THE BOOK OF GENESIS

The King Who Started It All

Genesis, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Started It All: The Book of Genesis, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you read the New Testament for Teens series, you know the saying: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” It was in every book, and it’s here too. Genesis is a good place to test it, because most people think they know Genesis already. Adam and Eve, a snake, an ark full of animals, a coat of many colors. Kids’ stuff, right?

Not even close. Genesis is one of the boldest, strangest, most honest books ever written. It tackles the biggest questions there are. Why is there something instead of nothing? What is a human being? Why is the world so beautiful and so broken at the same time? Why do families hurt each other? Can God use people who keep messing up?

It’s also not a book for little kids, whatever the coloring pages suggest. There’s murder, a flood that wipes out a world, lies, jealousy, a near sacrifice, sexual violence, human trafficking, and brothers who sell their own brother. Genesis doesn’t clean up its heroes. Almost every one of them is a mess. That’s part of why it’s believable, and part of why it’s hopeful. If God could work with this family, He can work with yours.

And running through the whole book, from the first page to the last, is a promise. God promises that evil won’t win, that a family will bless the whole world, and that He’ll never let go of the people He’s chosen. The rest of the Bible is the story of how He keeps that promise.

This is the first book of a new series on the Old Testament. So open your Bible to page one. In the beginning. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Genesis in nine chapters: creation (Genesis 1–2), the fall (3), from Cain to the tower of Babel, including the flood (4–11), Abraham's call (12–17), Abraham tested (18–23), Isaac and Jacob's early years (24–28), Jacob's struggles (29–36), Joseph's rise (37–41), and Joseph and his brothers (42–50).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Genesis is, who wrote it, how it's put together, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to read the days of creation, how big the flood was, and how Genesis was written, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Genesis also tells some painful stories. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Genesis in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each section of Genesis first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It begins The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Genesis raises questions teens are already asking, often because of what they're learning in science class. On the days of creation, I've presented the main Christian views (young-earth, old-earth, the framework view, the analogical days view, and evolutionary creation) fairly, without endorsing one. The same is true of the flood (global or regional), ancient Near Eastern parallels such as Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the question of authorship, including the Mosaic tradition and the documentary hypothesis. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Genesis contains violence and abuse, including the stories of Hagar, Lot's daughters, Dinah, Tamar, and Joseph's brothers. These are handled carefully and age-appropriately, without graphic detail. Each one includes a safety box that tells readers that what happened was wrong, that it is never the victim's fault, and that if anything like it is happening to them or a friend, they should tell a trusted adult.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Genesis sets up the rest of the Bible and how the New Testament sees its promises fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers have their own rich ways of reading these same promises. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Genesis a God who made them on purpose, who doesn't give up on broken families, and who keeps His promises.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

The Book of Beginnings

The name Genesis comes from a Greek word meaning origin or birth. In Hebrew, the book is called Bereshit, its first word, which means in the beginning. That's a good summary. Genesis tells the beginning of the universe, of human beings, of marriage, of sin, of languages and nations, and of the family through whom God would bless the whole world. If you want to understand the rest of the Bible, you have to start here. The New Testament quotes or refers to Genesis more than sixty times, and Jesus Himself went back to it when He talked about marriage (Matthew 19:4–6).

Part of a Bigger Book

Genesis is the first of five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, that Jews call the Torah, which means instruction or teaching, and Christians often call the Pentateuch, which is Greek for five scrolls. These five books tell one long story, from creation to the edge of the promised land. Genesis is the prequel. It explains who Israel was, where they came from, and why God chose them.

Two Halves

Genesis divides into two big parts. Chapters 1–11 cover the whole world: creation, the first humans, the first murder, the flood, and the tower of Babel. Scholars call this the primeval history. Then, in chapter 12, the camera zooms in on one man, Abram, and his

family. Chapters 12–50 follow four generations: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, especially Joseph. Notice the shift. The problem is worldwide. God's solution starts with one family.

These Are the Generations

Genesis has its own built-in outline. Again and again it says, This is the account of, or in older translations, These are the generations of. The Hebrew word is toledot, which means family history or what came from. The phrase appears ten or eleven times (depending on how you count), introducing each new section: the heavens and the earth (2:4), Adam (5:1), Noah (6:9), Noah's sons (10:1), Shem (11:10), Terah, Abraham's father (11:27), Ishmael (25:12), Isaac (25:19), Esau (36:1, 9), and Jacob (37:2). Genesis is a book of family trees, and the long lists of names that most people skip are actually the skeleton that holds the book together.

Who Wrote Genesis?

Genesis doesn't name its author. Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, and the rest of Scripture refers to them as the Law of Moses or the Book of Moses (Joshua 8:31; Mark 12:26). Jesus spoke of Moses writing about Him (John 5:46). Many who hold to Mosaic authorship think Moses used older records and family histories, possibly the toledot sections, and that later editors added a few updates, such as the account of Moses' own death in Deuteronomy 34 or modern place names like Dan (Genesis 14:14), a city named centuries later (Judges 18:29).

In the 1800s, many scholars proposed what's called the documentary hypothesis, associated especially with the German scholar Julius Wellhausen. It suggests that the Pentateuch was

woven together from four main sources, labeled J, E, D, and P, written at different times. Scholars pointed to things like the use of different names for God, repeated stories, and differences in style. Today, many scholars have moved away from the classic four-source version, and propose other models, while many conservative scholars argue that the evidence fits a single, carefully designed book better than a patchwork. Whatever you conclude, Christians agree that Genesis is inspired by God and part of His Word. The question is how He brought it to us.

The World It Came From

Genesis comes from the ancient Near East, the world of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Egypt, and Canaan, between them. Abraham's family came from Ur, a great city in Mesopotamia, and Joseph ended up in Egypt. These cultures had their own stories about creation and a great flood, written on clay tablets, some older than Genesis. Two of the most famous are the Babylonian creation story Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh, which includes a flood story. We'll look at them in chapters 1 and 3. Comparing them with Genesis is fascinating, because the similarities show that Genesis speaks the language of its world, and the differences show how radically different its God is.

When Did It Happen?

If you add up the ages in Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament, Abraham lived around 2000 BC, and Joseph went to Egypt a few centuries later. Some scholars date these events later, and some doubt that they can be dated at all. Many details of the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, such as names, customs, and travel routes, fit what we know of the ancient Near East in the early second

millennium BC. The events of Genesis 1–11 are much harder to date, and Christians disagree about how to read them, as we'll see.

Asking the Right Questions

We usually come to Genesis with our questions: How old is the earth? How did life develop? Where did the dinosaurs go? Those are good questions. But Genesis was written to people thousands of years before modern science, and it mainly answers different questions: Who made the world? Why is it here? What does it mean to be human? Why is there evil? Who is God, and can He be trusted? Christians disagree about how Genesis relates to science. But all agree that it gives the answers science can't give: that the world is not an accident, that you're made in God's image, and that God hasn't abandoned His creation.

Messy Heroes

Don't read Genesis as a book of role models. Noah gets drunk. Abraham lies about his wife, twice. Sarah laughs at God and mistreats Hagar. Isaac plays favorites. Jacob cheats his brother and his father. His sons commit murder and sell their brother into slavery. Judah treats his daughter-in-law unjustly. The Bible doesn't hide any of this. It tells the truth about people, even its heroes. That honesty is one reason to trust it. And it shows that God's plan doesn't depend on people being good. It depends on God being faithful.

