We do so out of thankfulness for the gift we have received in Christ: deliverance from the judgment to come and citizenship in heaven above.

Note also that God deals with Noah not simply as an individual but in terms of his covenant family. Noah is the head of his home. We refer to this as “family headship.” This is distinguished from “covenant headship.” There are only two covenant heads: Adam and Christ. Marriage, however, is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church, including Christ’s headship (Ephesians 5). Noah’s family headship as a husband and a father was no license for him to be a tyrant, domineering, or sinfully controlling of others. In the Bible, headship primarily means responsibility. In the world, headship and

authority is viewed as a license for tyranny. We don't have space in this devotional to develop this further. Our point here is to simply note how God deals with Noah and his family.

Both Noah and his household are saved in the ark. That doesn't mean each individual member of his family would end up being a true believer. We get some indication later that this is not the case although we don't know their definitive end. It does mean that God deals with us as families through his covenant promise.

This principle remains true today. It's the reason why in the book of Acts the message of the Gospel is stated in this way: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). It is upon the basis of this covenant-Gospel promise that we baptize our infant children. Just as Noah's whole family was "baptized" in the water judgment of the flood, so also God baptizes us in Christ (1 Peter 3:18-22).

For those of you married with children, remember today that this is God's greatest blessing upon your family. It consists not in the size of your home, bank account, proximity to loved ones or any other earthly thing. Your children's greatest treasures are not their academic or athletic achievements, but that they are heirs of God's promise and children of his covenant. All these other things are temporal, and that alone is eternal.

#8 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 8

Genesis 8 records the story of the subsiding of the flood waters and the rescue of Noah and his family. It begins with the beautiful phrase, "...and God remembered Noah." This is God's covenant-memory. He is not so much remembering Noah as a man, but the promise he made to him. God's memory is an amazing thing. Because he is infinite, he is also omniscient and all-knowing. God remembers everything, except one thing: through Christ, he promises to remember our sins no more. By faith, Noah had that blessing.

By faith, Noah obeyed God and built the ark to save his family. He received God's promise and proved his sincerity in his works. God will not forget his saints who receive his promise by faith and walk accordingly. Noah's story is a great illustration of faith in action.

Consider the obstacles Noah faced to this obedience that flowed out of faith. Noah spent years building an ark from a worldwide flood. Imagine what the neighbors thought! "There goes crazy old Noah, working on his ark again!" 2 Peter indicates indirectly that by faith no I had to endure much scuffing and ridicule from the world. So it is with Christians today. We are mocked as crazies who believe that one day the world will end and the Messiah will come riding on the clouds to judge the world and rescue us. Noah heard such ridicule as well. I'm sure it affected him emotionally. But those "mockers were singing quite a different tune when the rain started to fall...so they will at the end of this age. Worldwide judgment is coming. There is only one ark of salvation in Christ.

The chapter ends with blood sacrifice. Noah takes one of every clean animal and offers it as a burnt offering to the Lord. The burnt offering is the first sacrifice listed in Leviticus (chapter 1) because it marks the foundational beginning of our approach to God. In order to approach God, we must have our sin and punishment taken away. Only after that can we offer green offerings of thankfulness and consecration to Lord. Our persons must be accepted in God's sight through justification before our works of sanctification can be acceptable to him.

In summary, God's rescue of Noah in the Ark was a picture of a greater deliverance to come—one that would come through blood sacrifice in Christ.

#9 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 9

In this chapter, Noah and his family open their eyes to a new world. The old world has been swept away. A new creation has come. But it is not yet the final world. What is “new” still has some of the “old” in it— A reminder that the end has not yet come.

What signs do we see in the chapter that a new world has come?

First, God repeats the “mandate” he gave to Adam and Eve in the beginning: “...be fruitful and multiply and feel the earth.” But there is a difference. Before in Eden the lion would lie down with the lamb. There was no death. And there was no need for blood or sacrifice. Everything was perfect and there was no sin. Now “the fear and dread” of men will be upon every animal. Not just plants but also animals will be taken for food. We must not get too distracted with questions about eating in this chapter. The focus is not dietary. It’s a reminder that in this new world, there is still sin and death. Redemption has not yet fully come.

Second, God also adds new provisions to account for the murderous evil within man’s heart. In 9:5–6, we read of the establishment of the death penalty for murder. The advance of sin in the city of man was seen in the increase of murderous violence on the earth. Lamech killed a man for threatening him. The whole earth became filled with corruption and violence before the flood. This is the natural tendency of man’s heart. The death penalty becomes a way to check man’s selfishness by using it against him. Thus, the establishment of civil penalties for acts of evil becomes a great restraint upon the development of the collective sin of man.

Third, we clearly see that the principle of sin still infects the covenant line of Noah’s family. Although we have come to a “new world” of sorts, we do not have a “new Adam.” Like the rest of mankind, he still carries the old nature of the first man within him. Thus, we see Noah drunk and naked, and his son Canaan conducts himself wrongly toward him. There is a lot of debate as to what’s exactly going on in the passage, and admittedly some of the language is a little cryptic. We don’t have space in a devotional to get into all the details. We should not be distracted from the main point: sin is still present even in the covenant line.

Finally, even though we see many clear shortcomings in this “new world” it still clearly indicates that one day the final world will come. God promises to never again destroy the world with the waters of the flood. He makes the rainbow in the sky a covenant sign of his preservation of the earth. Visible to all the world, they have a concrete indication of the faithfulness and mercy of God. Although the focus will quickly shift from all the sons of Adam to a special blessing that will come from the line of Shem (9:26–

27), God also promises that one day the sons of Japheth and even Canaan himself will one day experience the blessings of God's final world.

This is what we have in Christ. In him, we are a new creation. In him fallen sons of Adam from all the tribes of the earth can have redemption. The corrupt violence that is within their hearts can be washed away with the waters of the Holy Spirit. Right now that message of salvation is being proclaimed to the nation, and God is faithful to his promise to preserve the earth until that task is finished.

Every day we observe creation, we see reminders of the beauty and glory of Eden, but also human corruption and sin. We must lift up our eyes to remember God's promise of a final world that will go far beyond restoring the glory of the first creation. There the lion will lie down with the lamb and we will worship the Lord free from all sin and violence eternally.

#10 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 10

This chapter contains the famous “Table of Nations.” It is a continuation of the genealogical record that we have followed throughout Genesis. The book is structured around the repeated phrase “these are the generations of X.” In one sense, the book of Genesis is just one long genealogy.

In this instance, the genealogy records the repopulation of the world through the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Speaking in broad generalities, Japheth’s sons settle towards Europe and Asia. Shem’s sons end up in what we now call the “Middle East.” The sons of Ham settle towards Africa. But there is some overlap between them.

At least two things are noteworthy in this chapter.

First, we continue to see the development of human culture among those associated with the “City of Man.” Back in Genesis 4, we saw how it was from the line of Cain that human cities were built, along with music, agriculture, and manufacturing. The line of the “City of God” is marked by the absence of such developments. It culminates in the figure of Enoch, of whom it is simply said that he “walked with God.” The “City of Man” seeks its glory in this world—a principle that will soon culminate in the tower of Babel. The “City of God” makes its chief end the worship and glory of God.

In this chapter these principles are carried forward in the line of Ham (through Canaan). It was Canaan that was marked with a “curse” in Genesis 9. From him comes Nimrod, “a mighty hunter before the Lord” (10:9). A hunter possesses earthly strength for death and destruction. Likewise, Ham’s descendants become city-builders (10:11). These cities become infamous for their wickedness (note the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah in 10:19).

And so we will see throughout history a strange combination in human society and culture. Along with the advance of wickedness, we will see the development of human civilization. God’s people will be citizens of heaven sojourning in a world that does not represent or encourage them in their heavenly pursuits. In its culture, they will simultaneously see God’s providential goodness and man’s rebellious evil. Its music will celebrate sin and evil, but often in a way that inevitably expresses the inherent beauty of God. Technology will develop for ends that are destructive and evil, but also in a way that will be of good use to man. Human culture will develop in a way to lead men away from God, but it will inevitably betray the fact that its makers were created by God.

Secondly, this chapter is a reminder that God’s plan will eventually involve all the nations of the earth. From this point on Genesis will focus on one particular family: the sons of Abraham. That family will

become a special nation, upon whom God will bless with his special love and care. Part of God's promise to Abraham is that through his seed a blessing will come to the whole world.

Although the focus of redemptive history will now narrow to Abraham, God does not forget the nations. He will determine the lands and places of their dwelling. While Israel will become the "apple of his eye" for the time being, out of the corner of his eye he keeps watch over all the nations.

And we ought to be very thankful for this! For today this plan has come to fulfillment before our very eyes. The Gospel of the Son of Abraham is being proclaimed in all nations. In our church (Lynnwood OPC) we have concrete expression of this, with members who come from the four corners of the earth. We look not for the city of man and its sinful glories, but we sojourn together for the city of God, and the new world he has begun and will bring in fulness at Christ's coming.

#11 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 11

This chapter consists of two parts. First, there is the story of the Tower of Babel and the “confusing” of the languages of the earth. Second, there is the genealogy of Shem as it narrows down to Abraham.

This is a transitional chapter. Prior to this, the Genesis history has been broad and universal. Moses has been telling us the story of the whole world. In this chapter, the focus begins to narrow to one man’s family: Abraham.

Yet the nations have not been forgotten. Part of God’s promise to Abraham is that he would be a blessing to the whole world. Things narrow only so that they can broaden once again in the fullness of time through the seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

But before we get there the stage must be set. The grand backdrop to this future work of redemption is the placement of the various nations of the earth. God divides them.

There are many things that divide mankind. Politics is divided between left and right. Genders are divided between male and female. Races are divided according to skin color (at least in the eyes of modern politics and culture). But there is one thing that unites everyone: rebellion against God.

The Tower of Babel is representative of this inherent desire on man’s part to reject God and glorify himself. Throughout the ancient world, there are many examples of religious structures in the shape of pyramids that reach high above the earth. Even by modern standards, they are amazing works of architecture. For centuries it was a grand mystery how the Egyptians built the pyramids in Egypt. But similar structures have been found in other parts of the world, including South America.

Today, we do not build a ton of explicitly religious structures. But that does not mean rebellion against God has gone away. We build large skyscrapers as symbols of a country’s economic might and global significance. Perhaps modern culture with its “secular” self-consciousness has forgotten that there is actually a religious impulse behind these efforts. The secularization of modern culture is actually a deepening of rebellion against God, not a lessening of it.

One tendency throughout history among sinful man is the bent toward totalitarianism. When left unchecked, men like to build empires. One thing that unites them is language. The Greeks Built a worldwide empire before Christ, and we still see the effects of it today in the dominance of the Greek

language during that time. Similarly, the Roman Empire made Latin the “official” language of the West. Today English is spoken among many major countries of the earth. The language we speak unites us.

Thus, in order to divide mankind God confuses the languages of mankind. Those who cannot communicate remain divided. And so God places a grand “check” on the acceleration and development of sin. And so God creates checks and balances among human society, dividing power and influence in different places.

But in the fullness of time God would reverse the Babel-curse through the Holy Spirit. One key sign of his coming is his giving the ability to speak in tongues. The modern charismatic movement has made much of this but often misses the point. The gift of tongues served primarily to make the message and doctrine of the gospel understandable to people who speak different languages. Because of this, both “prophecy” and “tongues” go together. The latter serves the former.

The only thing that can reunite mankind is a new common spiritual language flowing from a changed heart. We need a language shaped by Christ’s work of redemption—one that flows not just from our lips but from a changed heart. We have that in the Holy Scriptures which shape not only our words but our thoughts and deeds. Today people from every nation and language speak it to God’s glory.

#12 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 12

In this chapter, we enter into the heart of the Genesis narrative. Here we begin the story of the three great “Patriarchs”: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “Patriarch” is an old word that simply means “Father.” It typically emphasized the Father in his role as a family head with authority. In this time of redemptive history, God’s people are not yet a nation. This would happen in the time of the Exodus. They are also not yet an international community of believers in different regions. This change will occur in the New Testament era. Instead, they are a large, extended family headed by a single “Patriarch.” It would be a mistake to draw one to one connection between the provisions God made for his church in that era with what we see today. God’s church is not just one earthly family, but a collection of families from all nations of the earth. Parents (especially fathers) have authority in their families. But there is no one father in the church who takes precedence over the others. Instead, a group of elders together share in the shepherding care of the church as equals before God, submitting to one another in the Lord.

Genesis 12 records the call of Abram. The command of God is simple: Abram must leave everything and go where God tells him. In its essence, this is the same command God gives believers today. We must leave all to follow Jesus.

But does this mean we must literally sell our homes and possessions and give away all our wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven? Well, if we love those things more than God, it would be better to be impoverished in this life and enter the kingdom.

However, the connection between the call of Abram and Jesus’s call to us lies at its spiritual core. Hebrews 11:10 tells us that Abram obeyed this call in faith as he “was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

Abram’s faith was seen in how he trusted in God’s promise regarding things unseen. At God’s call, he left his family and his home without even knowing where he was going. God simply said he would lead him “to a land that I would show you.” And he made this move at age 75! Stop for a minute and ask yourself whether you would be willing to get on camels and travel thousands of miles with your wife, family, nephew, and all your possessions in this manner...

More than that, the promise was not that Abram would receive this land. Instead, the promise is directed towards his children. The Promised Land was his by promise, but he dwelt in it as if he were a stranger. To help us better connect to this experience, just imagine having to live in your own home as if you were a guest.

That is the perfect description of how we view our lives and possessions in this world. We take part in and enjoy the earthly things God has created, but we don't live for them. We live in the world, but we are not of it. We are thankful for the comforts of home, but we ultimately know our true home is elsewhere.

In all these things we see Abram's faith in future realities. His hope was not for this world, but for the world to come. His hope was not in an earthly city, but in a heavenly one.

That is the same hope to which we are called in Christ. Jesus tells us that we must lose our lives in this world that we might keep it for the world to come. Like Abraham, our faith may "waffle" and we will be tempted to compromises to survive (see the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt in this very chapter!). But when trials come, we must keep our eyes fixed on the greatness and certainty of the kingdom of God to come.

#13 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 13

Proverbs 17:1 says: “Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.”

That is the perfect description of Genesis 13. In it, Abram begins to experience earthly manifestations of God’s favor with the increase of his wealth and possessions. In all times of history, God often blesses his people with an earthy abundance. Christians are not ascetics. We do not pursue misery for the sake of misery. Even the Apostle Paul—who was a paradigm of Christian suffering—knew how to be brought low in want and how to abound in plenty. Everything created by God is good and is to be enjoyed by his people with thanksgiving.

But there is a catch—not because of the gifts themselves but because of our sin. Earthly abundance often becomes the occasion for strife. Instead of being thankful that we have ten more than we did the day before, we are filled with complaints because someone else got two more than we did.

No one is immune from his principle, even the “holy” family of Abraham. They work out a peaceful compromise, but their preoccupation with the earth sets the stage for even greater strife for Lot. Note how he chooses the land that looks a lot like the Garden of Eden—Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 13:12). As we have seen with the evil line of Cain, they develop human culture (architecture, agriculture, and the arts) in a way that celebrates and promotes wickedness and rebellion. Thus Moses bluntly describes these twin evil cities as “wicked, great sinners against the LORD.” There is no going backwards to Eden. The first creation has become corrupt and must make way for something greater.

The earth was always and only a sign of something greater. Although the special role of land-blessings in the OT has changed in the NT, it remains the case that God will give us testimonies of his heavenly favor in earthly gifts. He will sometimes even give us seasons of abundance. Let us be thankful in the enjoyment of these gifts, but also generous in a way that makes for peace and the extension of God’s kingdom through his word.

Jesus was offered all the kingdoms of the earth if he would simply bow his knee to worship Satan. We quickly plunge ourselves into idolatry for far less. Let us be wise to the perils of valuing temporary things above that which is unseen and eternal. Christ, the Son of Abraham, has made it to the eternal city of God. Let us fix our eyes on him and the irrevocable treasure of the kingdom that he brings.

#14 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 14

It's easy to paint the wrong picture of the patriarchal period. The images that come to mind do not involve a lot of conflicts. We think of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as quiet herders of sheep roaming quietly across vast stretches of a peaceful, ancient land. Or perhaps you think of him as a kind of "sheik" who carried a huge tent with lots of servants as he rolled through the Promised Land. As they traveled from place to place they live a peaceful life, living off the land and the plenty that God gave them.

Whatever image comes to mind we must remember this: Abram's sojournings were far from peaceful. This chapter is a stark reminder of that fact. So it is with God's people today. Sojourners often get caught up in the conflicts and wars of the nations in which they inhabit. That's exactly what happens in this chapter. A group of kings gather forces to rebel against one Chedorlaomer, a regional power. In the process Abram's nephew Lot is captured. When Abram finds out, he gathers the forces he has—only 318 men—and rescues Lot from his captors.