Hard Stories and Safety Notes

Genesis includes stories of violence and abuse. Including a story in the Bible doesn't mean God approves of it. Often Genesis simply reports what happened and lets the consequences show how wrong

it was. When we come to these stories, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they all say: abuse is always wrong, it is never the victim's fault, and if something like this is happening to you or a friend, tell a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, school counselor, youth leader, or pastor. If one adult doesn't listen, tell another one until someone does.

Promise and Covenant

Two words will come up again and again in this book. A promise is God's word about what He will do. A covenant is a binding agreement or relationship, often sealed with a sign. God makes covenants with Noah (with the rainbow as a sign), with Abraham (with circumcision as a sign), and later with Israel at Mount Sinai. Genesis is driven forward by God's promises: offspring who will defeat evil, a land, a great nation, and blessing for all peoples. Almost every story asks the question: will this promise survive? Watch how often it seems impossible, and how God keeps it anyway.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Genesis 1–2): In the beginning.

Chapter 2 (Genesis 3): The snake, the fruit, and the first promise.

Chapter 3 (Genesis 4–11): From Cain to the tower of Babel, including the flood.

Chapter 4 (Genesis 12–17): Abram's call.

Chapter 5 (Genesis 18–23): Abraham's tests.

Chapter 6 (Genesis 24–28): Isaac, Rebekah, and the twins.

Chapter 7 (Genesis 29–36): Jacob's struggles.

Chapter 8 (Genesis 37–41): Joseph, from the pit to the palace.

Chapter 9 (Genesis 42–50): Joseph and his brothers.

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CHAPTER 1

Let There Be

Genesis 1–2

The Bible doesn't open with an argument. It doesn't try to prove that God exists, and it doesn't start with a list of rules. It starts with a sentence so simple a kid could memorize it and so huge that scientists, philosophers, and poets have been chewing on it for three thousand years: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Before there was anything, there was God. Everything else, every galaxy, every mountain, every grain of sand, and you, came after Him and came from Him.

That one sentence quietly knocks over a lot of ideas. It says the universe isn't eternal; it had a beginning. It says the universe isn't God; it's something God made. It says the universe isn't an accident; Someone meant it. And it says God isn't one of many gods fighting for control. There's no rival, no partner, no battle. There's just God, creating.

Then the camera zooms in on the earth, and it's not a pretty picture yet. The earth was "formless and empty." It was dark, and water covered everything. In the ancient world, dark churning water was the ultimate picture of chaos, the stuff of nightmares. But even here, God is present. His Spirit is "hovering over the surface of the waters," like a bird over its nest. The chaos isn't out of control. God is about to bring order to it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Formless and Empty**

The Hebrew phrase for "formless and empty" is tohu wabohu, which sounds a little like a rhyme. Many readers notice that the six days answer those two problems. On days 1 through 3, God gives the world form by separating things: light from dark, sky from sea, land from water. On days 4 through 6, God fills the empty spaces He just made: lights for the day and night, birds and fish for the sky and sea, animals and people for the land. Day 1 matches day 4, day 2 matches day 5, and day 3 matches day 6. It's a beautifully designed passage about a beautifully designed world.

And then God speaks. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." No struggle. No magic spell. No raw materials He had to wrestle into shape. God just speaks, and reality obeys. This is the first thing Genesis wants you to know about God's power: His word is enough. When He says something, it happens.

Day after day, the same rhythm repeats. God said. It was so. God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning. The repetition is on purpose. Genesis 1 reads almost like a song with a chorus, and the chorus is this: God is in charge, and what He makes is good.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Enuma Elish**

Israel's neighbors had their own creation stories. The most famous is the Babylonian Enuma Elish, written down on clay tablets. In it, the gods are born from the mixing of fresh and salt water, and the young god Marduk kills the sea goddess Tiamat in a violent battle, splits her body in two, and makes the sky and earth from the halves. Humans are made from the blood of a defeated god so that they can do the gods' hard labor and feed them. When you read Genesis 1 next to that, the differences jump out. In Genesis there's one God, not a crowd of them. He doesn't fight anyone to create; He simply speaks. The sun, moon, and stars, which Babylon worshiped as gods, are just lamps God hangs in the sky (Genesis doesn't even call them by their usual

names, just the greater light and the lesser light). And humans aren't slaves made from a dead god's blood. They're made in God's own image and blessed. Scholars debate how much Genesis is responding directly to stories like this, but many readers think it's deliberately setting the record straight.

On the fourth day God makes the sun, the moon, and the stars, to mark "seasons, days, and years." Notice the job description. They aren't gods to fear or worship. They're more like clocks and calendars. On the fifth day the seas swarm with fish and the skies fill with birds, including the "large sea creatures," which some ancient people pictured as monsters of chaos. In Genesis, they're just more of God's creatures, made by Him and called good.

Then comes the sixth day, and the story slows down. Up to now, God has said, "Let there be." Now He says something different: "Let's make man in our image, after our likeness." It's as if God pauses before the most important part of the project.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is "Us"?**

Why does God say "Let's make" and "our image"? Readers have offered several answers. Some Jewish interpreters suggested God is speaking to the angels of His heavenly court. Others see it as a plural of majesty, the way a king might say "we." Many Christians, from the early church on, have seen a hint of the Trinity here: God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (who was just mentioned hovering over the waters). Genesis doesn't explain it, so be careful not to claim more than the text says. But it's fair to notice that the God of Genesis 1 is not lonely. Even before He made anything, there was something like conversation inside God.

Then comes one of the most important sentences ever written about human beings. God created humanity in His image, male and female. The writer is so excited he says it three times in one verse, almost like poetry.

What does it mean to be made in God's image? In the ancient world, a king would put statues of himself in the far corners of his kingdom to remind everyone who was in charge there. These statues were called the king's images. Genesis takes that idea and turns it upside down. God doesn't need stone statues. He made living ones. Every person is meant to show the world what God is like and to care for the world on His behalf. That's why God immediately gives people a job: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it." The word dominion has sometimes been twisted to mean people can trash the planet. But in context it means ruling the way God rules, carefully and generously, like a good king who looks after his land.

The image of God also means something about every single person you'll ever meet. Not just the popular kids. Not just people who agree with you. The kid nobody sits with at lunch, the person with a disability, the unborn baby, the elderly woman with dementia, the refugee, the enemy: all of them bear God's image. Genesis 9:6 will later say that's why murder is so serious. Human worth isn't something you earn by being smart, attractive, or useful. It's stamped into you by your Maker.

Notice too that both male and female are made in God's image. In a world where women were often treated as property, that was a revolutionary thing to say. Men and women are different, and Genesis celebrates that difference, but they're equal in dignity and worth, and they share the same job of caring for God's world. Neither one shows the world what God is like without the other.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Caring for Creation**
>
> If God made the world and called it good, then the way we treat the world matters. Psalm 24:1 says the earth belongs to the LORD, not to us. We're more like tenants or gardeners than owners. Christians disagree about a lot of

environmental politics, but nearly all agree on the basic principle: we're called to care for creation, not exploit it. That can be as simple as not wasting food, picking up trash on a trail, or learning the names of the birds and trees around your house. When you take care of God's world, you're doing the job He gave humanity on day six.

REAL TALK **You Are Not a Mistake**

Some days it's hard to believe you're worth much. Maybe you're not good at sports, or your grades are low, or your body doesn't look like the bodies you see online. Genesis 1 doesn't say you're made in the image of whoever has the most followers. It says you're made in the image of God. Your worth was settled before you did anything at all. If you struggle with thoughts that you're worthless, or with thoughts of hurting yourself, please don't keep it to yourself. Tell a parent, a counselor, a youth leader, or another trusted adult today. In the United States you can also call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline any time.

At the end of the sixth day, God looks at everything He's made, and the chorus changes. It isn't just good anymore. "It was very good." The world, as God made it, was not a mess. It was beautiful, ordered, and full of life.

Then, on the seventh day, God rests. He isn't tired; God doesn't get worn out. The word means He stopped, because the work was finished. And God "blessed the seventh day, and made it holy." This is the first thing in the Bible called holy, and it isn't a place or a person. It's a day, a slice of time. Later, Israel would keep the Sabbath as a weekly reminder that the world doesn't depend on our nonstop work. It depends on God. In a world where your phone never stops buzzing, that's a pretty radical idea.

REAL TALK **Rest Is Not Laziness**

A lot of teens are exhausted. Between school, homework, sports, jobs, practices, and the pressure to always be available online, there's hardly a

moment to breathe. Genesis 2 says God built rest into the very structure of creation, before sin ever entered the picture. Rest isn't a reward you earn once everything's done; everything is never done. It's a gift you receive by trusting that the world keeps turning even when you stop. Jesus said the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Try setting aside a few hours each week with no homework and no screens, and use it to sleep, pray, take a walk, laugh with your family, or just enjoy God's world. You were made by a God who rests.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Long Were the Days?**

Christians who all believe God created everything disagree about how to read the days of Genesis 1. Here are the main views, as fairly as possible. Young-earth creationists read the days as six ordinary 24-hour days, a few thousand years ago, and often point to the repeated phrase "there was evening and there was morning" and to Exodus 20:11. Old-earth creationists accept that the universe is billions of years old and often read each day as a long age (the Hebrew word yom can mean a long period), or as days of God's work separated by long gaps. The framework view sees the days as a literary structure, the forming and filling pattern, meant to teach who made the world and why, not the order or timing. The analogical days view, held by some theologians, sees them as God's days of work, described by analogy to a human work week, so that we can copy His pattern of work and rest. Evolutionary creationists (sometimes called theistic evolutionists) accept the scientific account of an old universe and the development of life over time, and see God as the Creator working through those processes, with Genesis teaching theological truth rather than science. Faithful, Bible-believing Christians hold each of these views. What they all share is more important than where they differ: God made everything, it was good, humans bear His image, and the world belongs to Him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The World as God's Temple**

One more way of reading Genesis 1 is worth knowing, because it overlaps with several of the views above. Some scholars, such as John Walton, point out that in the ancient world, temples were often dedicated in seven-day

ceremonies, and that a god was said to rest in his temple once it was finished, meaning he took his seat to rule from there. Read that way, Genesis 1 shows God setting up the whole universe as His temple, giving everything its function, and then resting on the seventh day as He takes His throne. Isaiah 66:1 pictures heaven as God's throne and the earth as His footstool. Whether or not you find this view convincing, it highlights something true: the world isn't just a big rock floating in space. It's the place where God intends to live with His people. That's exactly where the Bible ends, in Revelation 21, with God's dwelling place among people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Science and Scripture**

Some people think you have to choose between science and faith. Many of the founders of modern science, like Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton, believed God made the universe, and that's exactly why they expected it to follow orderly laws they could discover. Today, many scientists are Christians too. Christians have often spoken of God writing two books: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Because the same God is behind both, they can't ultimately contradict each other, even when our understanding of one or the other is still incomplete. It's okay to have questions. Ask them out loud, and keep reading.

Then Genesis 2 starts over and tells the creation story again, from a different angle. Genesis 1 is the wide shot from space; Genesis 2 is the close-up at ground level. In chapter 1, God is called simply God, the mighty Creator of everything. In chapter 2, a new name appears: the LORD God. That's God's personal name, the name He'll later reveal to Moses. The God who rules the galaxies is also a God who comes close.

And close is exactly what He does. "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Picture a potter getting His hands dirty, then leaning down face to face to breathe life into what He's made. The Hebrew word

for man, adam, sounds like the word for ground, adamah. You might call him Dirt Guy. You're made of the same stuff as the earth, which keeps you humble. But you also have the breath of God in you, which makes you priceless.

God plants a garden in Eden, full of trees "pleasant to the sight, and good for food." God cares about beauty, not just usefulness. In the middle are two special trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God puts the man in the garden "to cultivate and keep it." Work was part of paradise. It isn't a punishment. It's part of what it means to be human. Later, those same two Hebrew words are used for the priests who serve and guard the tabernacle, so some readers see Eden as the first temple, the place where God lived with His people.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Where Was Eden?**
>
> Genesis names four rivers flowing out of Eden. Two of them, the Tigris and the Euphrates, are still around today, in modern Iraq. The other two, the Pishon and the Gihon, are harder to identify, and people have proposed everything from the Nile to rivers that dried up long ago. Nobody knows exactly where Eden was, and the flood stories and thousands of years of history may have changed the landscape. What's clear is that Genesis wants you to see Eden as a real place on the map, not a fairy-tale land far, far away.

God gives the man freedom and one boundary. He can eat from any tree but one. If he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will die. Why put the tree there at all? Because love needs freedom. God didn't want robots who obeyed because they had no choice. He wanted people who would trust Him and stay close because they wanted to.

Then, for the first time, God says something is not good. "It is not good for the man to be alone." Everything was very good, but one

thing was missing. So God brings the animals to the man to name, which shows his authority and creativity. But none of them is right for him. There was no "helper comparable to him." The word helper doesn't mean an assistant or someone less important. In the Old Testament the same word is used for God Himself when He helps His people. It means someone who brings strength the other lacks.

So God puts the man into a deep sleep, takes part of his side, and builds a woman. When the man wakes up and sees her, he bursts into the first poem in the Bible: "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." In other words, finally! She's like him, she's equal with him, and she's different from him, all at once. Then the writer adds that a man will leave his father and mother and join his wife, "and they will be one flesh." Jesus quoted this line when people asked Him about marriage (Matthew 19:4–6).

The chapter ends on a quiet note: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed." That's not just about clothing. It's a picture of total openness. Nothing to hide from each other. Nothing to hide from God. No masks, no filters, no fear of being seen. Hold onto that picture, because in the next chapter, it shatters.

> **REAL TALK** **Two Accounts?**
>
> Some readers notice that Genesis 1 and 2 tell creation in different orders and wonder whether they contradict each other. Others, especially those who hold the documentary hypothesis, see them as two separate sources placed side by side. Many readers, ancient and modern, see them as two complementary pictures, one that shows the order of the whole universe and one that zooms in on the first humans and their relationship with God. Either way, the final editor of Genesis clearly wanted both, and each teaches things

the other doesn't. Genesis 1 tells you you're made in God's image. Genesis 2 tells you God breathed His own breath into you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Genesis 1 and John 1**

The Gospel of John begins with the same three words as Genesis: "In the beginning." Then John says that the Word was with God and was God, and that all things were made through Him. Genesis shows God creating by speaking. John reveals that the Word God spoke is a Person, the Son, who later became flesh as Jesus. And just as Genesis 1 starts with light shining into darkness, John says the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it. Christians read Genesis 1 and John 1 together: the One who made the world is the One who came into it to save it.