That's the only number listed in the chapter. Some take it as an indication that this conflict was more of a small skirmish and that the armies weren't very large. But I think the opposite point is being made here. Abram's forces are a mere handful compared to those of this coalition of kings.

Abram's army was characterized by its relative weakness. Although we are weak, God is powerful. He is pleased to work through weakness to show his power and his glory among his people.

That is why after the battle Melchizedek the King-Priest blesses God Most High... "who has delivered your enemies into your hand." It's also why Abram refuses to take even a thread or sandal strap from the king of Sodom. He wanted it to be clear that God was the one who gave him the blessing and victory.

The book of Hebrews shows us at length how Melchizedek is a type of Christ in his kingship and priesthood. Abram gives him a tithe or a "tenth" of everything. In this Abram made it clear that his hope was in someone greater: The son of Abraham, Jesus Christ. He would put an end to all war and have victory through his death and resurrection. Although we are often caught up in the conflict of earthly strife, we put our hope in the peace of the kingdom of heaven that he brings.

The principles manifested here are the same ones we live in today. Surrounded by earthly conflict, we find our strength in God and put our hope in him. Although we expect times of great struggle, we also know that God will at times bless us with earthly victory. When that happens, we are thankful and express it in our offering to the Lord. But we are careful never to make too much of ourselves in the

process, lest the all-surpassing power seem to be from us and not from God. I think this is a helpful reminder for God's people when they look at their leaders. They will never be everything they hope them to be. And that is by God's design. Even the greatest leaders knew this and never made much of their own efforts. Neither should we.

#15 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 15

Every journey involves two things: a final destination and a way to get there. Without clarity on these two points, all kinds of problems can result. We need to know where we are going and how we are going to get there.

The same is true in our Christian life. In order to flourish in our faith, we must know both our final destination and the way we will get there. If we are misguided in either of these things, we will certainly experience many perils.

This passage is a reminder to Abram and to us that in both the destination and the path God alone must be the object of our faith. Christ is the goal: we long to be with him. Christ is also the means to get there: he is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through him.

Both these points are seen in the chapter.

First, God reveals to Abraham that the ultimate reward to which he is looking is something far beyond Palestine or any other earthly thing. The land, his many children, his great possessions, etc. are all earthly tokens of something greater. They were all temporary signs of his goodness and pledges of heavenly life. The reward to which he was looking was ultimately God himself.

We see this immediately in verse 1. Its precise translation is debated by Bible scholars. The ESV has "...your reward shall be very great." Others translate it: "I am your shield, your very great reward." In the first, the reward itself is indefinite and simply described as "very great." In the second, the reward is specifically identified as God himself. There is little debate about the first clause--that God himself is his shield and defender. Either way we translate it points us in the same direction: the final destination is something greater than what is seen.

It is not without significance that in confirming his promise of many descendants God directs Abram's gaze heavenward. His descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. In our age the brightness of man-made light at night all but causes the multitude of the stars to be hidden from human view. Ironically, this is a good metaphor as to how the city of man suppresses and blots out the spiritual, heavenly light of God that still remains in the natural world. Drive a few miles into the rural wilderness and suddenly an entire universe of heavenly lights is revealed before your eyes. In a subtle way, God is showing Abram that the blessing of his many seed will not only be as numerous as the stars in heaven, but that the power to bring that blessing will come from heaven itself.

God himself is the final destination. But he is also the path by which Abram will get there. He will not arrive by his own efforts or works. He must journey by faith, trusting in God's power to fulfill the promise. That is why Genesis 15:6 plays such a large role in Paul's theology: "[Abram] believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness." He trusted in God's strength and power to bring him to the final destination.

This is seen and confirmed in several ways. First, Abram mentions to God the human impossibility of his having a natural heir. He and his wife are old and he continues childless. His heir is Eliezer, who is not his natural son. But God reiterates that his heir will be a son from his own body. What is impossible with men is possible with God. As Paul indicates in Romans 4:16-22, Abraham here trusted in God's power to bring life out of death--something out of nothing. He was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised, even though there was no earthly or human way to bring it about.

Secondly, this principle is vividly illustrated in God's answer to Abram's plea for reassurance and confirmation of this promise (15:8). God commands Abram to offer him animal sacrifice. Biblically these represent the idea of substitution. In our sin we deserve death, but another will come in our place to do what we cannot. These sacrifices ultimately point us to Christ, the final substitute.

After this, something quite dramatic happens. A deep sleep falls on Abram. Sleep is a time in which we cease all voluntary activity. We are wholly passive. Abram is unable to do anything. While he is sleeping, God appears to him in a vision, foretelling the future slavery and liberation of his children in the Exodus. Like sleep, slavery is a condition in which you become powerless to save yourself. The point is reemphasized: God alone will be the power at work to bring them to their final destination.

Finally, when night finally fell a smoking fire pot and flaming torch passed through the pieces of animals that had been arranged in sacrificial order. The torch and fire were a theophany of God himself. The message is clear, God himself will come down from heaven and endure a sacrificial death for Abram. Through his divine omnipotence, he will accomplish what is beyond Abram's human impotence.

So it is with our Christian faith. We are weak servants who bring nothing to the table except the sin from which we need to be redeemed. Our eyes are fixed on nothing earthly, looking for the city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. We are powerless in our own strength to make it to the final destination. We must put our hope entirely in God alone. We must find our peace and stability in his presence with us by the Holy Spirit and not in any earthly things.

#16 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 16

In Genesis 15 God made it clear to Abraham that the promised heir would come from his own body. On the human level, this was a near impossibility. Being about 100 years old, he was as good as dead as far as childbearing was concerned (Rom. 4:19). (How many centenarians do you know who are still having children). biologically speaking, men do have the ability to their children much longer than women. So an additional challenge is the deadness of Sarah's womb. By faith, Abraham trusted in God's power to bring about that promise. We see faith turn weakness into strength.

However, in Genesis 16 we see the "old man" (i.e., the sinful nature) and its weakness show its face again in unbelief.

A few things to note about the passage. First, note how the whole incident is really instigated by Sarai. She is the driving force behind the decision and its implementation. On one level, her motivation is understandable. There is a desire for children, but no fulfillment of that desire. The rest of the passage indicates that Sarah is wrestling with some pretty strong emotions that are not easy to process: bitterness, jealousy, and disappointment. As the "weaker vessel" by God's appointment, we should not judge her harshly. At the same time, we must recognize that there is a healthy and God honoring way to bring these feelings before the Lord and cast our burdens upon him. Instead, in weakness and unbelief Sarai tries to manipulate and control the situation in a way that does not honor the Lord. It also makes her negative emotions even worse. Rather than trusting God, she trusts herself to shape and control those in her life.

Secondly, Sarai's sinful plan manifests the principles of the city of man. In the earlier chapters of Genesis, the corruption of man comes to its culmination in the twin evils of sexual immorality and violent murder. Lamech, the seventh from Adam, is the first polygamist. Sarai said comes to these principles when she demands that her husband take her servant as another wife. Clearly what is happening here is not according to God's original intention and design for mankind.

Third, notice how the pattern of unbelief manifests itself with her husband. Sarai says to him: "...behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (Gen. 16:2). In this we hear echoes of the story of our first parents in the garden. The serpent tempted Eve by highlighting a perceived lack in God's gifts to her (i.e. forbidding them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). That instigated discontentment and negative emotion. Rather than responding to that in a way that honored the Lord and rejected Satan, she gave into those emotions. She then sought to lead and control her husband rather than submitting herself to his loving leadership.

Just as Adam listened to the voice of Eve, so now Abram listens to the voice of Sarai (verse 2). The parallels should jump out at us. Perhaps as you read you may even see parallels in the relational dynamics of your own marriages. It is very easy for Christian wives to grow frustrated with their husbands and with the lot God has given them. Taking care of a family is more than a full-time job in itself, and there are many burdens and emotions to bear. Those emotions are powerful forces. Rather than controlling them, they often will control us and lead us to act in a way that does not manifest faith. Rather than working through our emotions before the Lord and trusting in his power to control, we trust in our power to control others. As it is with Sarai, so it often is with us.

The result is the birth of Ishmael. Paul refers to him as the child “born according to the flesh.” What does that mean? The phrase refers to the fact that Ishmael was conceived according to human powers and plans. Abram and Sarai manipulated the powers of the earth to try to bring about God’s promise in their own strength.

That is the opposite of faith. Faith rejects hope in one’s own power and puts its trust in God’s power alone. We need to be very wise and shrewd to Satan’s ways here. We can easily convince ourselves that because we are engaged with things in a “religious” way we are trusting in him when we are really trusting in ourselves. We can use pious language to hide our trust in human power. That’s what Sarai does. On her lips she honors the Lord, but her heart is far from him: “The LORD has prevented me from bearing children...” on the one hand, she recognizes that the situation comes from God. Rather than trusting in God’s power to fulfill his promise in his time, she contrives a way to make it happen in her time. Rather than solving the problem, her trust in her own ability makes her situation worse. She moves from discontentment and disappointment to bitter jealousy.

So it is with unbelief. Trusting in our works and activities is very tempting. It gives us something to do. It makes us feel like problems are getting addressed. And Sarai’s case, it gives her concrete, immediate way for her to respond to negative emotion. In the end we only discover that we are powerless in ourselves to bring about the promises of God. In fact, our activity often makes our problems even worse. (By the way, although the chapter expresses these points through Sarai in her relational dynamic to her husband, these points apply equally to men and women, although it can manifest differently in each. Because the passage focuses on a feminine manifestation of this reality, I have chosen to focus on it in this devotional.)

It is certainly true that sometimes God calls us to act. But even when he does, or acting must be in faith. It must be characterized by a passive trust in God’s power to work through us even though we are nothing. At other times he truly does just call us to trust him and cease activity: “... enter the one who does not work, but trust him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Or as Moses says to complaining Israel in the Exodus: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord... The Lord will fight for you, and you only have to be silent” (Ex. 14:13-14).

We should all consider today how we might be unwittingly and perhaps unknowingly trusting in our own power to control our lives and the lives of others around us. We all have powerful emotions that push us in this direction: fear, resentment, jealousy, and anger. These are all the works of the flesh. The fruits of the Spirit that flow from faith are things like patience, trust, love, and joy in the Lord.

The core hope of our faith is something that is obviously beyond human power: resurrection from the dead. If that is our starting point when we accept the Lord Jesus by faith. But it must also be the path we walk to the end. We must reject all attempts to control and manipulate out of fear, trusting in God's wisdom and power to bring us to the promised land.

#17 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 17

In this chapter, God establishes the “covenant of circumcision” with Abram. This is not an entirely “new” covenant, but a confirmation and more formal ratification of a long-existing previous relationship. In it, God gives him a sacrament to seal and confirm the promise. It also provides a visible sign of the invisible grace at work to bring this promise to fulfillment.

In Romans 4:11 Paul provides a definition of the sacrament of circumcision: “He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith...”. Although he is speaking specifically about circumcision, what Paul says here applies to all sacraments. At their core, they function as signs and seals of God’s covenant promises and blessings.

It is a sign because it is a picture. It is an outward, visible manifestation of an invisible, inward grace.

But it is also a seal because it serves to guarantee and ratify that the person receiving it is an heir of the promise.

In this case, the circumcision of the foreskin of his flesh is a graphic reminder that the promise will not come about through his natural powers. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how the point can be made more emphatically (or painfully!). The promise of God relates to childbearing and reproduction. In the previous chapter Sarai and Abram sought to contrive a way (in unbelief) to bring about God’s promise by human strength. Sarai’s inability to conceive would be addressed by her giving Hagar (her servant) as Abram’s wife. In this, they trusted not in the power of God’s Spirit, but in the power of their flesh.

In the covenant of circumcision, God proclaims a graphic “no!” to these shenanigans. The promised “seed of the woman” will come through God’s power. In the fullness of time, he will arrive in a way that even more graphically illustrates the divine origin of God’s saving might: Christ will be conceived in the womb of a virgin.

Ironically, the very sacrament that served to poignantly point them away from trusting in their own human strength was corrupted by the Jewish leaders. The circumcision of the flesh pointed them to the need for a circumcised heart through God’s Spirit. But in New Testament times the Jews had perverted the sacrament of circumcision by making it a meritorious work. The very thing God gave them to lead them to justification by faith became part of an attempt to be justified by works. The deceitfulness of our sinful minds and hearts knows no end!

Additionally, this chapter is a reminder that God dealt (and still deals) with his people as families. It is noteworthy that Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself, but also every male eight days old born in his “house.” In the Old Testament, therefore, household circumcisions were performed. This is because the promise of God’s covenant is with Abraham and his children after him.

The same pattern is observable in the New Testament with the sacrament of baptism. The Gospel message of “believe in the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved” also includes an additional appendix: “...both you and your household.” Additionally, when family heads became believers, their entire households were baptized (cf. Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31, 34; 1 Cor. 1:16, 16:15). That does not mean that when someone believes their children also automatically become Christians. Nothing in the church works *ex opera operato* (a Latin phrase that means “by the deed done”).

It does mean that every believing parent has the same promise of God’s covenant: “I will be God to you and to your children after you.” In the New Testament, we have the sacrament of baptism. It vividly portrays that our children are conceived and born in sin, and need the washing of the Holy Spirit to purify them. God promises to work through the nurture of their parents to bring that promise to fruition in his good time. As it was with Abram, so it is with us today.

Genesis 18:19: “For I have chosen [Abraham], that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

We have no power in ourselves to bring this about. As parents we are but mere instruments to point our children to God. Let us then be diligent and faithful to help them know the incomparable value of the promise of which they are heirs, and lead them in the paths of Christ—the faithful seed of Abraham.

#18 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 18

As we have followed the story of God's promise to Abram, you may have noticed how God has been slowly filling in the details. Starting with Adam and Eve after the fall, God has set before his people hope in a promised redeemer. A "seed of the woman" will crush the head of the serpent and bring them redemption.

By Genesis 12 it has become clear that this promise will be fulfilled through the line of Abraham. By Genesis 15:4 we know that this son will come from his own body. Sarai's plan to bring this about through earthly means through Hagar exposes their latent unbelief. God's promise will come about through his power, not theirs.

In Genesis 18 these details are filled in even more fully. The promised child will come not only from Abraham's body, but also from Sarah's womb: "The LORD said, 'I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.'"

We are so familiar with this story and its outcome that it is easy to skip over this verse and think little of it. Sarah and Abraham are nearly a hundred years old. Maybe some of you had or still have a relative that old. Can you imagine them getting pregnant and having a baby?

The whole thought on the human level is totally laughable!

And that's exactly what Sarah does. She is sitting in the tent. When she overhears the LORD's words to Abram the text tells us "...Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure' (Gen. 18:4). Admittedly, the whole incident has so many layers of humor it is difficult for us as readers not to laugh at what is transpiring before us!

But Sarah's laughter is the laughter of unbelief. Remember, in just the previous chapter she had expressed this unbelief in a way that was destructive and damaging. She had Abram take Hagar as his wife so that she might have a child through her. At age 99 what other options were available to them?

In this Sarah's earthly short sidedness was manifested. She could not see beyond the human impossibilities to the fact that nothing was impossible with God.

Ironically, God would provide a memorial to Sarah's laughter when her son was born. At his birth, he receives the name "Isaac," which means "laughter." Only now the laughter of unbelief is turned into the laughter of joy as Sarah says: "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me" (Genesis 21:6).

In the fullness of time, the true son of Abraham would arise and do something even more laughable. Isaac was born of an old woman. Jesus would be born of a virgin. Isaac was born to an elderly father. Jesus would be born without a human father. Ultimately, this seed of Abraham would have this power in his when he was bodily raised from the dead.

And this power is at work in every believer joined to him by his Holy Spirit. We may scoff and laugh when faced with impossible circumstances. But we belong to one who creates light out of darkness, brings life out of death, and creates friends out of enemies.

#19-21 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 19-21

Have some catching up to do, so we will do what we have missed and today's reading in one.

In Genesis 19 we read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot had settled here thinking it would be like the Garden of Eden. Externally it bore a resemblance to it with lush vegetation. Morally speaking, the only thing growing it was weeds of depravity.

The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was clearly sexual in nature. It was not a question of a "lack of hospitality" as some ridiculously claim. They desired to commit "gang rape" of a violent and perverse variety, lying with men as one lies with a woman. Both the perverse inclination of the heart and the action itself are condemned. If one went still further to make this disposition part of their fundamental identity (as is being advocated today), it would only exacerbate the depravity. As far as the Genesis narrative is concerned, this is the highest manifestation of the principles of the city of man. The downward spiral of depraved violence and sexual immorality manifested earlier in Lamech has come to its culmination.