KEY VERSE

God created man in his own image. In God's image he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Genesis starts by saying that God made everything. What difference does it make to you whether the universe was made on purpose or happened by accident?
2. Which creation view in the box makes the most sense to you right now? Why do you think Christians can disagree on this and still agree on the main point?
3. If every person bears God's image, how should that change the way you treat someone you don't like?
4. God built rest into the rhythm of creation. What would it look like for you to take a real day of rest from screens and work?

TRY THIS *Go outside tonight, look at the sky for ten full minutes with your phone put away, and read Psalm 8. Then write down one thing you noticed about God's creation and one thing you noticed about yourself.*

CHAPTER 2

The Day Everything Broke

Genesis 3

Genesis 3 is one of the shortest chapters in this book, and one of the most important chapters in the whole Bible. It explains why the world you live in looks so different from the very good world of Genesis 1. Why do people lie, cheat, and hurt each other? Why does it feel so hard to be close to God? Why does everyone die? Genesis 3 says it started here.

It begins with a new character. "Now the serpent was more subtle than any animal of the field which the LORD God had made." Subtle means crafty or sneaky. Notice that the serpent is a creature God made; it isn't a rival god. Genesis doesn't explain where evil came from or tell you everything about the serpent. Later Scripture identifies the serpent with the devil, the "old serpent" of Revelation 12:9. Here, he's simply a voice that wants to pull people away from God.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Serpents in the Ancient World**
>
> In the ancient Near East, serpents showed up everywhere: on Pharaoh's crown in Egypt, in stories about chaos monsters, and as symbols of wisdom, healing, and fertility. In the Gilgamesh epic, a snake steals the plant that could have made the hero young again. So when Genesis introduces a talking serpent, its first readers would have recognized it as a symbol of something

powerful, mysterious, and dangerous. Genesis makes sure you know the serpent is just a creature, not a god, and not anyone to trust.

The serpent's first words are a question: "Has God really said, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?" It's a brilliant trick. He doesn't deny God exists. He just twists what God said and makes God sound stingy. God had actually said they could eat from every tree but one. The serpent makes it sound like God said no to everything.

The woman answers, and she gets it mostly right. But she adds a detail God never said: "You shall not touch it." Maybe she was building a fence around the rule to stay safe. Maybe the serpent's question was already working on her, making God seem harsher than He is.

Then the serpent goes for the kill. "You won't really die." He flatly contradicts God. Then he gives his reason: God knows that when you eat it "you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In other words, God is holding out on you. He doesn't want what's best for you. He wants to keep you small. If you want to really live, you need to stop trusting Him and decide for yourself what's good and what's evil.

That's the oldest lie in the world, and you've heard it a thousand times. It shows up in commercials, songs, and your own head. God's rules are there to ruin your fun. You'll be happier if you do what you want. Follow your heart, even if it means ignoring God. The serpent's strategy hasn't changed. It's always some version of this: God isn't good, and you can't trust Him.

REAL TALK **How Temptation Works**

Look at the steps in Genesis 3:6. She saw that the fruit was good for food (it appealed to her body), that it was "a delight to the eyes" (it looked amazing), and that it was "desired to make one wise" (it promised something she

wanted). Then she took it. First John 2:16 describes temptation in almost the same three ways. Temptation usually doesn't look ugly. It looks good, delicious, and smart. It almost always starts with a thought about God that isn't true. The best defense isn't just trying harder. It's knowing who God really is, so that when the lie comes, you can recognize it.

She takes the fruit and eats, and then she gives some to her husband, who was "with her." He didn't argue. He didn't protect her. He just ate it too. Both of them chose to trust the serpent's word over God's.

Immediately, their eyes are opened, just as the serpent promised. But what they see isn't godlike wisdom. "They both knew that they were naked." The beautiful openness of chapter 2 is gone. Now they feel exposed and ashamed. So they sew fig leaves together and try to cover themselves. It's the first cover-up in history, and it doesn't work very well. People have been sewing fig leaves ever since: masks, excuses, perfect profiles, and the sense that if anyone really knew us, they wouldn't love us.

Then they hear God walking in the garden "in the cool of the day." He's coming to spend time with them, like always. But this time they hide among the trees. The people made to walk with God now hide from Him.

And God comes looking. "Where are you?" God isn't asking because He doesn't know. He's giving the man a chance to come out and tell the truth. It's the first question God asks in the Bible, and it's a question of love. God goes after people who are hiding from Him. He still does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shame vs. Guilt**

Guilt says I did something bad. Shame says I am bad. Notice that Adam's first words after he comes out are about shame: "I was afraid, because I was

naked; so I hid myself." Shame makes us hide, from God and from each other. But God doesn't leave them hiding, and He doesn't leave you there either. If you're carrying shame about something you did or something that was done to you, the worst thing you can do is keep hiding. Talk to God about it, and talk to a trusted adult. Shame grows in the dark and shrinks in the light.

REAL TALK **Is Sin Really a Big Deal?**

It was just a piece of fruit, right? Why such a big punishment? But that's like saying a wedding ring is just a piece of metal. What made the act so serious was what it meant: Adam and Eve chose to believe God was a liar and to put themselves in His place. Sin is always bigger than it looks, because it's really about a broken relationship. That's also why little sins aren't so little. A lie, a bit of cruelty, a secret habit, all of them grow out of the same root: I know better than God. The good news is that God's grace is bigger than our sin. But we'll never really appreciate grace until we take sin seriously.

The man explains why he hid. Then God asks the hard question: did you eat from the tree? And the blame game begins. The man says, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Did you catch that? He blames the woman, and he blames God for giving her to him. When God asks the woman, she blames the serpent: "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Nobody takes responsibility. Sound familiar? Ever since, people have been saying it's not my fault.

Then God speaks to each of them, in reverse order. To the serpent, God announces a curse. It will crawl on its belly and eat dust. And then God says something that shakes the whole Bible: "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel." There will be a long war between the serpent's side and the woman's family. But one day a descendant of the woman will crush the serpent's head, even though He'll be wounded doing it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The First Gospel**

Since at least the second century, Christians have called Genesis 3:15 the protoevangelium, which means first gospel. Irenaeus, a church leader around AD 180, saw it as the first promise of Jesus, the descendant of a woman who would defeat the devil, getting wounded in His heel on the cross while dealing the serpent a death blow. Some readers think the verse is mainly about the ongoing struggle between humans and evil, and Jewish interpreters have often read it that way. But Paul seems to echo it when he writes, "The God of peace will quickly crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). Either way, notice when this promise comes. Before God tells Adam and Eve about the consequences of their sin, He announces that evil won't win. The bad news comes wrapped in good news.

To the woman, God says that bearing children will now come with great pain, and that her relationships will be marked by struggle. "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Many readers see this not as how God wants things to be, but as a description of what sin will do: the beautiful partnership of chapter 2 will be twisted into power struggles. A lot of human history, sadly, proves the point.