But even Lot has not been immune from the rot of sinful corruption. His alternative proposal for the men to lie with his two daughters is equally corrupt in its own way. God's people must always be wary of being shaped by the attitudes of the culture around them.

Lot's daughters, too, have become corrupt. They devise a way to lie with their own father after getting him drunk to bear children.

Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt having looked back at Sodom--as if there was something she was leaving behind there that was of any value or significance.

The bottom line is that no one comes out looking good in this story. We are all sinners. Those whom God saves are no more worthy than those whom he condemns. It is up to his sovereign, gracious choice to save or destroy.

In Genesis 20 we read a kind of "repeat" of chapter 12:13-20. Although Abraham has progressed in faith, our lives are not without retrogression (as we saw in the previous chapter with Lot). They tell a half-truth (Sarah is my sister) in order to avoid trouble. As before, both agree together and thus have joint responsibility. So Abimelech the king takes Sarah as his wife.

God warns him in a dream that he must return Sarah to Abraham, although he does accept that Abimelech acted in ignorance. Ironically, the pagan king shows more commitment to truth and integrity than does Abraham and Sarah!

Despite Abraham's inconsistencies, he remains a prophet before the Lord. By the power of his office, his prayers are made effectual before the Lord.

Are we not thankful for a greater prophet, who is perfect in his righteousness and filled with grace and truth? Abraham's prayers were effectual through his office even in his sin and unbelief. Jesus's prayers are effectual as the perfect, sinless high priest who always lives to make intercession for us.

Genesis 21 records the continuing story of the birth of Isaac and Ishmael.

Throughout Genesis we see the historical manifestation of the principle of election: God chooses one and passes over the other. He chooses Abel, not Cain; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau.

In the first part of the chapter, the son of election, born of the Spirit is born. Sarah's (and Abraham's) laughter of unbelief is turned into the laughter of joy at the fulfillment of God's promise.

Yet Ishmael is also protected. Although himself passed over his preservation is a sign that in the fulness of times God will make a way of salvation for the nations, that all the sons of Abraham may be of one family. I think a similar point is being made in the treaty with Abimelech. The two will deal kindly with one another and with their posterity. This goes beyond the peace of earthly relations. One day Abraham's greatest Son will bring true peace and eternal life to all nations.

#22 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 22

This chapter contains the famous story of Abraham's "sacrifice" of Isaac as a test of his faith. Rightly interpreted, this is what the books of James and Hebrews indicate (James 2:20-21, Heb. 11:17-19). But the chapter is also filled with typology that points us to Christ. It contains teaching regarding both the subjective and objective aspects of our Christian faith: Christ's work for us, and the Spirit's work in us.

The subjective side is not hard to grasp. God had specifically promised that a son from Abraham and Sarah's own body would be their heir--and no other. On the human level, their age made this a human impossibility. No child could be born to them according to the flesh. He must be a child born according to the Spirit. This required faith in God's power and the abandonment of human power. That child was Isaac. Out of death, God brought life.

Now God calls Abraham to subject this living son to death again. Previously, Abraham and Sarah had succumbed to the weakness of their flesh, contriving ways to bring about God's promise through human means. How different things look now.

Although sermons on this passage often focus on the pathos of the passage on the part of Abraham, the text draws little attention to this. Here we see the fruits of Abraham's faith. There is no more gut-wrenching act imaginable than to sacrifice one's own child. Most parents suffer what is tantamount to emotional trauma when they leave the home when they become young adults. Others who lose their children suffer deep wounds that last a lifetime. It is unimaginable that any parent could willingly take the life of their own child, let alone at the command of God.

But the text tells us nothing about Abraham's internal, emotional state. Rather than needing reassurance and consolation for himself, he is the one who (after a manner of speaking) gives it to Isaac (Gen. 22:8).

In this, we see Abraham's faith, manifested in his internal peace, calmness, and fortitude. As Paul says, Abraham's faith consisted in the fact that he was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:21). As Hebrews indicated, he had reasoned that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead and thus in faith was prepared to offer him in sacrifice (Heb. 11:19).

But along with Abraham's subjective faith, we also see the objective promise of God typified in this passage. Whenever we look at faith, we must also consider its object. In other words, we must not only consider what faith is, but what faith looks to. Faith is intertwined with its object. It receives all its power from the one it trusts. We cannot talk about faith without also talking about God.

The object of faith is Christ. He is typified here in several ways. First, we see him pictured in Isaac. He is the "only Son" whom the Father loves whom he freely and willingly gave as a sacrifice for his people. Isaac was born according to the Spirit when he was conceived in the old and dead womb of his mother. Jesus was born of the Spirit in a greater way when he was conceived in the womb of a virgin without a human father. Christ was given over to death and was raised to life. The Scripture tells us that "figuratively speaking" the same happened to Isaac (Heb. 11).

But we also see Christ typified in the substitute God's provides. Abraham had faith in God's power not only to raise Isaac but also to provide the necessary blood sacrifice as a substitute. For this reason, he tells Isaac: "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (22:8). After the angel stays Abraham's hand, he finds a ram caught in a thicket on the mountain and offers it up instead of his son.

In Genesis 22 we thus have the heart of the Gospel. We are called to faith. We must look towards what is unseen and heavenly. We rest on God's power and reject our own human works and efforts. When we depend on ourselves, we are filled with fear, anxiety, anger, and frustration. When we depend upon God we have an inner peace that surpasses all understanding. We must look to Christ in his obedience and sacrifice. Through him the greatest problem of sin and death. He who brings us safely through the biggest storm will certainly carry us through the smaller ones.

#23 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 23

The story of Abraham has had a clear focus. The God who created something from nothing can also bring life out of death. Out of Abram's dead body and Sarah's dead womb, he brought a child of life, born according to the Spirit. In the previous chapter, Abraham was prepared to give his son over to death, trusting in God's power to raise him to life. The promise to Adam and Eve is still alive and well. God is even manifesting that power ahead of time as a token and pledge of the promise to his servants.

Genesis 23 is a reminder that this life has not yet fully come. If Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation, Sarah is the mother of Israel. Adam called his wife "Eve" because she would become the mother of all the living. Yet both she and now Sarah succumbed to earthly death.

Abraham is understandably filled with sorrow. At 127 years old she has clearly lived a long life with many earthly connections, not least of these is the long marriage to her husband. Bereft of his lifelong companion, he mourns and weeps for her. The earthly loss is real and poignant.

Yet even in death Abraham's faith testifies to life. The rest of the chapter details his efforts to procure a burial plot for his wife. Abraham is insistent that he pay full price for the plot of land and not be given it for free or for less than the "market" rate.

What is the point of all of this? Surely funeral arrangements always involve tedious monetary details that often feel awkward for the mourning. But why does the text dwell so long on this point?

It is because in this story we see an expression of Abraham's faith in a greater, heavenly country. Although the land is his by right and promise (God has already given it to him!), he lives with the self-consciousness that he is really a "sojourner and foreigner"--not only in the Promised Land but also the entire earth.

His hope is not in this land. He would die long before he or his descendants would be a possessor of it. His hope is in the resurrection, eternal life, and the heavenly country of which Palestine was but a pledge.

The reality is that all of his earthly family connections would one day come to an end. But God's word and life will never end.

What a wonderful reminder of the temporariness of this world, but also the permanence of the world to come. The world has much to offer, but none of it will last. Our lives will end in death and it will all perish. Christ, the seed of Abraham, has conquered death and has entered already into the heavenly country where he is preparing a place for us. In that place, there is no need for burial plots. Death will be conquered, and the grave will be emptied.

#24 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 24

The previous chapter was a stark reminder that although God has given the promise of life, his servants are still subject to death. Through Abraham and Sarah, God brought life out of death. God did this early in their sojourn with the conception of Isaac in Sarah's dead womb. He did it again towards the end in the "resurrection" of dead Isaac on Mount Moriah when he was about to be sacrificed.

But after a long life of 127 years, Abraham inevitably laid Sarah in the grave and mourned for her. The early intrusions of life proved only to be temporary signs of something greater that had not yet fully arrived.

Even as the father lost his wife, the son lost his mother. Both men mourn in their own way for the missing woman in their family. In the beginning, God declared that a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. Isaac is now severed from his mother through death, and Abraham pursues for him a wife.

But she must not come from the Canaanites. Obviously, the potential marriage partners for God's people in this era are quite small in number. At this time in redemptive history, the church is limited to one family. She must be found in close proximity to the promised line. The issue here is not ethnic or racial (let alone a matter of skin color). The concern is primarily religious. So Abraham sends his servant to his old homeland to find Isaac a wife from among his extended family.

The whole idea of an arranged marriage like what we read here strikes most modern readers as odd. Although the father here seems to have an outsized role in mate selection, the practical reality is not as different as it might seem. Most men who wish to marry a young woman will seek the approval and blessing of their spouse's father and mother. Likewise, the text is clear that Isaac's potential wife must come willingly and cannot be forced to marry against her will (24:8). There are cultural differences in the details to be sure, but we continue many of these principles in our own marriage arrangements today.

But these are unique times. The whole scene unfolds in a way as to guarantee that the future spouse of Isaac is found by the hand of God's special providence. The servant prays that God would make the choice clear to him with some particular details. She will be the one who will give him a drink from her jar by the water and also offer water for her camels. When this takes place, he confirms it by inquiring about her family. When it is revealed that all this took place by the hand of God, they all agree (including Rebekah--verse 58) and she is taken back to Isaac.

The story concludes with a beautiful scene where the two are wed, and Isaac brings Rebekah into the tent of his mother. One mother in Israel passes, but another comes and takes her place, and "so Isaac was comforted after the death of his mother."

The whole scene is a beautiful picture of God's mercy in our misery, but also a continuation of his promise to bring from Abraham's line a chosen seed and redeemer. Without Rebekah, there would be no wife for Isaac. Without a wife, there would be no child and thus no redeemer for Israel. Thankfully, the promised seed has arrived, and we can trust in God's providential care to provide all that we need in this life, but more importantly, in the life to come!

#25 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 25

Genesis 25 is a transitional chapter. In it, we see the death of Abraham and the passing of the covenant "baton" to Isaac.

The emphasis of the passage is on the distinction between the promised line of Isaac and the rest of Abraham's descendants and heirs.

The Apostle Paul makes a distinction in the book of Galatians between Isaac and Ishmael. The one is born according to the Spirit, while the other is born according to the flesh. In Romans, he made the same point more tersely when he says, "Not all Israel belongs to Israel." From the beginning, there are two nations among Abraham's children: one earthly (the Jerusalem below) and one heavenly (the Jerusalem above). The one is chosen by God while the other is rejected through his sovereign power.

The same principle abides today. Not all who profess Christ are truly his. Many are called, but few are chosen. Some will outwardly appear to serve him but inwardly are ravenous wolves. Most of the nation of Israel rejects the Lord Jesus when he comes. Only a small handful receive him, and most of them reject him when he is crucified.

God takes care to provide special care and protection to Isaac, the child born according to the Spirit. He makes a distinction between him and the rest. Isaac receives all that Abraham has. He is the heir, distinct from the others. Abraham sends the sons of his concubines far away from Isaac to the east country. After Abraham's death and burial, God specifically "blessed Isaac" as opposed to the others. Moses also goes out of his way to insert "the generations of Ishmael" in this chapter to reinforce the point: the line of Ishmael is distinct from the line of Isaac and will be handled differently. Thus, the generations of Ishmael conclude with the phrase: "He settled over against all his kinsmen."

Finally, the chapter concludes with the birth of Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau. In the course of history, they become emblematic of this very principle. Jacob is loved, Esau is hated. A distinction is made between the two. That distinction is not based on any difference in them. Jacob is certainly not more righteous than Esau--his very name means "deception."

In the same way, we must think of ourselves as distinct from the world, not because of our righteousness but because of God's grace. In thankfulness, we must also live differently. Like Abraham in his sojournings, we have much in common with the world in terms of the things of the earth. We enjoy the same food, the same weather, watch the same sporting events, and operate in the same civil arena. But we do so in a radically different manner. We must eschew the sinful practices often deeply

embedded in the culture around us. More fundamentally, even our positive participation in earthly things must be shaped by our consciousness that we are not really citizens here on earth. We are but sojourners. Our lasting citizenship is in heaven. Like Abraham, our sojourning will one day end in death, and the distinction between us and the world will be fully realized when we are received in the heavenly land above.

#26 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 26

In Genesis 26 we make a full transition from Abraham to Isaac. The sojourner has to take a sojourn from his current place of sojourning. He goes to Gerar in the Philistines because of a famine in the land. Despite the earthly difficulties, God reiterates his promised blessing initiated with Abraham and now continued through Isaac.

History has a way of repeating itself. The whole question of food and famine will repeat later in the Genesis narrative with Joseph. For now, history repeats itself in Isaac's dealings with King Abimelech. Like Abraham before him, Isaac concocts a human-centered self-preservation strategy. Like Sarah, Rebekah was a beautiful woman. Fearful that he will be killed and his wife taken, he lies and says that she is his sister. Despite his sin, God's protective hand remains upon them and he keeps them sexually pure and physically safe.

The issue here is deeper than just individual moral purity and physical protection. God's people and promise are to flow through Rebekah and Isaac. Christ will come through them. If they are separated or killed before their line can continue, God's promise will be snuffed out. But his blessing remains.

And this becomes obvious to the surrounding peoples. Isaac becomes so wealthy the Philistines envy him and send him away (26:16). Later they declare that they "see plainly that the Lord has been with you" (26:28).

God intended these earthly blessings to be tokens and pledges of the heavenly country to which he was calling them. Unfortunately, we know from the rest of the story that as Isaac grew older his eyes (both literally and spiritually) grew dim to the true spiritual reality of the promise (27:1). God in mercy still remained true to his promise, and in the end, Isaac remained true to the Lord.

What a good reminder of how the troubles of life can so easily overwhelm us and blind us to the glory of God's promises. When times are good and earthly blessings are bountiful, they can often be accompanied by much trouble that taints our joy. Furthermore there are troubles in life that can make life bitter, as it was with Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 26:35). Whether our times are happy or sad on the earthly level, we must lift up our eyes above this world (for we are only sojourners here), and keep our clear-eyed gaze set on the heavenly country.

#27 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 27

Isaac is the "middle" child of the three great patriarchs. Whereas Abraham and Jacob get a lot of attention and space in the book, Isaac's story is pretty condensed.

A good chunk of the first part of his life overlaps with the story of Abraham. Isaac is present with Abraham at Mount Moriah, and he is passively present when his father makes arrangements to find him a wife. It is only in a good chunk of Genesis 25-26 where Isaac stands alone as the focus of the narrative.

But here in Genesis 27, he returns to a diminished position. Isaac has become old and his eyes have grown dim. As we shall see, this is true both literally and spiritually. He remains mostly passive in the narrative. Others must do things for him. His wife, Rebekah, manipulates and deceives from behind the scenes. Like mother, like son. Jacob also cheats and deceives to take the place of prominence in his family. His goal? Obviously to take for himself the great wealth procured by his father under God's gracious blessing.

The details are pretty familiar to most Christians, and you can see them for yourself in the chapter. But notice how the concern of each member has become almost entirely earth-centered. Isaac thinks he is about to die (although he lives for quite a while longer, as the subsequent chapters attest). His concern is almost solely on how he will fill his belly. He wants Esau to get him some meat. (Incidentally, one really wonders if Isaac is just using his visible feebleness to manipulate his son into giving him what he wants).

Rebekah and Jacob, too, are solely concerned about their earthly status in the family. Jacob is her favorite and will preserve her position by exalting him. This leads them both to lie, cheat, and deceive to obtain their goal.

Esau himself earlier had despised his birthright, selling it for a mess of pottage.

Where is their faith in the heavenly country? Isaac's old eyes have grown dim to the world around him. One wonders if their eyes of faith have grown totally dim to the heavenly country above. Where is the heroic faith of their father Abraham? Where is their hope in God's power to raise the dead, let alone provide a single meal after a long day of work? It seems the era of Isaac has not attained the era of Abraham.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Is there even a hint of faith among any character in the passage?

The answer to that question is a clear "yes." Hebrews 11:20 tells us that "By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau."

Where in the world is there any evidence of this in the text? Although in Isaac the fire of faith has become a small spark, it is still present--unless our eyes have also grown too dim to see.

The key is in verse 33. Right when Isaac realizes that he has actually blessed Jacob over Esau, the text tells us that he "trembled violently." Why? At that very moment, Isaac realized that God's plan from years before had finally come to fulfillment: the older will serve the younger.

Back in Genesis 25:23, God had directly told Rebekah this very thing. They both knew ahead of time that this was God's plan. Despite his self-conscious efforts to thwart that plan and bless Esau instead, God worked to bring his plan to fulfillment.

Isaac's faith, to be sure, is not as full as Abraham's. It is only manifested after the fact. Although he fails to trust that God will fulfill his promise, he does accept the results after the fact by refusing to reverse the blessing.

See how gracious the Lord is, even to his diminished and weak saints? It is hard not to see a reflection of our spiritual shortcomings in Isaac, with eyes dim to spiritual things and a belly alive to earthly comforts. In spite of his small faith and earthly focus, the Lord remains true to his word.

We are sinners--the "holy" Patriarchs no less than us.

We are often drawn away from a heavenly focus, overwhelmed with the concerns of life, family, in-laws, marriage, children, and surviving in a hostile society. In all these things we see their sins and shortcomings, even as we see them in ourselves.

Yet God's promise remains true and his plans remain firm. He even works through our sins and shortcomings to bring about his perfect will.

#28 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 28

Genesis is a book about distinctions. There is a Creator, and there is the creature. The two are not the same. One is worshipped the other worships. There is light against darkness. The land is distinguished from the sea and the sky. The fish are different from the birds, mammals, and reptiles. Male is different than female, although both are created in God's image. What stands out in creation is the vast array of distinctions God has created.

The story of the fall taught us that sin is different from righteousness, holiness from holiness, obedience from rebellion, and sin from unbelief. Hence the tree of testing was called the tree of the "knowledge of good and evil."

The rest of the book makes a grand distinction between two lines of humanity: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. From the former, a redeemer would come. Genesis is, in part, the story of how God preserved that chosen line of the seed of the woman so that from it a Savior would come, even Jesus.

In Genesis 28 God is concerned to preserve that distinction in the transition from Isaac to Jacob. As far as it depended upon them, the distinction was not being upheld in their life and conduct. Although they outwardly had a distinct status their inward life was often not that much different than the world. They pursued earthly comforts and pleasures and were filled with conflict and strife, all while using deceit and trickery to obtain their desired ends.

But God keeps them distinct. As with Isaac, Jacob is directed to take a wife from among the appropriately distanced relatives of Laban's house. He must not marry a Canaanite woman. Again, the concern is not racial but religious. So today a Christian is permitted to marry another of any race or status, but only in the Lord.

Esau, on the other hand, hears of this and does exactly what Isaac told Jacob not to do. He goes out of his way to find a wife (in addition to the ones he already had) from Ishmael's line--already rejected by the Lord.

As time goes on, the distinction becomes clearer. The line of promise is kept pure, while the line of the flesh increases in impurity and rebellion against God.

Yet God is still at work to sanctify his chosen seed. While Jacob begins his sojourning very earth-focused, God would gradually redirect his eyes elsewhere. Thus the chapter concludes with Jacob receiving a vision of heaven. The imagery of the ladder and the angels of God ascending and descending might seem odd, but the point is simple. A ladder gives you access to a higher area. God is showing Jacob that in grace he is granting him access to a higher, greater country. He will one day make his servants like the angels of God, pure and holy, that they might enter into his presence. So he declares: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (28:17).

At the end of his life, Jacob would reflect on his earlier years declaring to Pharaoh: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning" (Gen. 47:9).

Are we not thankful that God welcomes sinful sojourners to the gate of heaven? That is exactly what he does in Jesus--for Jacob and for us. Jesus declares: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). He is the only ladder to heaven. He calls not the righteous but sinners to repent and climb that ladder by faith to the heavenly city.

#29 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 29

In the previous chapter, Isaac had sent Jacob away to the land of Laban in Paddan-Aram to help him find a wife. This has been a key theme in the book of Genesis. God's promised redeemer will be a man, but no man is born except from a woman. Patriarchal era match-making is about far more than perpetuating family lines and earthly status. Their very salvation is at stake.

The great matriarchs of this age (Sarah, Rebekah, and now Rachel) had much in common. All three were considerably fair in appearance, and had moments of faith, but also times of failure. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob they are human instruments through which God shows his power and grace.

Laban was Rebekah's brother, so he would have been Jacob's uncle. That would have made Rachel and Leah his cousins. The Bible has some laws about marrying close relatives that are codified later under Moses. Jesus also makes clear that marriage is between one man and one woman, although in the Patriarchal period, they did take multiple wives. In this, they sinned against God, even though he overlooked it and left it unpunished. As with their other sins, he brought good out of their evil.

But what goes around comes around. Jacob was a deceiver--his very name suggests this. Now his uncle Laban does some deceiving of his own. When Jacob arrives, he falls in love with Rachel as she was "beautiful in form and appearance." In this era, the women were likely very heavily clothed with full veils and all. It was probably not unlike some modern Muslim cultures today. Ironically, that doesn't stop Jacob from noticing her physical beauty, even if it is just from her eyes. If the point of covering women is to keep men from being too preoccupied with external appearances, this method was clearly ineffectual. Modesty in dress is certainly commended by the Bible, but the excesses of men cannot be solved through extra clothing.

But that's not really the main point. Laban realizes that Jacob loves Rachel and takes advantage of the situation in a quite dishonest way. He has Jacob serve him for seven years to receive Rachel as his wife. He is so lovesick that "they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (29:20). But when the time arrives, it is Leah who is given to Jacob, not Rachel. When he discovers the deception, Laban requires another seven years for Rachel. He also ridiculously appeals to custom and tradition to justify his deceit.

What are we to make of all of this? Besides the point made above about the Redeemer coming through a woman, we are also reminded that our heavenly salvation is worked out in the ordinary things of life.

We sometimes think of our lives as very bifurcated. We have acts of worship and devotion, but then more "ordinary" times that are more practical where things just "need to get done." In those times we quickly forget the Lord.

There is nothing more ordinary and all-consuming than our relations in our families. Whether we are married or single, most of us still have family connections that take up a large part of our life.

In the patriarchal era, it is striking how much space is devoted to their faith (or unbelief) is worked out in the context of marriage and family. Abraham is called to leave his father's house. He lies about Sarai being his sister and the king takes her as his wife. When Sarai has no son, she sinfully manipulates the situation out of her ill feelings and makes Abram take Hagar. Abraham's great test involves the sacrifice of his only son, whom he loves. The story of Isaac, too, is filled with similar family issues. Isaac travels to find a wife. Rebekah starts to loathe her life because she is upset about Esau's Hittite wives. Now Jacob is dealing with a controlling and manipulative father-in-law.

So in these stories, we have trouble with in-laws. We have lies, deceit, and lust in marriage. We have sibling rivalry that lasts a lifetime. We have jealousy within families over who is most loved, has the most prominent position, or has the most children. We have sorrow and death at the loss of loved ones. We have the stress of many moves to new locations. We have grief and sadness from parents at the poor conduct of children. And in the rest of Genesis, it doesn't get any better (see the Joseph story!).

Does any of that sound familiar? I think so! It seems little has changed in the thousands of years since the Patriarchs.

As it was then, so it is today. God works out his redemptive purposes in the ordinary things of life, especially tensions and conflicts within families.

Let us remember that each of these moments is an opportunity for us to express our faith in a heavenly homeland and our participation in a greater, spiritual family. It is easy to be loving and kind to people whom we see for only a few brief moments a day. It is far more difficult with those whom we are around all the time. We must remember that it is in these ordinary things of life that our faith and salvation are being worked out. Behind the earthly troubles, we must see the hand and plan of God, remaining calm and steadfast in faith. Filled with his love and sufficiency we can conduct ourselves with honesty, grace, and sacrifice, knowing that he will give us everything we need to make it to his heavenly kingdom.

#30 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 30

At the end of the previous chapter, we were introduced to the sibling rivalry between Rachel and Leah. Through Laban's deception, they had both become Jacob's wives. This polygamous arrangement is (at best) inconsistency in the members of the City of God. It is one of the manifestations of corruption in the City of Man (see Lamech and his two wives earlier in the book). The subsequent narrative makes clear that God's blessing is not on the polygamous relationship itself, although he does bring blessing out of curse (even as he brings good out of evil).

The pattern of the book is that the older is humbled and the younger is exalted. Abel's offering is accepted, but Cain's rejected. Ishmael becomes the child of the flesh, but Isaac the child of the Spirit. Jacob supplants Esau and the older serves the younger. The pattern continues here with Rachel and Leah. Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah. In fact, the text says she was "hated."

It is not hard to understand the psychology of sin and its subsequent wounds that lead to this. For Jacob, Leah is a constant reminder of Laban's treachery and deceit: he demanded seven years for Rachel, and he gave Leah in her place. Then another seven years of service is added. It is not difficult to see how this could be a source of bitterness for Jacob.

Likewise, it is not hard to understand Leah's emotions. She was formally accepted but substantially rejected by her husband. She has a husband, but he is not really a husband. She has a right to his goods and home but has nothing from his heart. This leaves her feeling "affliction," and in need for emotional attachment. These are basic needs for any wife, and fundamental duties for any husband. Jacob sinfully fails in his duty, and Leah gives into her sinful feelings in her response.

Rachel is filled by Jacob's love, but her womb remains empty. Envious of her sister elevated formal status due to her conceiving three sons, she takes a page out of her grandmother Sarah's book and gives Jacob her servant Bilhah that she might have sons through her. Through this she triumphantly declares victory over her rival: "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed."

Leah reciprocates by borrowing her sister's strategy, giving Jacob her servant Zilpah. Incidentally, Jacob fails to honor his God-given obligations to lead and passively acquiesces in both requests.

The story gets even stranger with a dispute about mandrakes (Really? Mandrakes? They are fighting about Mandrakes?). And then there is the story about Jacob's obviously pathetic strategy (as far as the laws of nature and animal reproduction are concerned) to trick his uncle Laban into hijacking all the livestock he can with questionable methods of lamb-breeding.

As far as Jacob is concerned, he is worn out by the bitterness and complaints of his wives. At one point he exasperatedly exclaims at Rachel's demand that he give her children: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"

Ironically, his sinful exasperation actually hints at the real solution to their problems. If we do not start with the sufficiency of God for us in our earthly needs (even emotional ones) we will never be able to love others. Instead, we will seek the affirmation and love that only God can provide from others around us. That is not only fundamentally idolatrous, it is counter-productive. We end up driving away the people from whom we desire affection, and end up lonelier and more bitter than before.

No one in the story comes out looking rosy and pure. Everything is tainted with sin. Here we see all the characteristic sins in marriage and family: sexual immorality, lust, failure to love, bitterness, jealousy, and emotional manipulation.

Insofar as this is a reflection of our sinful natures and perhaps what we are manifesting in our lives in our families and churches, this text is a call to repent. We can clearly see the absurdity and the evil of these things in the characters of the story. We should apply this to ourselves as if we are looking in God's mirror!

Yet through it all, we see God's grace and their faith.

Mixed in with their sinful feelings is a God-centered mindset. Although Leah clearly has issues, the Lord has mercy on her and it is He who opens her womb. She recognizes this as a mercy of God: "Because the Lord has looked on me in my affliction..."

Jacob's exasperation also betrays his faith (albeit imperfectly expressed): "Am I in the place of God?" Rachel, too, realizes that the blessing she seeks can only come from God: "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice..." Later Leah also credits God with her "wages" and "good endowment." Moses (the narrator) makes it clear that it is indeed God who remembers Rachel, listens to her, and opens her womb. These are just a few examples of the God-centered mindset of the Patriarchal family.

Finally, the fact that Jacob prospered with his absurdly ridiculous breeding methods shows that his success only came from God. (Really? Speckled and spotted sheep come through breeding them in front of trees? You've got to be kidding me!).

As it was with the Patriarchs, so it is with us. We believe in God and know that he is the source of every good thing. But we are simultaneously filled with sinful lust, bitterness, jealousy, and rivalry. And this manifests itself in our closest relationships in which we have promised by vow to do the opposite.

Yet God is gracious to sinners. His salvation comes not by works, but by faith. He is gracious, and he is also powerful. He can bring good out of our evil, blessing out of our curse.

And are we not thankful for this fact? For that is exactly what God needs to be able to do to save us. The crucifixion of Christ was the most heinously evil act ever committed. But in it, God does the highest possible good in providing a sacrifice for his people.

#31 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 31

Genesis 30 was filled with conflict, bitterness, jealousy, strife, and deceit. Despite the Patriarchal family's sin, God continues to bless them for the sake of his promise. Things don't change a lot in the next chapter.

This is perhaps a good occasion to reflect on a shorthand way to summarize the theological emphasis of each Patriarch. This isn't exhaustive but is pretty easy to remember. Abraham teaches us fundamentally about faith and justification, while Jacob teaches us about growth in sanctification. Others have suggested a Trinitarian typology: Abraham reflects God the Father, who gives up his only Son (Isaac) typifying Christ. In Jacob, we see the work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify and make holy. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive summary of each figure and its theological significance. But it does draw attention to what is found in Genesis 22 as well as the broad scope of the Jacob narrative. The Jacob story is about progress and growth in grace.

This stands in contrast to Isaac. Isaac's story was one of gradual decline in spiritual vitality. His eyes grew dim, and so did his faith. Yet it remained intact at the end. Abraham was different. His faith was pretty constant with only punctuated moments of weakness, operating on a high spiritual plane throughout his life. Jacob moves in the opposite direction, slowly dying more and more to his sin and living unto righteousness.

In the first part of his life, Jacob is minimizing his offenses and maximizing the offenses of others against him. By the end, he does the opposite: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning" (Gen. 47:9).

In this chapter, God tells Jacob to return again to the Promised Land. In his speech to Rachel and Leah, Jacob begins to acknowledge the divine source of his blessing. He says of Laban that "God did not permit him to harm me." He also credits the Lord with the abundance of his livestock: "Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me." Despite his own sin and cheating, God has given him the increase.

In this, we see the flower of spiritual growth amid the weeds of his sin. But God's gardening work is not yet finished!

Even when he flees from Laban their mutual trickery is manifested. Jacob reminds his wives how Laban tricked him into getting 14 years of service for both of them. (I am sure the reminder of that whole story

made them both feel great!). Laban returns the charge with a counter-charge, asserting that Jacob tricked him and snuck away with his daughters (27).

To top it off, Laban's daughter stole her father's household gods before she left. To theft she adds further deceit, apparently lying about her menstrual cycle to avoid a thorough search. The whole episode leaves the reader shaking their heads.

Despite their sin, God's blessing remains upon them. God tells Laban not to harm Jacob, and he does not (although he is understandably upset). Jacob again recognizes that his prosperity and preservation only came about by God's gracious hand (42).

In the end, the scene of conflict is resolved in a covenant of peace between them. What is characteristic of Jacob's entire life is characteristic of this single chapter. Faith remains intact, and God's blessing abides. Sin is bountiful, but grace is still more bountiful.

We see in Jacob a picture of each of us. We believe in God, but sin still clings to us. At times we find ourselves in bitter conflict with those closest to us. In this, we sin against God, but he remains faithful to us. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit in sinners not only in the Patriarchal age but in every age--even until the fullness of the age to come.

#32 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 32

Jacob has been on the move. He is a sinner, but also a sojourner. He needs forgiveness and cleansing in order to make it to his final destination in the heavenly land above. Back in 28:1, God had appeared to him and directed him to leave and go to Paddan-Aram to take a wife from his uncle Laban's daughters. Now God has directed him to return again to the Promised Land (31:13).

But there is a big problem waiting for him there. And that problem's name is "Esau." Although the sojourn with Laban had its share of family problems, they were nothing compared with Esau. (Incidentally, this is a good reminder for us. When we think the problems we have are too bothersome, perhaps God is actually sparing us even bigger ones! We should trust him that the ones he has given us are for our good).

The last time Jacob interacted with Esau, things were not good. Jacob has stolen his blessing as the firstborn, and Esau was so filled with anger that he wanted to kill him (27:41-45). His mother Rebekah had hoped that time would subdue the fires of Esau's anger (27:44), but Jacob does not know if his brother's memory is short or long.

In coming back to Esau, Jacob was forced to confront his past. That meant that he was forced to confront his sin and its consequences. Insofar as his fleeing came from the Lord, it was in the interests in his preservation that God's promise may continue. Insofar as his fleeing came from man, the motive was to avoid the consequences of his sin.

This means that when Jacob confronted Esau, he was really confronting God.

Jacob's first attempt to address the possible fury of Esau was to placate him. This is hinted at in 32:5, but increases still further with gifts to Esau gradually increasing in degree in 32:13-21 until he sends everything he has ahead of him to Esau.

All he knows is that Esau is waiting for him with 400 men. Jacob will be no match for Esau, the mighty hunter of the field. As he slaughtered wild game, so he will slaughter his brother (or so he fears).