To the man, God says the ground is cursed because of him. Work will now be frustrating, full of thorns and sweat. And then the saddest line of all: "For you are dust, and you shall return to dust." God told them they would die, and now death enters the story. They didn't drop dead that very day, but the process started. They were cut off from the source of life, and they began to die, like a flower cut from its plant.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is Eve to Blame for Everything?**

Some people through history have used Genesis 3 to say women are weaker, more easily fooled, or more to blame. That's not what the text says. Adam was standing right there. He ate too, and the New Testament actually holds

Adam responsible for bringing sin into the world (Romans 5:12). Both of them chose to disobey, and both of them faced the consequences. Using this story to put women down is just another version of the blame game Adam started.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Were Adam and Eve Real People?**

Christians answer this question in more than one way. Many hold that Adam and Eve were a real, historical first couple, the ancestors of all humanity, specially created by God, and they point to Jesus and Paul speaking of Adam as a real person (Matthew 19:4; Romans 5:12–19). Some, especially among those who accept evolutionary science, believe Adam and Eve were real historical people whom God chose from among early humans to represent humanity in a special relationship with Him. Others read Adam and Eve mainly as archetypes, figures who represent every human being (the name Adam simply means human). Christians in all these camps affirm that humans were made by God in His image, that humanity really did fall into sin, and that Jesus came to undo what went wrong. If you have questions about this, talk them through with your pastor or youth leader. It's a question worth asking.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Was the Tree?**

What was so special about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Was the fruit magic? Probably not. Many readers think the point is not the fruit but the choice. Knowing good and evil may mean deciding for yourself what's good and evil, instead of receiving that from God. Others think it refers to wisdom or maturity that God intended to give in His own time, in His own way, and that Adam and Eve grabbed too early. Others see it as a phrase meaning everything, all knowledge, which belongs to God alone. Whichever way you read it, the heart of the story is the same. The first sin wasn't really about food. It was about trust. Would humans let God define what's good, or would they take that role for themselves? It's the same question you face every day.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Kind of Death?**

God said that in the day they ate from the tree, they would surely die. But Adam lived to be 930. So was God wrong, or was the serpent right? Readers

have answered in a few ways. Many say death began that day spiritually, as Adam and Eve were cut off from God, and physically, as their bodies began a slow march toward the grave. Some note that the Hebrew phrase can mean you will surely become mortal. Others point out that in the day can simply mean when. Either way, the serpent's promise that they would not die turned out to be a lie. Every funeral since has proven God right. And that's why Jesus' resurrection is such good news. He beat the death that entered the world in Genesis 3.

Then comes a small detail that's easy to miss. "The LORD God made garments of animal skins for Adam and for his wife, and clothed them." Their fig leaves weren't enough. So God Himself makes something better. For the first time, an animal's life is given to cover human shame. Many Christians see in this a first picture of sacrifice, pointing ahead to the day when Jesus would give His life to cover our sin. At the very least, it shows God's tenderness. Even while sending them out, He takes care of them.

Finally, God sends them out of the garden, to keep them from eating from the tree of life and living forever in their broken state. Cherubim, powerful angelic beings, and "a flaming sword which turned every way" guard the way back. Eden is closed. Humans are now east of Eden, outside the garden, longing to get back home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Cherubim**

Forget the chubby baby angels on greeting cards. The cherubim of the Bible are awesome and a little frightening. In the ancient Near East, giant winged creatures with human faces and animal bodies, like the lamassu statues of Assyria, guarded the entrances to palaces and temples. Visitors to the British Museum or the Louvre can still see them, some more than fourteen feet tall. In the Bible, cherubim guard God's holy presence. Golden cherubim stood on top of the ark of the covenant, and they were embroidered on the temple curtain. Ezekiel saw cherubim with four faces and wings full of eyes. When

> God placed cherubim at Eden's gate, the message was clear: the way back to God's presence was closed, and only God could open it again.

It's worth pausing to notice how much changed in one chapter. Humans' relationship with God was broken: they hid. Their relationship with each other was broken: they blamed. Their relationship with themselves was broken: they felt shame. Their relationship with creation was broken: the ground would fight back. Sin isn't just breaking a rule. It's like a crack that runs through every part of life. That's why the good news has to be just as big. Jesus came to reconcile us to God, to each other, to ourselves, and, according to Romans 8, even to set creation free.

The rest of the Bible is the story of how God opens the way back. In the tabernacle and temple, cherubim are woven into the curtain that keeps people out of God's presence. When Jesus dies, that curtain is torn in two (Matthew 27:51). And at the very end of the Bible, in Revelation 22, the tree of life appears again, growing in a city where God lives with His people, with no curse. What was lost in Genesis 3 is restored in Revelation 22. The whole Bible is a story about getting home.

> **REAL TALK** **Is It Fair?**
>
> Maybe you think it's not fair that everyone suffers because of what two people did. Christians have wrestled with this for centuries, and they don't all explain it the same way. Some emphasize that Adam represented all of us, like a team captain whose choices affect the whole team. Others emphasize that we've all inherited a nature bent toward sin, or that every one of us has made the same choice Adam did. Romans 5 makes the connection, and then it adds the good news: just as one man's disobedience brought death, one Man's obedience, Jesus', brings life to everyone who trusts Him. If you think it's unfair that Adam's choice affects you, remember that Jesus' choice can affect you too.

REAL TALK **The Blame Game Today**

Adam blamed Eve and God. Eve blamed the serpent. Today the blame game has gone digital. It's easy to subtweet, screenshot, and pile on someone else's mistakes while hiding our own. It's easy to say my parents, my teacher, my coach, or my friends made me do it. Some of those people might really share the blame. But Genesis 3 shows that healing starts with honesty. God asked Adam what he had done. God already knew. He wanted Adam to say it. The same is true for you. First John 1:9 promises that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us. You don't have to hide behind fig leaves or excuses. You can come out from behind the trees.

KEY VERSE

I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel.

Genesis 3:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The serpent's main lie was that God can't be trusted. What are some ways you hear that same lie today?
2. What are some modern fig leaves people use to hide their shame?
3. God's first question to the hiding humans was "Where are you?" If God asked you that question today, how would you answer?
4. Why do you think God announced the promise of the serpent-crusher before He told Adam and Eve about the consequences of their sin?

TRY THIS *This week, when you catch yourself blaming someone else for something you did, stop and admit out loud that it was your fault. Then take one step to make it right.*

CHAPTER 3

East of Eden

Genesis 4–11

Once humans leave Eden, things go downhill fast. In just eight chapters, Genesis goes from the first murder to a world so violent God sends a flood, and then to a tower built by people who want to make a name for themselves. These chapters can feel strange: giant ages, mysterious beings, a boat full of animals. But they show something you'll recognize: what happens when people try to live without God, and how God refuses to give up on them anyway.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Genesis 1–11**

Scholars sometimes call Genesis 1–11 the primeval history, meaning the story of the earliest times. These chapters cover a huge sweep of time very quickly, and they read differently from the more detailed family stories that begin with Abraham. Some readers take them as straightforward history in every detail. Others see them as true history told in a highly stylized way, with symbolic numbers and literary patterns. Still others see them mainly as theological stories that use the language of their time to teach truth about God and humanity. Christians across these views agree that they teach real truths about the real God and the real human condition.

Adam and Eve have two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain farms the land, and Abel keeps sheep. One day they both bring offerings to God. Cain brings some of his crops. Abel brings "some of the firstborn of his flock and of its fat," which means the best he had. "The LORD

respected Abel and his offering," but not Cain's. Genesis doesn't explain exactly why. Hebrews 11:4 says Abel offered his gift by faith. It seems the difference wasn't plants versus animals, but the heart behind the gift. Abel gave God his best; Cain went through the motions.