In this way, Jacob is truly forced to confront his past sins. We have seen that the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is characteristic of Jacob's narrative. Sometimes that process of sanctification involves us confronting old sins. We all have them to one degree or another. Sometimes we don't deal with them

the way we ought. Instead of confessing them and truly repenting, we just leave them in the past and hope we either forget them or they go away.

But it doesn't work that way. One day there will be a reckoning, and Jacob must face it--and so must we!

This reality presses Jacob to a fuller acceptance and expression of his sinfulness and unworthiness. Notice the change in the tenor of his prayer: "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord ...I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant" (Gen. 32:9–10). It's not that Jacob's previous prayers were insincere. They were immature. They largely focused on how he could avoid the harmful consequences of sins committed against him, rather than mourning the evil of the sins he committed against others. Now the focus has changed when he says to God "I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of [your] steadfast love...and faithfulness."

There is not and never has been any merit in any patriarch, prophet, or any other person to which they appeal when coming to God. It is all a matter of God's grace and mercy to us as sinners.

The God he confronts in prayer he also confronts in reality at Peniel. There he wrestles with God--not to resist his commandments, but to obtain his blessing. Notice how his focus has changed: he no longer chiefly desires earthly prominence (the status of firstborn, an abundance of livestock, etc). He has given them all up! Instead, he wants God's blessing (32:1). This is not the wrestling of a rebel, but the wrestling of faith.

What a blessing that our past sins can be forgiven by God. But they also leave their mark. Thus Jacob walked with a limp the rest of his days, as a constant reminder of his past weakness that he might always trust in God.

#33 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 33

In Genesis 32, Jacob was preparing for war. He was forced to reckon with the sins of his past, and ultimately he was forced to face God himself at Peniel.

In Genesis 33 that long-expected hour has come. He must face Esau and his four hundred men. The last he saw his brother was many years ago when he was filled with anger and hatred towards him for stealing his birthright. The last we saw he saw, he was looking for blood and wanted to kill his brother.

And he must face him alone. He has sent everything he has ahead of him as a gift and attempts to placate his estranged brother.

And then the unexpected happens. Instead of raising his sword against his brother in violence, he raises his arms to embrace his brother in peace.

It's hard to not be moved when reading the touching scene. Anyone who has lived through any length of family strife know how sad and bitter such times can be. Those who have been blessed to see family enemies become friends again will no doubt be reminded of the joy of reconciliation.

Jacob and Esau certainly feel that joy. But Jakob feels it in a special way. Note how he says: "For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me" (33:10). Behind his reconciliation to Esau was his reconciliation to God. To see the face of Esau was like seeing the face of God. When overwhelmed with our sinfulness, we are filled with the fearful expectation of judgment at the thought of seeing God.

But the only fighting we see in the passage is polite quarrels over who will be more deferential to the other and take greater care of the others house and goods.

The whole scene is quite beautiful and moving.

That's a wonderful picture of a time in the future when Israelites and Edomites and people of all nations will be done with war and hatred and finally be at peace. That piece can only come from God through his promised seed, Jesus Christ. And that piece can only come as a work of his grace in the heart. Human beings will never be reconciled to one another until they are first reconciled to God.

#34 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 34

Sexual impurity is a theme that appears several times in the book of Genesis. Lamech (the seventh from Adam) is the first polygamist. Before the flood, the sons of God took wives from the daughters of man, being allured by their physical attraction. The patriarchs lie about their marriages for fear that the kings might kill them and take their wives for themselves. But God preserves them and keeps them from violating the holy line of faith. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed for an extremely perverse form of sexual immorality, men seeking to lie with other men and violate them. Human sexuality (whether purity or immorality) is clearly a key aspect of human life before God. So far, God has kept his people safe and pure in the midst of an impure people.

But things change in Genesis 34. Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, is seized by Schechem the Hivite and raped. His tender words mask a vicious, abusive heart. His personal "love" is only possessive "lust." He manifests the heart of the city of man, which is only evil continually in every intention of the thoughts of his heart.

The situation faces them with a dilemma. On the one hand, they cannot sit by quietly while another man violates their daughter and their sister. On the other hand, retaliation will likely only make the situation even worse in their relationship with the surrounding people. There is no good option.

Jacob is the patriarch, but the aftermath is largely out of his hands. His sons take up the task of executing vengeance upon their enemies. They deceive the Shechemites, tricking them into getting circumcised so that they might intermarry with them. When they were incapacitated from the circumcision, Simeon and Jacob came into the city and slaughtered them.

The Shechemites had defiled their sister, so they killed their men and plundered their wives and little ones. Sexual abuse is met with violent retaliation. The picture is not a pretty one. Sin abounds all around.

Circumcision, ironically, was a covenant sign that (in part) signified judgment for sin. It symbolized death to sin and the power of one's own flesh to bring redemption. What a powerful illustration we have of that principle here.

In Genesis 49 Jacob gives his last words to his sons. Of Simeon and Levi he says:

“Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel (Gen. 49:5–7).

The tribe of Levi would have no inheritance in Israel but be scattered throughout the land.

Ironically, God would bring his good out of their evil--his holiness out of their impurity. The tribe of Levi would graciously be set apart as priests to the Lord. He cursed their anger but blessed their office.

In the same way, Christ comes from sinful forebears. Out of their immense evil, he brings even greater good. To those who reviled him, he did not revile in return. Those who judged him he forgave. Those who hated him received his love. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

#35-36 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 35-36.

The story of Abraham emphasized the doctrine of justification: "[Abraham] believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Abraham's story is a story of trusting God's power by faith to bring life out of death, righteousness out of guilt.

The story of Jacob, on the other hand, exemplifies God's work of sanctification. Jacob's life is a gradual growth in grace, holiness, and obedience. He begins the story as "Jacob" (a "deceiver") but ends it as a "Prince of God" ("Israel").

Abraham lived his entire life on a fairly consistent high plane of spiritual maturity and closeness to God. Jacob gradually changes, becoming less earthly-minded and more heavenly-minded throughout his life. He dies more and more to sin and lives more and more to righteousness.

After Jacob's sojournings and subsequent reconciliation with Esau, it is fitting that God brings Jacob to Bethel. "Bethel" means "house of God." There he also builds an altar and is commanded to purify himself and put away their foreign gods. The purification of the heart precedes the purification of religious forms.

Having been purified by God, they are also protected by him. These two things go together. We cannot ask for God's protection without also seeking his purification. The terror of God falls upon the surrounding cities to keep them from harming Jacob's family.

Although real, sanctification remains imperfect in this life. Its presence is a sign that God is truly at work, but it can only go so far on this side of heaven. Although Jacob clearly makes progress, his sons still trail behind. In this chapter, Moses (the narrator) goes out of his way to mention Reuben laying with Bilhah (his father's concubine). The list of the twelve sons of Jacob is a reminder of their treachery in the Joseph story--but also a preview of their transformation by God's grace.

Clearly, it cannot deliver them from death until a greater measure of God's Holy Spirit is given. Thus the chapter is filled with death: the death of Deborah (Rebekah's nurse), and then the death of Rachel and Isaac.

The chapter contains a brief but beautiful note reminding us of the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. It tells us that Isaac died old and full of days, and that "his sons Esau and Jacob buried him."

Death will put an end to this life. It will end all our earthly joys, but also all of our earthly conflicts and miseries. What a good reminder to strive to pursue peace with both God and man today. Christ is in our midst both to purify and protect his people. In him, we are reconciled to God and are called to be reconciled to one another. If we are sinfully at odds with a brother or sister, let us ask for the grace to repent, humble ourselves, and live today in a way that reflects the glory of Christ and the peace of the kingdom of heaven.

Genesis 36 contains the genealogy of Esau. Esau became the father of the Edomites, who were perpetually a thorn in the side of Israel. For example, in Numbers 20, Edom refuses to give passage to Israel during their journey to the promised land and came out against them with an army. In 2 Samuel 8, the Edomites were subdued by David and became Israel's servants. But in Solomon's reign, Hadad the Edomite would rise up against him as an adversary (1 Kings 11). The prophets prophecy judgment against them (Jeremiah 49, Ezekiel 25, Amos 1). Obadiah especially focuses his attention on this nation.

But Amos and Obadiah are interesting in that they not only prophecy judgment for Edom. They also foretell a time when they will be enfolded into God's gracious covenant with Israel. As Jacob and Esau were at last reconciled, so also the nations that come from them. Amos says that Israel will one day "possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that are called by my name" (Amos 9:12). Obadiah tells us that "Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's."

Like most Old Testament prophecies, the details are somewhat cryptic. But later history clearly shows that in Christ God's people from every nation will be joined as one in the service of his heavenly kingdom. The fact that the Genesis proto-history continues to track the line of Esau (even as it recorded the Table of Nations in Genesis 11) is a sign that God's redemptive plan still has something for them.

The sanctification we see personally in the life of Jacob will thus be extended to the entire family of Abraham, including Esau. Through Christ, it will be extended to all the fallen sons of Adam. God consigns all over to disobedience that He might show mercy to them all!

#37 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 37

Genesis 37 introduces us to the story of Joseph, a favorite of many devoted Bible readers. Judged purely on its literary merits, this section of Genesis is a master class of written dramatic narratives. It's hard to imagine another relatively short story so packed with meaning and pathos with which to compare it. Every detail of the narrative has significance. Every plot thread ties together by the end. Characters are dynamic, moving and changing by God's grace and coming to terms with the sin and evil in themselves. In the grand scheme, a master plan is revealed that ties together all the individual narratives under one sovereign God: you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Ultimately, this narrative artistry reflects its Divine origins from the moving of the Holy Spirit. No other work can compare with Joseph's story because no other person compares with God. But the artistry is not just in the work of literature--it reflects the real history guided by the sovereign hand of God.

The simple point of the first chapter is not hard to see: human beings are evil. We have seen this evil develop through the city of man from Cain on. Filled with jealousy and anger, men live murderous and sexually perverse lives. Cain killed Abel in a jealous rage. Lamech killed a young man merely for threatening him and took two wives to satisfy his fleshly lusts. In the time of the flood the sons of God (i.e., the holy line from Abel) intermarried with the daughters of men (i.e., the sinful line of man) for the same ends. The whole earth was also filled with corruption and violence. In Sodom and Gomorrah, these are combined in a single act of attempted community rape, men lying with men in unrestrained depravity.

So here now we see these principles in the grandchildren of holy Abraham. Filled with jealousy they heartlessly hand their brother over to death just as Cain did to Abel. With total disregard for him (not to mention their father, whom they knew would be devastated at his loss) they cast him into a pit.

It's not clear that their "mercy" of rescuing him from death and selling him into slavery is really any better. There's a reason the saying "better to die on our feet than live on our knees" has gained traction among men.

Ironically, one of the biggest transformations can be seen in the two main instigators of Joseph's sufferings: Reuben and Judah. Reuben begins by trying to rescue Joseph. He attempts to deceive them by getting them to throw him into a pit so that he might restore him to Jacob later (32). When he later finds Jacob missing from the pit he tears his clothes (37:29). Later he will offer his own two sons as a promise that he will bring Joseph back to Jacob (43:37). Reuben, the firstborn, is the would-be Savior. But Israel's savior will not come from the tribe of Reuben.

It is from Judah that "Shiloh" would come, from whom the scepter will not depart. But Judah is no savior at the beginning of this story. He will take a path of transformation (much like Jacob). In contrast to Reuben, Judah makes sure something evil befalls his brother. He is the one who ensures that Joseph is sold into slavery (37:26-27). He ensures that they receive some profit for Joseph. It is not enough to simply satisfy his jealousy. He must satiate his greed as well.

In the next chapter, we see even greater depths to his sinfulness. Judah seeks to satisfy his sinful lust with not only a Canaanite woman but also with a "prostitute" who turns out to be his daughter-in-law. Evil piles upon evil. Judah seems to embody nothing but the principles of the city of man: lust and violence.

Yet by the end of the story, things have changed. It is Judah who eventually acknowledges their guilt (44:16). He pleads for mercy on behalf of his father, bereft of Joseph and slowly making his way toward the grave in tears. And it is Judah who offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin.

In this Judah's transformation is complete. He moves from a paragon of the city of man to a paragon of the city of God. He moves from jealousy and hatred to self-sacrificial love. He moves from one who reflects the sinful treachery of Judas to Jesus (who sold his brother, beloved by the Father, for 30 pieces of silver), to the sacrificial love of Jesus himself.

Indeed, one other detail in the passage makes it clear that only in Christ are Joseph's dreams fulfilled and true reconciliation comes. Notice how both the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars will bow before Joseph. Those represent Jacob (the sun), his mother (the moon), and his brothers (eleven stars).

The problem is that the moon (his mother, Rachel) never made it to Egypt to bow before Joseph. She died back in Genesis 36. But in the resurrection, she will bow down with Jacob and his other sons. They will kneel together with believers of every nation to worship the lion of the tribe of Judah.

The Joseph story reveals Christ and his work. It reveals his work in us, transforming us from sinners to saints. It reveals his work for us, bearing our sins and dying in our place.

It teaches us about the depraved sinfulness of man, but also God's good mercy. Sin is powerful, but grace is more powerful. What man means for evil, God means for good that we may have life through him.

#38 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 38

One of the main characters of the Joseph story is easy to miss in the opening chapter. Obviously, Joseph receives the most attention in the narrative, even as he receives the most attention from his father. As much as his circumstances dramatically change, his character and faith largely remain stable. We don't see him waffling or compromising much at all. He is much like his great-grandfather, Abraham, and lives his life of faith on a high plane of spiritual maturity.

On the other hand, there is Judah. He is more like his father, Jacob, slowly transforming and growing in sanctification throughout his life. Judah is highly significant in the Genesis narrative, as he becomes the tribe from whom the Messiah is destined to arise. Jesus will be called the lion of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:7, Rev. 5:5). Jacob will bless him with a prophecy to the effect that "the scepter shall not depart" from him, meaning that the kingdom and the rule shall be his.

This is a hint to us that Judah plays a far more important role in the story than we might first think. Some liberal scholars are very puzzled as to why Genesis 38 even exists. It seems to disrupt the "natural" flow of the narrative, taking the focus away from Joseph. Some have argued that this chapter is a later addition, probably to reinforce the sexual ethics of later Israelite religion.

Nothing could be farther from the truth, and such arguments say a lot more about the literary blindness of these scholars than anything awkward about the narrative flow of the Joseph story.

As we saw yesterday, Judah is the transformational figure in the narrative. He moves from seeking to sell and profit from his brother's demise to offering himself as a substitute in the place of an endangered brother. The man who selfishly sacrifices one brother becomes a self-sacrifice to save another. That is quite a transformation of heart and mind!

But we are not there yet. Genesis 38 is a window into the depths of evil that still lie within Judah. Taken together, these chapters reveal that the principles of the city of man are alive and powerful within his heart: lust and violence. First revealed fully in Lamech (the seventh from Adam) and culminating in human society just before the flood, sexual lust and physical violence are the twin evils that characterize human evil among individuals and societies. Judah is neck-deep in them.

We saw the corrupt violence in Genesis 37. Judah's freeing Joseph from the pit speaks no good of him. He probably would have suffered less there than under the harsh taskmasters to whom Judah sold him (and that for a handsome profit). He is as corrupt as Cain and as shrewd as Satan.

Genesis 38 buttresses this point with an expose of his sinful lust. In the first section (verses 1-11) we see this lust spreading through his sons. First, Judah himself marries a Canaanite woman (which God had previously forbidden). The text reveals the raw desire that motivated him: "Judah saw [her]...He took her and went into her" (38:2). The lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh: that is all he is interested in!

She bears three sons. The firstborn was named "Er." His evil was so great, that the Lord simply terminated him: "Er...was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death" (38:7).

His next son, Onan, was obligated to marry his brother's wife. This obviously seems strange by today's standards. We call it the "Levirate marriage" and was instituted primarily to ensure that a widow would maintain her existing relationships within a family and have some provision to support and sustain her family. It was an Old Testament provision that is not in force today. Its establishment was in part due to the unique circumstances of the holy line being limited to one family (Patriarchal era) and one nation (Exodus era), especially land-inheritance rights.

This context is important because it demonstrates the evil of his refusing to fully consummate the levirate marriage and raise up offspring for his brother. So he spills his semen on the ground--happy to use the occasion to satisfy his lust, but not to reject the responsibility that lies at the basis of it. Sexual intimacy always carries with it responsibilities. It is the way of sin to separate these two.

(It is worth pausing to note that the issue here is not the more general one of family planning. The Bible nowhere tells us that sexual intercourse within marriage requires the intention of achieving a successful pregnancy. Obviously, the Bible commands us to be fruitful and multiply. Many children are a blessing from the Lord. But there are times and seasons of life when attempting to get pregnant may not be wise. Contraception [and family planning more general] is not per se forbidden for Christians, provided it is not used as a means to avoid having children altogether and thus avoid the responsibilities that God attaches to the pleasure of intimacy in marriage. Obviously, abortion-causing procedures are not really "contraception" and are condemned by God.)