Cain is furious. His face falls. And God comes to him, the way He came to Adam, with a question and a warning. Why are you angry? If you do what's right, you'll be accepted. "If you don't do well, sin crouches at the door. Its desire is for you, but you are to rule over it." Sin is pictured as a wild animal crouching outside the door, waiting to pounce. But God also says Cain can master it. He doesn't have to give in.

Cain doesn't listen. He invites Abel into the field and murders him. Just one generation after the garden, a brother kills his brother. Then God asks another question: "Where is Abel, your brother?" And Cain lies: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" That's one of the most famous questions in the Bible, and the whole rest of Scripture answers it: yes, you are.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **When Anger Turns Dangerous**
>
> The story of Cain shows how anger and jealousy can grow into violence if they aren't dealt with. Anger itself isn't always wrong, but God told Cain to master it before it mastered him. If you feel so angry that you're afraid you might hurt someone, or if someone in your life is threatening to hurt you, don't wait. Tell a parent, school counselor, or another trusted adult right away. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

God says Abel's blood cries out to Him from the ground. Even if no one else saw, God did. Cain is sent away to wander. But even here, God shows mercy. When Cain is afraid that someone will kill him,

God puts a mark on him to protect him. Even a murderer is still made in God's image, and God doesn't give up on him.

Cain's family builds the first city and invents music and metalworking. That's good. Human creativity is part of the image of God. But Cain's great-great-great-grandson Lamech brags to his wives that he killed a young man for wounding him, and that if Cain is avenged seven times, he'll be avenged seventy-seven times. Violence is spreading and getting worse. Much later, when Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, Jesus answers with almost the same number: seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22). Jesus reverses Lamech's song of revenge.

Meanwhile Adam and Eve have another son, Seth. "At that time men began to call on the LORD's name." So there are two family lines growing up side by side: one marked by violence and pride, the other marked by worship.

Genesis 5 is a family tree from Adam to Noah. It can feel boring at first, but it has a rhythm, and the rhythm is grim. Each man lives, has children, lives some more, "and he died." Over and over. Death is real now, just like God said. The ages are enormous; Methuselah lives 969 years, the oldest person in the Bible.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Did They Live So Long?**
>
> Readers have different explanations for the huge ages in Genesis 5. Some take them literally and suggest that people lived longer before the flood, perhaps because the effects of sin and decay built up gradually. Others think the numbers are symbolic, or that they follow ancient ways of honoring important ancestors. Interestingly, the Sumerian King List, an ancient record from Mesopotamia, gives kings before a great flood reigns of tens of thousands of years, much longer than anything in Genesis. Whatever the ages

mean, the ages get shorter after the flood, and the main point stays the same: everybody dies.

But in the middle of the chapter, the rhythm breaks. "Enoch walked with God, and he was not found, for God took him." Enoch didn't die. He walked so closely with God that one day God simply took him. It's a tiny glimmer of hope in a chapter full of death. Death doesn't have to have the last word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Enoch in Later Tradition**

Enoch gets only four verses in Genesis, but he became a celebrity in later Jewish writings. A whole collection of books, called 1 Enoch, was written in his name in the centuries before Jesus, full of visions of angels, heaven, and the coming judgment. The little letter of Jude in the New Testament even quotes from it. Most churches don't consider 1 Enoch part of Scripture, though the Ethiopian Orthodox Church does. Hebrews 11:5 gives the simplest summary of Enoch's life: before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. That's not a bad way to be remembered.

Then Genesis 6 opens with one of the strangest passages in the Bible. "God's sons saw that men's daughters were beautiful," and they took wives from among them. Their children were connected to the Nephilim, the "mighty men who were of old, men of renown." Who were the sons of God? Some readers think they were angels or spiritual beings who crossed a line they should never have crossed, which is how many ancient Jewish writings, like 1 Enoch, understood it (and which may be in the background of Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4). Others think they were powerful kings who took whatever women they wanted, or that they were men from Seth's godly line who married into Cain's ungodly line. Whichever view is right, the point is that boundaries God set were being trampled.

God also announces that people's days will be limited to 120 years. Readers aren't sure whether that means human lifespans would shrink to about 120 years, which is roughly the upper limit of human life today, or that there would be 120 years before the flood came. Either way, it's a sign that God was setting limits on a humanity that recognized none.

And it gets worse. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was continually only evil." That's a terrible description: every thought, only evil, all the time. The earth was filled with violence. Then comes one of the most emotional verses in Genesis: "The LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart." God isn't a cold machine. He grieves. His heart breaks over what people have done to His world and to each other.

So God decides to wash the world clean and start again. "But Noah found favor in the LORD's eyes." Noah was "a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time. Noah walked with God." Like Enoch, he walked with God. God tells Noah to build an ark, a huge floating box made of wood and sealed with pitch, about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. Noah is to bring his family and pairs of every kind of animal, plus extra clean animals, on board.

Noah obeys. "He did all that God commanded him." Imagine building a giant boat on dry land for years while your neighbors watch. Second Peter 2:5 calls Noah "a preacher of righteousness." His obedience itself was a message.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Big Was the Ark?**

Genesis gives the ark's size in cubits, the length of a forearm, about 18 inches. At 300 cubits long, 50 wide, and 30 high, it was roughly 450 feet long: about one and a half football fields, as tall as a four-story building, with three decks inside. Its proportions, long and narrow like a box, are remarkably stable on rough water; modern ship designers have noticed that its ratios are similar to those of large cargo ships. In the Gilgamesh epic, by contrast, the boat is a perfect cube, which would spin and roll in a storm. In Kentucky, a group built a full-size replica called the Ark Encounter, and visitors are often stunned by how huge it is. Whatever your view of the flood's scope, the ark was no bathtub toy with giraffes sticking out of the top.

REAL TALK **Different in a Corrupt World**

Noah lived in a world where violence was normal and everybody went along with it. He walked with God anyway. That's not easy. You may be the only one in your friend group who doesn't vape, cheat, or join in when people are cruel. It can feel lonely. But Noah shows that one person who walks with God can make a difference for a whole family, and for the future. You don't have to be perfect, and you don't have to be weird for the sake of being weird. You just have to keep walking with God, one day at a time, even when no one else is.

Then the flood comes. "All the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the sky's windows opened." Genesis describes it as creation running in reverse. In Genesis 1, God separated the waters above from the waters below and made dry land appear. Now the waters crash back together, and the world returns to the watery chaos of the very beginning. "Every living thing was destroyed that was on the surface of the ground." Only Noah and those with him in the ark survive.

REAL TALK **Is the Flood Story Too Harsh?**

Lots of people struggle with the flood. Why would a loving God destroy almost everyone? It's a fair question. Genesis doesn't present God as angry for no reason. It shows a world drowning in violence long before it drowned in water, and a God who was grieved, not trigger-happy. It's also worth noticing that God waited, that He gave people time while Noah built and preached, and that He made a way to be saved. The flood shows that God takes evil seriously. A God who didn't care about violence wouldn't be good. And the story ends not with destruction but with a promise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Was the Flood Global or Local?**

Christians disagree about how far the flood reached. Some believe it covered the entire planet, pointing to phrases like "all the high mountains that were under the whole sky" and to the purpose of the ark, and some argue for flood geology to explain rock layers and fossils. Others believe it was a massive regional flood that covered the whole world as Noah and the writer knew it, the land of Mesopotamia, pointing out that phrases like "all the earth" can mean a known region elsewhere in the Bible (see Genesis 41:57, where all the earth comes to Egypt to buy grain), and that geology doesn't show a single worldwide flood layer. Still others focus on the story's theological message and don't think its point depends on settling the question. Faithful Christians hold each view. All agree the flood was God's judgment on human evil and His rescue of Noah's family.

After 150 days, "God remembered Noah." That doesn't mean God forgot. In the Bible, God remembering means He acts on His promise. A wind blows, the waters go down, and the ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Noah sends out a raven and then a dove. The second time, the dove comes back with a fresh olive leaf in its beak, the sign that life is growing again. Ever since, the dove and the olive branch have been symbols of peace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gilgamesh and Atrahasis**

Genesis isn't the only ancient story about a great flood. In the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, a man named Utnapishtim survives a flood in a boat, brings animals along, sends out birds (including a dove and a raven), and offers a sacrifice afterward. An even older story, Atrahasis, tells a similar tale. When these tablets were discovered in the 1800s, some people thought it proved Genesis had just borrowed a myth. Others thought it showed a real memory of a great flood had been passed down in several cultures. Look at the differences, though. In the Babylonian stories, the gods send the flood because humans are too noisy and keep them awake. The gods are scared of the flood themselves, and afterward they swarm the sacrifice like flies because they're starving without humans to feed them. In Genesis, one holy God sends the flood because of human violence and evil, chooses to save a righteous man, and makes a gracious covenant with all life. The stories share a shape, but they tell you very different things about God.

Noah steps out onto a washed world, and the first thing he does is build an altar and worship. God smells the pleasing aroma and makes a promise: "While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night will not cease." The seasons you see every year are a reminder of God's faithfulness.

Then God blesses Noah and his sons just like He blessed Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth." It's a fresh start, a new creation. God allows them to eat meat now, but not the blood, which represents life. And God declares that human life is sacred: "Whoever sheds man's blood, his blood will be shed by man, for God made man in his own image." The flood didn't erase the image of God. Every person still carries it.

Then God makes a covenant, a binding promise, with Noah and every living creature: He'll never again destroy all life with a flood.

The sign of this covenant is the rainbow. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for rainbow is the same word as the word for an archer's bow. Some readers see a beautiful picture here: God hangs up His war bow in the sky, pointed away from the earth. Every rainbow you see is God's reminder, to Himself and to you, that He keeps His promises.

But the new start doesn't fix the human heart. Noah plants a vineyard, gets drunk, and lies uncovered in his tent. His son Ham sees him and goes and tells his brothers, while Shem and Japheth respectfully cover their father without looking. Noah later pronounces a curse on Ham's son Canaan. This passage was horribly misused for centuries to justify racism and slavery against people of African descent. That's a gross misreading. The curse falls on Canaan, not on Ham's other sons, and the text says nothing about skin color. Using the Bible to hurt people God made in His image is the opposite of what Genesis teaches.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Table of Nations**
>
> Genesis 10 lists the descendants of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and the nations that came from them. It contains about seventy names, which later Jewish tradition took as a symbol of all the nations of the world. This chapter tells you something big: every people group on earth is part of one human family. All nations matter to God. That's why it's so powerful when, at Pentecost in Acts 2, people from many nations hear the gospel in their own languages.

Genesis 11 tells the story behind that scattering. At this point, everyone speaks one language. They settle in a plain called Shinar, in Babylonia, and they have a plan. "Come, let's build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top reaches to the sky, and let's make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad on the surface of

the whole earth." God had told people to fill the earth. They want to huddle together and make themselves famous instead. It's pride, plain and simple. They want to reach heaven on their own terms.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ziggurats**
>
> The tower of Babel was probably a ziggurat, a huge stepped pyramid made of baked mud bricks. Ancient Mesopotamian cities built them as temples, with a shrine on top where they believed the gods could come down to earth. The most famous ziggurat in Babylon was called Etemenanki, which means the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth. Genesis has a little fun here. The builders think they're reaching heaven. But God has to "go down" to even see their tower. Compared to God, the greatest human achievement is tiny.

The LORD comes down and says that if they keep going like this, nothing they plan will be impossible for them. So God confuses their language, and they can't understand each other anymore. The building project stops, and the people are scattered across the earth. The city is called Babel, which sounds like the Hebrew word for confused. The irony is sharp: the place they hoped would make them famous becomes a name for confusion. And Babel, or Babylon, becomes a symbol throughout the Bible of human pride that sets itself against God, all the way to Revelation 18.

But the story isn't over. On the day of Pentecost, God reverses Babel. Instead of people trying to climb up to heaven, the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven. Instead of languages dividing people, people from all over the world hear about God's works in their own languages and become one family in Jesus (Acts 2). At Babel, people tried to make a name for themselves. At Pentecost, they called on the name of Jesus.

REAL TALK **Making a Name for Yourself**

The people of Babel wanted to be famous. That desire hasn't gone away; it's just moved online. Likes, followers, views, and streaks can become our tower. There's nothing wrong with doing great things or being known. But when your worth depends on making a name for yourself, you're building on sand. In the very next chapter, God promises Abram, "I will bless you and make your name great." The difference is who's doing the building.

Genesis 11 ends with another family tree, this time from Shem down to a man named Terah, whose family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans. Terah had a son named Abram. And then comes a quiet, painful line: Abram's wife Sarai "was barren. She had no child." After eleven chapters of sin, judgment, and scattering, the story narrows down to one family with no future. It looks like a dead end. But that's exactly where God likes to start.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Patterns in Genesis 1–11**

If you look back over these first eleven chapters, you'll notice a pattern that repeats again and again. First, people sin: Adam and Eve, Cain, the world before the flood, the builders of Babel. Second, God speaks and announces judgment: the curse, Cain's wandering, the flood, the scattering. Third, God shows grace in the middle of judgment: clothing for Adam and Eve, a protective mark for Cain, an ark for Noah, and, after Babel, the call of Abram. Sin, judgment, grace. Sin keeps spreading, but grace keeps showing up. Paul summed it up centuries later: where sin increased, grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20). That's still true in your life.

KEY VERSE

I set my rainbow in the cloud, and it will be a sign of a covenant between me and the earth.

Genesis 9:13 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God told Cain that sin was crouching at the door, but that he could master it. What sins crouch at your door? What would it look like to master them?
2. How do you feel about the flood story? What questions does it raise for you, and how does the covenant with Noah help answer them?
3. Babel was about people trying to make a name for themselves. Where do you see that same attitude in your life or online?
4. Why do you think Genesis spends so much time on family trees? What do they teach about God?

TRY THIS *The next time you see a rainbow, stop and thank God for one promise He's kept in your life. Until then, read Acts 2 and list every way Pentecost reverses Babel.*

CHAPTER 4

Leave Everything

Genesis 12–17

Genesis 12 is a turning point for the whole Bible. For eleven chapters, the camera has been pulled way back, showing the whole human race spiraling away from God. Now it zooms in on one man, one wife, and one tent. God's plan to fix the whole world is going to start with a family. And not an impressive one. An old man and an old woman who couldn't have children.