Like Er, Onan is also put to death by the Lord (38:10). The tribe of Judah is no paragon of purity!

After this Judah himself falls into a perverse form of sexual immorality by engaging in sexual relations with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. I will not survey all the details here (you can read them yourself in the chapter). She disguises herself and he mistakes her for a prostitute. Tamar, however, was not given the care and provision due her by Onan, and Jacob did not give her to his next son, Shelah. In one respect she is thus a victim of neglect. While we cannot excuse her actions, we must appreciate that her sin and

that of Judah have different levels of heinousness. Judah sins from a position of strength to satisfy the lust of his flesh. Tamar sins from a position of weakness, seeking some method of earthly survival in an already corrupt situation.

Pause for a minute and consider this point: it is from this man that a savior will come. Indeed, Tamar's sons include Perez and Zerah. Perez is in the direct Messianic line outlined in Matthew 1:3, who explicitly mentions his mother, Tamar (thus recalling the whole incident!).

The big theological lesson of the whole Joseph story is that God can bring good out of evil. That is nowhere more evident than in the transformation and Messianic exaltation of Judah and his tribe. Out of Judah's great evil, God brings redemptive good! Christ humbled himself to come out of an especially sinful tribe, even as he humbled himself to take our sins upon him.

And so it is with us. God came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. His goal is to glorify his infinite perfections, especially his mercy, grace, and love. He does this most clearly when the recipient of these blessings is most sinful and undeserving. We seek to hide our sins to avoid the shame of being exposed. The Bible reveals even their hidden sins, but only that the greatness of God's grace to them might be seen more clearly.

#39 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 39

In Genesis 39 Joseph sees some ups and downs. Joseph is brought down to Potiphar by the Ishmaelites (39:1), but then he is raised up as overseer of the whole house. He is later brought down from this position and through into the prison, only to be raised up again and put in charge of his own prison (39:19-23).

Before this Joseph was in an exalted position as the beloved son of Jacob, only to be thrown down into the pit by his brothers and sold into slavery.

Clearly, Joseph's life has had its ups and downs. He will continue to have more.

Another way to describe this pattern is a movement from humiliation to exaltation. It is the same pattern we see manifested in the fullness of times through the Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered in humiliation but was raised up in power.

Joseph's life is an embodiment of his own union with Christ, and in this way also foreshadows what his Savior will experience in the future. The story is filled with this kind of Christ-centered typology.

One key element of the "humiliation" portion of this pattern is the theme of unjust suffering. There are few places in the Bible where this is more dramatically evident than in the story of Joseph with Potiphar's wife.

Joseph had been nothing but upright and faithful in all his dealings in Potiphar's house. Although his presence there was the result of unjust treatment perpetrated against him by his own brothers, he never used that as an excuse to shirk his own responsibilities. He was so trustworthy that Potiphar did not even worry about anything Joseph oversaw. Indeed, what a witness to the world. Christians often doubt and wonder what they might do to be a better witness to the world. We think of going on a "missions trip," planning some big event, or doing some "extra" act of faithfulness. The reality is, the daily tasks God sets before us (when done faithfully and to his glory) beautify and adorn our profession far more than the "big" acts of Christian service. Being faithful day today in the small things like loving our spouses, nurturing our children in the faith, faithfully fulfilling our membership, vows, etc. are far more valuable in the eyes of God than the short-term missions trip, coordinating the yearly church dinner, etc. Indeed, if our focus is on doing something "big" we may need to ask ourselves whether that is just a way for us to avoid being faithful in the small things God has given us.

Joseph daily manifested integrity and trustworthiness in spite of mistreatment, and so became a bright light to the kingdom.

But darkness is always lurking in the shadows. In spite of the light emanating from Joseph's faithfulness, Potiphar's wife appears on the scene.

When it comes to sexual sin, the emphasis of the book of Genesis is definitely on men. Men are more often the perpetrators of sexual sin than women. More often than not the man is simply the perpetrator and the woman is simply the victim. On the one hand, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand why this is the case. Biologically men have stronger God-given desires in this area which are easily perverted by sin. Again, you don't have to have an advanced degree to see that the one with the stronger appetite is more likely to steal food when they are hungry.

Biblical history proves that the majority of sexual sins are committed by men. It is Lamech that takes two wives. It is the sons of God who see that the daughters of men are attractive and intermarry with them. It is the men of Sodom and Gomorrah that wish to violently assault other men (even refusing women). It is a man in Schechem that defiles Dinah. It is the man Esau who marries Canaanite women because of their attractive appearance.

But Genesis 39 reveals another side to this. Joseph is handsome in form and appearance, and Potiphar's wife notices (39:36). She "casts her eyes on him," and demands that he lie with her. We aren't told much more about what else might have motivated her. Was she neglected by her husband? Was she more attracted to Joseph's advanced position, using sex as a means to manipulate and gain the privileges that would come with her attachment to power?

The text draws no attention to these things. Many things might become the occasion for our sins, but in the end, we are still responsible to do the right thing. The text does clearly say that her heart was filled with lust towards him. Her eyes see his appearance, and she desires to lie with him.

Day after day she makes her advances, only to be rejected by Joseph who will not lie beside her or even be with her (39:10).

Again, the integrity of Joseph is highlighted here. In dramatic contrast to his brother Judah, whose sexual perversity was on full display in chapter 38, Joseph reveals unparalleled God-centered integrity. If you were wondering why Genesis 38 spent so much time on Judah's sins on this topic, perhaps now you can see! Joseph's sexual integrity stands in sharp contrast to Judah's lust and treachery.

And notice the motive that keeps him on the straight path: "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God" (39:10). God is truly with Joseph in the place where it matters: in his heart and conscience to guide him in what is right.

In spite of his faithfulness and purity, injustice comes to him once again. Potiphar's wife grabs Joseph by the garment and demands that he satisfy her sexual desires. Immediately Joseph flees half-naked, as she had taken his robe in her hand.

Notice how the perpetrator then pretends to be the victim. And how so like Satan himself, who is the ruler of the kingdom to which she belongs. He masquerades as a helpless victim (a sheep) while underneath he is really a predator (a wolf). Having failed to seduce her, she retaliates by falsely accusing Joseph of the very thing she was relentlessly trying to do. The evil heart revealed here is truly desperately wicked!

The church must listen to women who come forward with claims of abuse from their husbands. The emphasis of the Bible and human history demonstrates why this is the case. A woman is the "weaker vessel" and in a subordinate position insofar as her husband is her head. The Bible calls her to be in submission to a loving, self-sacrificial husband. This means she is in a more vulnerable position, and any claims regarding abuse need to be taken seriously from the outset. The fact that she is under her husband's authority is no reason to dismiss her claims in these matters. It is instead a reason to never dismiss them and investigate them carefully. The church is forbidden to prejudge any matter, and every accused person has the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty before the courts of the church and the state. But this does not mean extra safeguards cannot be put in place while a claim is investigated. When weighing conflicting testimony between a husband and a wife in these matters, the church should give a weight of credibility to the claims of a woman. When they do not do these things, the church does great damage to its witness to Christ and leaves women hurt and traumatized.

But Genesis 39 is a reminder that human evil cuts across both genders, including sexual sins. We cannot adopt a simplistic framework in which only one gender sins in these matters. Each situation must be analyzed starting from a Biblical framework that certainly puts the greater emphasis on the responsibility of the man, without neglecting the clear reality of Satan's shrewdness. He can do damage through the predatory perpetrator and the would-be perpetrator masquerading as a victim. We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices.

But notice the common theme in both his "ups" and the "downs": the Lord was with Joseph (39:2, 21, 23). The world is filled with manipulation, lust, injustice, and abuse. Our ultimate hope is not in what we can do to make this world better (although there is much we can do in this regard), but only in the exaltation, we receive in the kingdom of God to come.

God was with Jesus in his ups and downs, just as he was with Joseph. Like Joseph, Jesus will be falsely accused of the very thing his perpetrators commit: insurrection and blasphemy. Yet he will maintain his integrity all the way to death, even the death of the cross.

Whatever circumstances or trials we face, this truth abides. It is simply ours to trust him, and demonstrate our faith in God's faithfulness by walking in the integrity of the kingdom of God.

#40 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 40

The Joseph story began with big dreams. I don't mean "dreams" in the sense of a wish or desire. In this sense, we will "dream" of living on a tropical island with nice weather, owning our own business, or marrying the man or woman of our "dreams."

The dreams of Joseph were revelatory dreams. Today God speaks through his written word in the Bible. Before the writing of the Bible, God spoke to his people in many different ways. During the Patriarchal period, he regularly spoke to his people in dreams and visions.

But dreams by themselves are not always easy to understand. Dreams are partly visual but also partly audible. God's servants need words to interpret the things they see. Sometimes God gives both in a vision, appearing in a certain form but also speaking words. Other times the dream is primarily visual, and it is left to the recipient to interpret it. So it was with Daniel in the time of the exile and Peter in the days of the Apostles (Acts 10). Thankfully God worked in different ways to give them the wisdom to understand these dreams.

So it was with Joseph. He not only received dreams and visions but had wisdom from God to interpret them. Revelation is only useful to us insofar as we understand it. So today God gives the Scriptures to his church but also gifts men to interpret and teach it to the people so that they might be edified in understanding and grow in love.

In Genesis 40, Joseph again finds himself in prison. He has had a lot of ups and downs! The favorite of his father was then cast out by his brothers. Raised up in Potiphar's house, but thrown down by Potiphar's wife. From the top of his Father's house to the bottom of an Egyptian prison, Joseph has truly been on a wild ride! Through it all, God's presence has sustained him in his faith and integrity (39:23).

In Genesis 40 two new prisoners join Joseph by God's providential hand: the cupbearer and the baker. They committed an offense against the king of Egypt and found their sorry tails sitting in jail. Joseph, having again been found completely trustworthy by the captain of the guard, attended to them.

On the same night, both of them have cryptic dreams. The cupbearer dreams of a vine with three branches with grapes on them. After this, the cupbearer presses the grapes and places them in Pharaoh's hand.

The baker dreams of three cake baskets on his head. On the top basket, there were all kinds of baked goods, but the birds were eating them.

Both dreams are visions of the future. Although they do not understand the vision, Joseph can. He explains that the three branches in the cupbearer's dream represented three days, after which he will be restored to office. Unfortunately for the chief baker, the three baskets stood for the three days leading up to his execution.

All these things come to pass just as Joseph had predicted.

In addition to his interpretation, Joseph gives one e request. He asks that the cupbearer remember him in his innocence and speak a good word on his behalf to Pharaoh. It is noteworthy that Joseph highlights his integrity and innocence: "For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit."

Up to this point, we read little about Joseph's internal, emotional state. Later we see more of this revealed as he is moved to tears in his interactions with his brothers. Indeed, Joseph has said little in the narrative so far. His words should not surprise us. Throughout his life, he maintains his integrity, faith, and commitment to God. I am sure he felt the injustice of how he was treated. After all, he was not only treacherously betrayed by his own brothers, he was then framed by Potiphar's wife. The righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Evil prevails and Joseph lies in jail.

Once again, justice does not come for Joseph. The cupbearer is restored to his position but forgets about Joseph. It really is hard to imagine how someone could forget an incident like this. Yet evil once again befalls Joseph.

Think about your own life in light of this. Like Joseph, we are sojourners in an evil place. We face evil from the world and sometimes evil from within the church and family of God. We will often seek to do what is right before God to honor him. Instead of receiving thanks, praise, and honor from men, we will often receive the opposite. We will do good to others, only to have evil done to us. We then become forlorn, fatigued, and cry out to God complaining of all the injustices done to us.

But this kind of commitment and faith is not something extraordinary or "extra" in the Christian life. It is to this very thing that we have been called, even as Christ himself endured the same. The Christian life is a continual task of daily bearing the cross, looking to him for strength to sustain us, and trusting nothing in ourselves.

That is what sustained Joseph. He had true faith in an invisible God whom he knew was at work behind the scenes. He had faith in the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. When he experienced injustice, he endured it patiently, knowing that God was just waiting for the right time to exalt him from his humiliation.

Joseph sat in prison for at least two years. He was among the lowest of the low. But at just the right time God exalted him. When Pharaoh had dreams concerning years of feast and famine but had no understanding of what he had a scene, the cupbearer finally remembered Joseph. Because of the timing and the circumstances, the result was that Pharaoh not only brought him out of prison but made him second in command over the whole nation.

Are you suffering injustice? Are you growing weary as you are being mistreated or harassed as you faithfully follow Christ? Take heart and take courage! We are just waiting for the right time when God will work his wonders, vindicate his servants, and exalt them through the grace of Christ.

God is merciful. He will listen to your cries and show mercy to you in misery. But our faith will be most clearly seen when we are calm, collected, and patient under trial. We wait upon him. He will act when the time is right. His wisdom is greater than ours, and we cannot take that great act into our own hands.

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, so that in due time He may exalt you" (1 Pet. 5:6).

#41 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 41

The Joseph story has a lot to say about human sinfulness. Brothers betray a brother, profiting off his misery by selling him into slavery. Patterns of sexual sin and abuse are passed down through the generations in Judah's family. Potiphar's wife herself is a predator masquerading as the prey, using her "believable" position to vengefully destroy a man who rejected her advances in godly integrity. The world likes to divide everyone up into different groups: some inherently righteous who can never do wrong, others inherently evil that can never do right. The Bible's message is different: all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God!

But God is gracious. He has sent his Spirit of grace to transform sinners. This righteousness comes not by works. If that were the case, no one would be righteous. If God kept a record of sins, who could stand? Instead, this righteousness comes by faith.

That is the message of the book of Genesis. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). He and his believing forebears trusted in the power of an invisible God whose power was far more than anything they could ask or imagine, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

One great test for their faith and ours is how we handle trials. For the Patriarchs, it was a mixed bag. Sometimes their faith shines like gold, like when Abraham is about ready to sacrifice his one and only son, trusting that God would raise him from the dead. Other times their faith is covered in manure, like when on multiple occasions they lied about their relationship to their wives ("She is my sister") to save their own necks.

Jacob, too, is a story of growth. At the end of his life, he will say: "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning."

Jacob may not have attained to Abraham's faith, but Joseph is a near replica of his great-grandfather's spiritual principles.

We have seen his faith manifested in an impressive display of godly integrity. Constantly mistreated and the object of vicious injustice, he remains steadfast in his commitment to God. The closest thing we hear to a complaint is a more than reasonable request to the cupbearer to show him the simple kindness of mentioning him to Pharaoh because "I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit" (Gen. 40:15).

There is nothing more challenging than suffering evil and mistreatment while you are earnestly and sincerely pursuing the good. Doing good is hard enough when you have support and encouragement. It's even harder when it seems no one even recognizes your efforts. It is emotionally and spiritually debilitating to do good while evil is done to you.

But that is the life of Christ and the life of faith. Our call is to patiently wait and trust for God to work in his time.

For two years Joseph sat in the prison, forgotten by the cupbearer. For two years he had to wrestle with whether he had also been forgotten by God.

But in Genesis 40 we see the final outcome of God's wise, providential plan. It turns out that God was waiting for just the right time for the cupbearer to remember Joseph. Pharaoh has a dream that has a divine origin. No one is able to interpret it for him. He is troubled and desperate. He needs Joseph's help, although he has no idea who he is.

Right at this moment, the cupbearer remembers Joseph. Consider this point: if the cupbearer had remembered Joseph earlier, things probably would have turned out different. He may have been released from prison, but he never would have been made second in command over Egypt. God allowed him to endure temporary misery in prison because he had something greater planned for him in the future.

Instead, God's providential hand was at work arranging everything behind the scenes. He was working the whole time to turn all the evils meant against him for his greater good.

So Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams: seven years of plenty followed seven years of famine. His wise counsel to save up in times of wealth to make it through times of impoverishment lays the foundation for an even greater work: humbling his brothers. In this way, he paves the way for their subsequent reconciliation and salvation.

Do you see God's providential hand at work in Joseph? If his deliverance had happened sooner, the whole nation of Egypt and his own family would have perished in the famine. Our timing is blind, but God's timing is wise.

The same is true with Jesus. Israel longed for a deliverer to come for thousands of years. But it was not until the fulness of times had come that God sent forth his Son. At just the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

In his own life, too, God's timing was right for Jesus. God is all-powerful and could have delivered Jesus from his enemies whenever he wanted. Christ himself had all power and authority in his hands and had 10,000 legions of angels at his beck and call.

But he waited on the Lord, enduring evil and mistreatment. He received deliverance in God's time, and the greatest evil ever perpetrated in his crucifixion resulted in the greatest good in the accomplishment of salvation for his people.

If God can do that for Joseph even as he did in for Jesus, can he not also do it for you? Basic to our Christian calling is to endure suffering for righteousness' sake. We are all too often surprised by this, even though the Bible clearly warns us about it:

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet. 4:12).

Instead, we can be calm and patient. And to the degree we can by faith already see the great end of eternal life he is working through it, we can rejoice with joy unspeakable and filled with glory.

Let us then endure every hardship patiently, trusting in God's great power and his heart of love for his people.

#42 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 42

Genesis 41 saw the exaltation of Joseph. The boy clothed in the coat of many colors had been stripped and humiliated by his brothers. Now a grown man, Joseph is clothed once again. This time he is clothed with fine linen and a gold chain from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. The slave has become the ruler. The humble has been exalted.

But so far in the story, we have heard little of Joseph's family after the expose of Judah's sinfulness Genesis 38. Joseph's dream involved two things: his exaltation as a great ruler, but also the humbling of his entire family when they bow down before him.

Just as the circumstances had to be exactly right under God's providential hand for Joseph's exaltation, the same is true for the humbling of his brothers.

sinful humans do a really bad job assessing their own spiritual condition. We often draw a direct connection between our visible, earthly well-being with our spiritual well-being. If things are good, God is blessing us, if things are bad he is cursing us.

Reality is not that simple. Sometimes when we are rebelling against God, he will bless us with earthly goods to woo us to repentance and remind us of his kindness. Rather than a sign of God's ratification of our lifestyle, we should see it as a token of his mercy. Likewise, when God's people are impoverished they can feel a spiritual joy and well-being that seems to escape them in times of plenty and freedom.

although we should always be disposed to take our sins seriously and repent before God no matter what the circumstances, all too often we don't wake up to our spiritual condition until something happens to wake us up.

Hunger has always been a great motivator. It's one of the most effective means to incite the inactive. The one who does not work will not eat. The empty one will seek to be filled.

And so by God's providential hand, the famine moves Joseph's brothers to consider their own mortality. Faced with possible death their entire outlook on life changes. They are desperate for food. They are so desperate they will even go to Egypt in the slim hopes of finding grain.

Once in Egypt the second part of Joseph's dream comes to partial fulfillment. When Joseph's brothers make it to Egypt they come before their brother and "bow[] themselves before him with their faces to the ground" (42:6).

It's a simple and rather ordinary act for the subjects to bow before A sovereign. But they do not recognize Joseph. Why would they? Now a grown man and fully adorned as Egyptian royalty, most of the identifying marks of his appearance would be hidden from them.

What is also hidden from them is the providential hand and purpose of God to bring them to this point. Earlier the thought of bowing before Joseph filled them with jealousy and rage. Now in desperate hunger, they willingly bow before him in the hopes of getting at least some scraps of food to survive.

In this act, we see the first signs of repentance. There is the realization of their desperate condition and their need to submit themselves to their true ruler.

But repentance must be proven with fruit. Repentance starts with the realization of one's desperate condition, but it must lead to the full acknowledgment of one's sin and true sorrow for and hatred of it. And so Joseph arranges to keep one brother behind in custody. He also arranges a test to prod them to acknowledge their past sins.

By the time they return to their father, they find their money (I.e. The payment for the grain) still in their sacks. Although innocent of theft, they are fully aware that by all appearances they are guilty. there will be no covering over the appearances of impropriety. Ironically, Joseph has arranged a situation that puts them in his shoes. They will be accused of a heinous crime although they are truly innocent. How will these brothers respond?

Places in the narrative Joseph stands as a type of Christ. In other places, such as here, he functions more after the pattern of God the Father, the great planner and providential caretaker of history.

Just as the God of providence waited for just the right time to release Joseph that he might be exalted, so the time is becoming right for his brothers to come to repentance.

We ought to marvel at God's wise ways! There are many times in our lives when those closest to us will require repentance. Many times the sins they commit will be against us. Many times those sins will deeply hurt and wound us. Just ask Joseph!

It is very tempting to take the work of producing repentance into our own hands. The people around us can bother us. They will sin against us. We want them to change. We then try to become the Holy Spirit to work conviction in their hearts.

But we are not the Holy Spirit. We are unholy sinners. We can certainly be an instrument in God's hands, using words and even confrontation that he will use to bring someone to repentance. Each individual Christian plays this important role, and sometimes the church itself must step in as well. But that's a very different thing from trying to be the Holy Spirit.

The reality is that true repentance only comes from God. He will work in his time and his plan to turn the person from the error of their ways. God's grace, kindness, and compassion for sinners will be evident through and through.

How different our efforts to instigate repentance can be! All too often are bitterness, anger, frustration are intermixed with our sincere desires that others change. If we are honest with ourselves, we all too often desire their repentance so that our life will be easier, and not that they will better glorify God. At the end of the day, we want to take credit for the changes that we see. This applies in every area of our life, whether it's conflict resolution between spouses, between parents and children, or between members of the church.

Working through conflict requires faith. We must trust that God is at work and his ways and his time. We certainly have a role to play in bringing this about as Jesus makes very clear in passages like Matthew 18. But even then we are but mere instruments and must show in our hearts, emotions, and demeanor that we know God is at work.

#43 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 43

Things are finally starting to change for Joseph and his family. Sold into slavery and wrongfully imprisoned, Joseph has been exalted as ruler over Egypt.

His brothers, too, have begun to change. The famine has humbled them. They have had to travel to Egypt to beg for bread. Unbeknownst to them, Joseph is alive and well. Just as they were blind to God's exalting him in their family, so they are still blind to him as ruler of Egypt.

But things are starting to change. They are beginning to look at things differently. They punished Joseph even though he was innocent, and now they fear reprisal for theft even though they are innocent. The shoe is being providentially placed on the other foot!

Simeon has been held in custody at Joseph's request. And they begin to see the divine message. They say to one another: "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we would not listen" (Gen. 42:21).

True repentance begins with an acknowledgment of our sin. It doesn't end there, but it does start there. After years of hardship, unjust suffering, and oppression, Joseph's perpetrators are showing small signs of God's work in their hearts.

But they are in a quandary. Joseph's request requires that they bring Benjamin back the next time they come. Jacob is still haunted by the loss of Joseph, and will not allow a repeat of that parental trauma. They are thus placed on the horns of a dilemma with no easy option: face certain death by starvation, or face the possible loss of a beloved child.

This moment is gut-wrenching, but it also provides a real opportunity to express trust in God and a real change of heart.

And that is what we see in Judah. Note well his words: "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever (Gen. 43:8–9).

A lot has happened in the Joseph story, and it might be easy to overlook the significance of these words. But remember who Judah was. He was the brother who was not content to kill Joseph but to profit off his life by selling him into slavery (Gen. 37:26). It was Judah whose sexual depravity spread to his entire family, which was exposed for all to see in Genesis 38. Judah was an evil man. He worshipped himself and the flesh and had no thought of God.

Yet what a great change has taken place in his heart. He who selfishly sold his brother now sacrificially offers himself as the bearer of responsibility. He who treacherously plotted to destroy his youngest brother now offers a plan to save him.

When the brothers return to Joseph, he can see that the transformation has begun. He sees them return with the money he placed back in their sacks--a sign of their newfound integrity. They could have easily continued their dishonest ways and kept it for themselves.

When they finally arrive again to meet Joseph, he inquires about his father even as he sees his brother, Benjamin. When he sees them he is filled with compassion and has to leave the room as he is being moved to tears.

What a wonderful picture of repentance and reconciliation. The perpetrators begin to be filled with remorse and demonstrate it in sincere ways. The one that has been hurt rejects the path of bitterness and vengeance and their hearts soften. Instead of being driven apart by sin and evil, God's grace draws them together.

What we see here is but a preview of the full reconciliation we will later behold. As we see from the end of the chapter, repentance must be proven. That takes time. It will not happen all at once.

In this passage we see the great work of God that flows out of the mercy and love of Christ. While being treacherously crucified by his own brothers in the Jewish nation, Jesus prays that they would be forgiven. While others perpetrate crimes against him, he works for reconciliation. They work for his condemnation, he works for their justification. They condemn, but he forgives. They inflict pain, but he works for healing.

These things are not of human strength. But by God's grace, it will happen. Trusting in his providential hand, we know that God will bring every evil to our good, even sin and conflict that so afflicts us. Trusting him we will glorify his power, mercy, and grace and manifest the love of Christ in our lives.

#44 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 44

True repentance will bear God-honoring fruit. It starts with an acknowledgment of wrongdoing, but it doesn't end there. All too often "repentance" doesn't make it to the end of the "race" and turns out to be a sham.

We will acknowledge wrongdoing, but then minimize the significance of what we did. We make excuses, whine about the consequences of our sin, and ultimately shift our responsibility to others.

We will say: "Yes, I did wrong but it's not that big of a deal. Sure, I shouldn't have said that but you say bad things to me, too. Yes, I did wrong, but do I really deserve this level of consequence for my sin?"

True repentance does none of this. It makes no demands and no excuses. It takes responsibility. It says with God-honoring simplicity: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

True repentance is also fully willing to be tested. That is what happens to Joseph's brothers in Genesis 44. They have begun to come to their senses and realize that divine judgment has come upon them for their sins against their younger brother. They have awakened to the danger of their past sin. But have they come to full terms with its odiousness such that they are willing to truly humble themselves before God?

The testing already began in the previous chapter. Joseph tested their integrity by putting the money they gave to pay for their food back in their sack. They passed this test with flying colors.

Next, Joseph fed them at his table and arranged them in birth order. To Benjamin (the youngest remaining brother) he gave a portion five times greater than the others. In this way, he replicates the same situation his brothers were in when Joseph was the object of his father's special love. Instead of jealousy and rage, they are filled with joy.

In chapter 44 Joseph adds yet another test. Once again Joseph puts grain back in their sacks along with the money they used to buy. This, of course, makes it appear that they stole the money. Additionally, Joseph puts his silver cup in Benjamin's sack, which adds an even greater appearance of guilt. It also means that Benjamin is now an easy scapegoat. They could all blame him for the theft, claiming that the extra silver cup is proof that he is actually the perpetrator.

Joseph is shrewdly weaving together a test in which all of the things that he endured are now set on their shoulders.

How will they respond?

The outcome is quite beautiful. It shows that God can still be working redemptively even when the heart has become calloused and stoney.

There is no figure that demonstrates this transformation more dramatically than Judah. He was the brother who suggested they sell Joseph to profit off his life. He was filled with sexual perversion that spread like a cancer through his family, while Joseph kept his godly integrity in resisting temptation.

But God's Spirit has been at work. This servant of self has become a servant of others. When Joseph demands that Benjamin be taken and punished for the crime, Judah's heart turns to his father. He knows that his sin against Joseph has filled him with unspeakable grief, bringing him to the grave filled with tears. He is filled with compassion for his father. He realizes the hurt that his sin has caused others, and cannot bear to be the occasion for that once again.

And so Judah gives the clearest proof one can offer for true repentance. Indeed, it's the greatest proof that Christ is being formed in one's heart. He offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin (44:32). The man who wanted to profit off the life of another now offers his life in the place of another. Jesus tells us: "Greater love has no man than this, than that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Christ has been formed in Judah. His transformation proves to be real.

Thus, it is not from Joseph's line that the Messiah will come. The scepter of the kingdom will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet (Gen. 49:10). Christ was formed in Judah, and so Christ will flow out of Judah. Judah became a sacrificial lamb, and God will bring from him a lion to rule-- and the obedience of the people's shall be his.

The Christ has come. He is being formed in us, just as he was in Judah. He is working true repentance to cleanse our hearts of filth, turning selfish sinners into self-sacrificial servants.

#45 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 45

Modern narrative fiction tends to dwell on the inner life of the characters. As the story is told, you will read almost everything about what the person is feeling, thinking, and how they try to sort out all of their disconnected thoughts.

Biblical narrative is quite different. The focus is largely upon objective words and actions. That is not to say that the Bible neglects the inner life of the mind and the heart. It only does so in a different genre than narrative. We need to turn to the poetry of the Psalms to dive more deeply into the spiritual workings of the saint's hearts. Biblical narrative tells the story of history for what it truly is: the mighty acts of God and the unfolding of his plan.

But sometimes emotions are so powerful they cannot be contained, either by the narrator's pen or the character experiencing them. They cannot be hidden in the heart but are shown on the sleeve. So it is in Genesis 45. Already in a previous chapter, Joseph had been moved to tears at the sight of his brothers. Long had he patiently waited for God to fulfill his dream-promise to him. He had endured much unjust suffering at the hands of many, all the while maintaining his integrity. God had promised both suffering and exaltation. He had seen his share of suffering, and finally, the exaltation had come.

But Joseph's emotions are not for the reason you might expect. If it were me, I'm pretty sure I would be feeling quite different. If my brothers had sold me into slavery, only to end up begging me for food to survive, I would be filled with smug satisfaction. Instead, Joseph is moved to tears. Ultimately this is because he began to see even more clearly. the good that God was going to work out of the great evil he experienced. Having suffered physical injury, slavery, false accusation, and imprisonment, it would've been perfectly understandable if his emotions had been different. Yet his heart grows warm in love for his younger brother and his family.

And now in Genesis 45, he has even greater reason to be moved. Reunions with old friends and family members can be a happy occasion. Even happier is a reunion that overcomes sin and involves one who is truly repentant. At the end of Genesis 44, that's exactly what he saw. His brother, Judah--the very one who led the conspiracy and to get him sold into slavery--now offers himself in the place of Benjamin. The same man who sacrificed his youngest brother Joseph for profit now offers to sacrifice himself for his youngest brother, Benjamin.

Judah is a changed man. He has repented. The fruit is undeniable. Just as there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, so Joseph is filled with joy at the changed heart of his brother.

What a beautiful picture of how God's redemptive grace is at work in the midst of our sin. The perpetrator of sin needs grace to convict his heart and move him to repentance. The victim of sin needs grace and may not give in to the hurt and bitterness that it brings. When the world sees repentance, it attacks the confessor to cancel and destroy them, obliterating them from the earth. When God sees a repentant sinner, he rejoices and delights to show mercy.

this should be an encouragement to us if we are currently having to work through the slog of being reconcile to a family member or brother who has sin against us. Sometimes the heart can become so hard and blind that it seems as if they will never change. Joseph's brothers were pretty evil. On the human level, there was no reason to believe they would ever change. But nothing is impossible with God. At the end of the story, he only permitted their great acts of evil in order to set the stage for even greater acts of grace. Indeed, we must trust his wisdom when he allows us to endure such things.

As happy as this scene is with the full reunion of the family in sight, it is not the final fullness of the work God will do. The greatest "good" that God will bring out of Israel's "evil" will come only fullness of time through Judas greater son. Joseph experienced some pretty terrible evils. But Jesus will experience the greatest evil ever perpetrated by mankind in the history of the earth. He will come as a truly sinless savior but be crucified as a criminal. Man meant that act for evil, but God meant it for good. And because of his blood forgiveness can come not only to Joseph's family but also to all the families of the earth.

And because of his work, there will one day be an eternally happy reunion. All brothers who have been at odds while sojourning on the earth will one day fully be at peace in heaven. Only there will be no more tears. All the wounds will have been healed and death will be no more.

Until that day it is our calling to live on earth as it will be in heaven. We see a glimpse of that here in the Joseph story. We must pray for Grace to have it manifested in our lives as well.

Are we at odds with a family member? Is there a brother or sister in the Lord to whom we need to be reconciled? One day you will live with them as redeemed friends forever in heaven. We may have to wait for the right time in God's providence for it to happen. We may do everything we can to be at peace, but the other party, for a time, might be unwilling. But we should strive for peace with our brothers on earth, even as we will be at peace with them in heaven.

#46 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 46

Technically the "Joseph Story" occupying the last quarter of Genesis is part of the "generations of Jacob." The whole book of Genesis is structured around a recurring phrase: "these are the generations of..." That is how Genesis 37:2 began, only clearly identifying the subsequent chapters as the generations of "Jacob."

Jacob's life is all about transformation. The principle is encapsulated in the name change he undergoes in the middle of the story. "Jacob" (the deceiver) becomes "Israel" (the prince of God).

This principle of transformation is also evident in his sons, especially Judah. We have seen him move from a corrupt, selfish sinner to a self-sacrificial savior of his brothers.

Joseph and his brothers have been in the foreground and Jacob has been in the background.

But now in Genesis 46, Jacob steps forward into the limelight again. He has spent much of this story in grief and tears. Like Joseph, he has suffered at the hands of his sons. On more than one occasion, Moses (the narrator) has drawn attention to his grief and bereaved heart. After having suffered the ill effects of his sin throughout his life, it seemed as if they would haunt him the rest of his days, and he would go down to the grave in tears.

At the end of the previous chapter, it tells us that Jacob's heart became numb when he heard the report of his sons. They told him that "Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over all the land of Egypt." His heart became numb at the unbelievable news. But the wagons full of provisions were proof enough that the story could not be easily dismissed.

Genesis 45 begins with another long-awaited vision from God to Jacob. It had been some time since God had last appeared to him. The Lord reiterates his blessing to him and confirms that Joseph's own hand will close his dying eyes (46:5). This vision is a concrete reminder that although the Lord himself has remained in the background, he has been actively at work in the story the entire time. Just as Jacob himself has been in the background of the story, so also has the Lord.

It is not hard for any human being to theoretically appreciate the grief of losing a child or the potential joy of being reunited after being separated for half a lifetime. If you have children of your own (and

especially if the Lord has ever taken one from you) you know the joy of their arrival into this life and the pain of their departure.

When Jacob finally arrives in Egypt, these feelings are on full display. The text tells us that when Joseph and Jacob finally met, he "fell on his neck and wept on neck a good while." Having seen the face of his son--once thought dead, but now alive again--he can die in peace. This reunion is tantamount to a work of resurrection from the dead.

Just as his grandfather Abraham received his father Isaac from the dead (figuratively speaking) in his sacrifice on Mount Moriah, so now Jacob receives his son Joseph back from the dead.

Indeed, death and resurrection are all over the story of Joseph. Joseph is as good as dead in a pit, as a slave, and in a prison. But God raises him out of them. Judah and his brothers are as good as dead enslaved in heinous sins, but God delivers them from them and gives new life. The whole world is haunted by the specter of death in the great seven-year famine, but God raises them to life by providing food through Joseph's hand.

The whole story is a complete impossibility by human standards. Slaves don't become masters of houses. Prisoners are not given charge over jails. Lowly slaves don't become rulers of empires. Estranged brothers and family members typically take their conflicts to the grave, hardly reconciling in life or before death. Parents don't receive their children back from the "dead."

A lesson of the Joseph story is that God is powerfully at work to do what is impossible with man. This principle is at the heart of our redemption. It is impossible for man to bring God to dwell with him, but Christ became a man, dwelling in human nature to be our redeemer. It is impossible for the wicked to be declared innocent and righteous, but this is what Christ does for us in our justification.

God may give us seasons of grief and sadness. But the God who gives the pain also promises to bring healing in his good time. We may feel overwhelmed at times, thinking that God has abandoned us. But as this story reminds us, we must not faint and lose heart. The God who brings tears of sadness also brings tears of joy. He who allows separation and conflict will also bring reconciliation and peace. It is ours to trust in him, waiting upon him to work his power in his time.

#47 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 47

The last chapter saw repentance come to full fruition. The hearts of Joseph's brothers had been tested. Their change was been found to be genuine. Out of their reconciliation to Joseph flows the beautiful fruit of the tearful reunion of Joseph and Jacob.

But these are not the generations of Joseph or his brothers. They are the generations of Jacob. As we noted earlier, Jacob's life is characterized by the redemptive principle of transformation. We call this the doctrine of "sanctification."

Indeed, there is an old tradition that sees in the three great patriarchs emphases reflective of the three persons of the Triune God. Father Abraham reminds us of the person of God the father, who gave his one and only Son--pictured in the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah. In this, Isaac is clearly a type of Christ and the person of the Son of God. Although in no way a type of the person of the Holy Spirit, Jacob's life embodies his sanctifying, transforming work in our hearts.

Joseph's brothers' transformation is completed in the previous chapter. But the capstone of Jacob's personal renewal is seen here in Genesis 47.

The theme is encapsulated in the words exchanged between Jacob and Pharaoh in Genesis 47:7–9. Pharaoh draws attention to Jacob's advanced age. The Egyptians were particularly obsessed with extending human life and thus with old age. The Egyptians would famously mummify bodies to preserve the physical flesh as long as possible. It turns out that Jacob is 130 years old. That's quite old by the standards of any era, and especially this time in the ancient near east. Life expectancy was not that long on average. God blessed all the patriarchs with exceptionally long life, in part as a pledge of the eternal life that he had promised to them.

But note Jacob's commentary on his 130-year life before Pharaoh:

"Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." (Gen. 47:9).

Anyone who has a father or grandfather of even modest significance understands Jacob's mindset. Even if they attain only to a modicum of success in this life, sons constantly live in the shadow of their father.

They resemble them in appearance, but will they also resemble them in character? They ask themselves: How do I measure up? Am I amounting to something even as my father did?

You can imagine how Jacob felt having Abraham as a grandfather! Even if Jacob had lived a nobler life in his younger years, he would still have some pretty big shoes to fill.

But the gap between his life and that of his fathers is pretty large. Although his years were long measured in literal standards, in spiritual terms they were brief and evil. Notice how Jacob measures his life in terms of his spiritual progress and vitality. Although his progress was real, it fell far short of what it could've been. In this sense his days were, indeed, few and evil.

Note also how Jacob's words differ in emphasis from what he had said previously. He had spent 14 years with Laban trying to win Rachel's hand in marriage. Jacob was no saint during those years, and Laban certainly didn't always deal honestly with him.

But notice how at that time Jacob puts the emphasis on his relative innocence and emphasizes Laban's sins. Speaking to Rachel and Leah he says: "I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before... You know that I have served your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times" (Gen. 31:4-7).

There is certainly an element of truth in what Jacob says here, but the emphasis is definitely on Laban's sins and not his own.

How different he sounds now! He doesn't even mention the way others have sinned against him. He doesn't utter a single word regarding eleven sons, and how they caused him such great misery through their treachery and evil. His focus is entirely upon himself and his own personal sin: "few and evil have been the days of my sojournings."

What a picture of a sanctified mindset. Fundamental to our Christian life is the idea that we must make far more of our own sin than we do the sins of others. This is utterly contrary to human nature. Our desire is to vindicate ourselves. We demand understanding and sympathy for our own failings and weaknesses, but we judge others harshly at the smallest slip up. We demand leniency for ourselves, but cry out for vengeance upon those who sin against us.

The Heidelberg catechism tells us that even the most sanctified us among us have only a small beginning of the obedience that God requires of us. We must look at Jacob and see a mirror of our own lives and hearts.

But in him we also see the mercy of God. God chose Jacob not because he was more righteous than his brother, but because of his own purpose and grace. In fact, it could even be argued that God chose him to magnify his own mercy in forgiving his great sin.

None of us knows how long we will live. But I'm sure when we are near to meeting our Savior we will all look back at our lives and say "few and evil have been the days of my sojournings, and they have not attained to the days of the sojournings of my fathers." In this way, we will humble ourselves before Christ as we stand before his judgment seat. Thankfully we have the promise that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

#48 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 48

The book of Genesis has many themes. One repeated pattern is the elevation of the younger sibling over the older. Abel is accepted, and Cain is rejected. Ishmael is born according to the flesh through Hagar, while Issac is born according to the Spirit. Jacob is loved, but Esau is hated. The older serves the younger.

This pattern was poignantly on display in the Joseph story. He was the youngest of twelve brothers, but beloved by his father. God gave him revelatory dreams in which he saw visions of the future: his older brothers would bow down to him. The youngest would become the king.

The pattern repeated itself again in his own life. The slave became the master of Potiphar's house. The prisoner became the jail-keeper. The sojourning Hebrew would become ruler over all of Egypt. The lowly are exalted.

In Genesis 48 we see this pattern repeat yet again with the blessing of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh. These two become the fathers of a "half-tribe" in Israel. Ephraim and Manasseh count as one, thus securing the beloved place of Joseph in the nation. The double portion of Jacob's love is perpetuated in a double tribe for Joseph's house.

Thus, taken as a unit they together encapsulate the principle underlying Joseph's exaltation as the youngest brother. Insofar as they represent Joseph in Israel, the tribe of Ephraim-Mannaseh shows how God delights to exalt the lowly.

But within the tribe itself, the same principle is manifested. It shows itself in a way we might not expect.

Joseph, the youngest now exalted, brings his two sons to Jacob that he might bless them before he died. Ultimately the blessing he seeks is not from his father, but from God.

Jacob's eyes are not what they used to be. He is, after all, 130 years old. Although the body can live that long, the eyes typically have a shorter life span. Although his earthly eyes have grown dim, his eyes of faith have increased in clarity.

Joseph comes near to Jacob, positioning the oldest son (Manasseh) near his right hand, and his younger son (Ephraim) near his left. It was the tradition of the ancient near east to give prominence to the firstborn. So on one level, this is to be expected.

But is it not a surprise that Joseph expects the oldest to receive the greatest blessing? Surely he has seen in his life that God delights to exalt the younger! That is exactly what God did to him. It is also exactly what Joseph did when he tested his brothers, giving Benjamin prominence in his dealings with them.

Yet here Joseph insists that his oldest son receive the higher place naturally due him.

Israel will have nothing of it. Instead, he crosses his arms, placing his right hand on Ephraim and his left hand on Manasseh. Both are blessed. Both will become great. But the younger will have prominence over the older.

A pattern is being reiterated here. It is not one that comes naturally to us in our human flesh. Even Joseph--who had experienced this principle in his own life more than any other--fails to consistently accept its implementation.

God humbles the proud but exalts the lowly. This is a pattern that will be repeated in the fulness of times in the coming of Christ. He will be the beloved Son of the Father, but be sold by his brother (Judas) and crucified by his own people. He will come down from heaven in human flesh, humbling himself by becoming obedient to the point of death--even the death of the cross. The beloved Son will be forsaken by the Father for our sakes, that we might be reconciled again into God's family.

And from him an eternal blessing will flow--not just to a half-tribe in Joseph's house, but to all nations of the earth.

Our lives in him encapsulate the same pattern. Jesus tells us that if we are to follow him we must humble ourselves, trusting that God will exalt us. We do this when we quickly confess our sins and repent, and likewise when we forgive our brothers from the heart when they sin against us. The humiliation and exaltation of Christ must be formed in us through the Holy Spirit, and not just something we confess with our lips.

#49 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 49

Genesis 49 contains the blessings of Jacob on his twelve sons. Interestingly, the first and last books of Moses end similarly. Genesis and Deuteronomy both conclude with a series of prophetic blessings on the twelve tribes. Similarly, the lives of each Patriarch involved the passing of the father's blessing upon a particular son: Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, and Jacob to his twelve sons.

One thing that is different here is that the blessing is passed collectively to all, albeit in different ways. Jacob gives Joseph a double blessing in making two of his sons constitute a single tribe. As we shall see, Judah also receives prominence as the tribe from whom the king will come.

But insofar as the sons of Israel will constitute a nation that blessing passes collectively to all of them. That signals a big change that is about to take place. God is moving from dealing with his people as they constitute a single family (albeit an increasingly large one) to dealing with them as a nation.

As noted above, this chapter does not simply contain blessings for the present. Jacob pronounces blessings their fulfillment only in something future and ultimate. We refer to these kinds of things as "eschatological" because they refer to the "last" things (in Greek the word "eschatos" means "last").

That is why Genesis 49:1 begins with Jacob referring to things that will happen in the "latter days." The ESV translates the phrase as simply "days to come." That is not totally wrong but obscures the phrase's deeper significance. What Jacob foretells here regarding his twelve sons cannot be satisfied in anything less than something eternal and permanent. Indeed, it can only be fulfilled in Christ.

A deep dive in this passage would tease out how this is true for each of the twelve sons. But we do not have space in this devotional to develop that in detail.

Instead, we will focus our attention on the blessing of Judah, which is the most direct and centrally important prophecy of the chapter (Gen. 49:8-12).

First, we note that the prominence given to Joseph is now transferred to Judah. Genesis 49:8 states that his "brothers shall praise you" and that "your father's sons will bow down before you." This is the same thing that was revealed to Joseph in his dreams back in Genesis 37. The rule over Jacob's family entrusted to Joseph in Egypt is now transferred to the tribe of Judah.

Second, the reason for this transfer flows out of Judah's transformation in the pattern of Christ. We have noted how Judah is a kind of a "hidden" main character in the narrative. Joseph obviously takes up the most space. While his circumstances are dynamic and constantly changing, his spiritual character remains constant and steadfast. It is quite different from Judah. He undergoes a dramatic transformation. He begins the story profiting with his younger brother and profligate in his sexual immorality. He ends the story by offering himself as a kind of substitute and sacrifice for his youngest brother. In this way, Judah has been conformed to the life of the future Savior. In his sanctification, he reflects the cross and resurrection of Christ: dying to sin and living to righteousness.

For this reason, Judah is elevated among his brothers. He becomes a kind of sacrificial lamb, and therefore God exalts him as a "Lion." It is for good reason that in the fulness of times Jesus is called the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5). Interestingly, in the very next verse (Rev. 5:6) Jesus is also presented as a "lamb" of sacrifice. Do you see the pattern? God takes the humiliated lamb and makes him the exalted lion!

This was the pattern of Joseph. It is becoming the pattern of Judah. It will be the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Although there is much more to say, we conclude by noting that Jacob's prophetic blessing declares that the "scepter" and the "rulers staff" will not depart from Judah, and that the "obedience of the peoples shall be his." Although David and Solomon had brief parts of their reigns where this saw provisional fulfillment, it cannot be said the absolute sense that the obedience of the peoples were theirs.

It is only in Jesus that this prophecy comes to fulfillment--indeed the whole Joseph story! Rejected by his brothers and made a sacrificial lamb, God exalted the Lion of the Tribe of Judah and installed him as king over all. Through his word and Spirit tribute is now coming to him, and the obedience of the nations is his. All authority in heaven and earth has been giving to him, and he is making disciples of all nations.

We are among that number. We are members of that kingdom. We show that in our obedience to him. He is working now to conform our lives to his through the power of his death and resurrection. Neither slavery, nor imprisonment, nor slander, nor any other hardship can make a dent in our participation in these eternal things.

#50 - Devotional Meditations on Genesis 50

The book of Hebrews tells us that all the Patriarchs saw themselves as sojourners on earth. They were looking beyond Canaan to a better country, that is, a heavenly one (Hebrews 11).

In Genesis 50 we see Jacob breathe his last. Tears fill Joseph's face, as well as the faces of his family and the entire nation of Egypt. But Jacob insists that he will be buried with his fathers in the field of Machpelah. Although Abraham was the rightful heir and owner of the whole land, he purchased it from a Hittite with his own money. He knew his permanent place of rest would be in a better Canaan which was his true home. Jacob himself knew this perhaps better than anyone, for he saw the ladder of God (Jesus) upon which the angels ascended to and descended from that place.

The family of Abraham has truly been blessed and become a blessing to the nations. They see the fruit of God's redemptive grace in their reconciliation to one another. Egypt (one of the Gentile nations) is literally saved through the revelation of God regarding the seven years of plenty and famine. God's promises are (provisionally) fulfilled.

Yet the brothers still have lingering fears and doubts. Perhaps Joseph still harbors bitterness and anger towards them? Perhaps his only goal in reconciling to them was an earthly one: to enjoy the fruits and blessings of a reunion with his father. Now that the patriarch has passed, it may be that Joseph will pay them back. Maybe all that was holding him back before was his love for his father, not wishing that he be bereaved of the rest of his sons.

But God's grace has truly triumphed over human evil. Joseph himself had already received them in love. And before Jacob's death, he had commanded them to tell Joseph to "please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because of the evil they did to you" (Genesis 50:17).

It is striking that Jacob gave this command. He was the victim of their sinful treachery almost as much as Joseph. Many years were filled with tears as he had assumed his beloved son had vanished from the earth. Jacob's sons acted cruelly towards him, keeping their evil deeds secret for all those years.

Yet God's mercy overcomes vengeance. Jacob experienced this in his own life, as God has forgiven him many sins. As he had been forgiven, so he forgives.

But Joseph, too, who had lived an exemplary and upright life is not filled with pride and self-righteousness. He also knows that he is a servant of God. The God who said "do not touch the woman" (Potiphar's wife) also said, "you must forgive." And so, filled with tears he forgives his brothers from his heart. They all weep together.

This is the work of God. It cannot be accomplished through human means. In fact, the reason God allowed such great evil to take place is that on this canvas of sin he might display the beauty and glory of his forgiving grace.

When we read the Joseph story, it is utterly baffling how first-century Judaism could have adopted a way of religion that was so based on the idea of meritorious works. It is baffling today to see that so many view the Christian faith as primarily expressed in human activity through formal acts of worship and service.

The heart of the Christian faith is repentance and forgiveness. We repent and God forgives, but this must also be expressed towards our fellow man. We must repent truly and from the heart when we sin against others. And we must forgive from the heart when they repent to us.

That was the heart of Jesus towards us. He was patient towards all the great evil done to him, praying on the cross "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." Out of that evil he brought infinite good, paying the price for the sins of his people.