God speaks to Abram, and His first word is a hard one: leave. "Leave your country, and your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you." Notice what God doesn't say. He doesn't give Abram a map. He doesn't tell him where he's going. Abram has to leave everything familiar and follow God one step at a time.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Ur and Haran**
>
> Abram's family came from Ur of the Chaldeans, a wealthy city in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). Archaeologists have dug up Ur and found royal tombs full of gold, a huge ziggurat to the moon god Nanna, and evidence of a sophisticated city with schools and trade. Abram's family moved northwest to Haran, another city famous for worshiping the moon god. Joshua 24:2 says Abram's father "served other gods." So when God called Abram, He wasn't calling a man who grew up in church. He was calling someone out of a world full of idols, to trust a God he couldn't see.

Then God gives Abram a sevenfold promise. He'll make him a great nation. He'll bless him. He'll make his name great. Abram will be a blessing. God will bless those who bless him and curse those who treat him with contempt. And finally: "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you." Remember Babel? The people there tried to make a name for themselves, and God scattered them. Now God promises to make Abram's name great Himself, and to use Abram's family to bless all the scattered families of the earth. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God keeps that promise, all the way to a crowd from every nation, tribe, and language worshiping Jesus in Revelation 7.

"So Abram went, as the LORD had told him." He's seventy-five years old. No retirement plan. No GPS. He takes his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and everything they own, and he goes. Hebrews 11:8 says, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out to the place which he was to receive for an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he went." That's what faith looks like. Not having all the answers, but trusting the One who does.

When Abram arrives in Canaan, God appears and promises, "I will give this land to your offspring." There's just one problem. Abram doesn't have any offspring. And the Canaanites already live there. Still, Abram builds an altar and worships. Everywhere he goes in this chapter, he builds altars. He's claiming the land for God, not with swords, but with worship.

But Abram is no superhero. Almost immediately there's a famine, and Abram goes down to Egypt. He's scared that the Egyptians will kill him to take his beautiful wife, so he asks Sarai to say she's his sister. (She actually was his half-sister, as we learn later, but it was still a lie meant to deceive.) Pharaoh takes Sarai into his palace, and

Abram gets rich from Pharaoh's gifts. God has to step in and rescue Sarai by striking Pharaoh's house with plagues. The man God promised to use to bless the nations just brought a curse on a nation instead. It's embarrassing. Pharaoh has to scold Abram and send him away.

> **REAL TALK** **Heroes with Clay Feet**
>
> One of the most honest things about Genesis is that it doesn't hide its heroes' failures. Abram lies about his wife (twice, actually; he does it again in chapter 20). Jacob is a cheat. Judah is a hypocrite. If Genesis were made up to make Israel's ancestors look good, it did a terrible job. The heroes of Genesis aren't heroes because they're perfect. They're heroes because God is faithful to them even when they aren't faithful to Him. That's good news for you, because you're not perfect either.

Back in Canaan, Abram and Lot have so many animals that the land can't support them both, and their herdsmen start fighting. Abram has every right to pull rank. He's the older man, and God gave the promise to him. Instead he says, "Please, let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are relatives." And he lets Lot choose first. Lot looks at the well-watered plain of the Jordan, which looks like the garden of Eden, and he chooses it, settling near the city of Sodom. Genesis adds an ominous note: the men of Sodom were very wicked. Lot chose by what looked best, and it would cost him dearly.

After Lot leaves, God tells Abram to look in every direction, north, south, east, and west. All that land will belong to his family. And his descendants will be "as the dust of the earth," too many to count. Abram gave up the best land, and God gave him everything.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Is a Covenant?**

You'll see the word covenant again and again in Genesis and the rest of the Bible. A covenant is more than a contract. A contract is about exchanging goods or services: you do this, I'll pay that. A covenant is about a relationship: I will be yours, and you will be mine. Marriage is a covenant. In the ancient Near East, great kings made covenants with smaller kingdoms, promising protection in return for loyalty. God uses that familiar idea to describe His relationship with His people. In Genesis, He makes covenants with Noah (and all creation), with Abraham, and through Abraham with his descendants. Later He'll make a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and with King David. And on the night before He died, Jesus took a cup and called it the new covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20). The whole Bible is a covenant story.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Canaan**

The land God promised Abram was called Canaan, roughly modern Israel, the Palestinian territories, and parts of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. It was a narrow land bridge between the great empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which meant armies and traders passed through it constantly. It wasn't the richest land in the region; it depended on rain instead of great rivers like the Nile or the Euphrates. Later, Deuteronomy 11:10–12 points this out: in Egypt, farmers watered crops from the river, but in Canaan, the people would have to look to God for rain. The land itself was designed to teach trust.

After the rescue of Lot, the king of Sodom offers Abram all the goods he recovered. Abram refuses to take even a thread or a sandal strap. He doesn't want anyone to say that the king of Sodom made Abram rich. Abram has learned something since his trip to Egypt. He wants to receive his blessings from God, not from a wicked king's handouts. It's a quiet but important moment of integrity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Melchizedek**

Genesis 14 tells about a war between kings, and Lot gets captured. Abram gathers 318 trained men and rescues him in a daring night raid. On the way home, a mysterious figure appears: "Melchizedek king of Salem brought out

> bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High." Salem is probably an early name for Jerusalem, and Melchizedek's name means king of righteousness. He blesses Abram, and Abram gives him a tenth of everything. Then he vanishes from Genesis. Psalm 110:4 picks him up again, saying a coming king will be "a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." And the book of Hebrews (chapter 7) sees Melchizedek as a picture of Jesus, a King and Priest whose priesthood is greater than any other. Bread and wine, a priest-king in Jerusalem: Christians have noticed the echoes of the Lord's Supper too.

Then comes one of the most important chapters in the Bible. Abram is still childless, and he's worried. God comes to him in a vision: "Don't be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." But Abram is honest with God. "Lord GOD, what will you give me, since I go childless, and he who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" His servant is going to inherit everything. What good are God's gifts if there's no one to pass them down to?

God doesn't scold him for asking. He takes Abram outside and says, "Look now toward the sky, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." So your offspring will be. Imagine a sky with no light pollution, packed with thousands of stars. That's how many descendants this old, childless man is going to have.

And then the big sentence: "He believed in the LORD, who credited it to him for righteousness." Abram didn't earn God's approval by being good. He simply believed God's promise, and God counted his faith as righteousness. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to explain the heart of the gospel. Abram was declared right with God by faith, long before the law of Moses, long before he was circumcised. And that's still how anyone becomes right with God: not by earning it, but by trusting God's promise, which for us is fulfilled in Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Smoking Furnace**

God then makes a covenant with Abram in a way that sounds strange to us. Abram cuts animals in half and lays the halves opposite each other. In the ancient world, people sometimes sealed a covenant by walking between cut animals, as if to say, may this happen to me if I break my promise (Jeremiah 34:18 describes this practice). But Abram doesn't walk between the pieces. He falls into a deep sleep, and "a smoking furnace and a flaming torch passed between these pieces." That's God Himself, appearing as smoke and fire, the way He would later lead Israel out of Egypt. God alone walks the path. He takes the whole weight of the promise on Himself. If anyone breaks this covenant, God will pay the price. Christians see that come true at the cross.

During that same vision, God tells Abram some hard news. His descendants will be foreigners and slaves in a land that isn't theirs for four hundred years before God brings them out. That's a preview of the book of Exodus. God's promises are sure, but they're not always fast.

And waiting is hard. Ten years after arriving in Canaan, Sarai still has no child. So she comes up with a plan. She gives Abram her Egyptian servant Hagar, so that Hagar can have a child for her. In their culture this was a legal custom; ancient contracts from the region mention it. But it was still a human shortcut around God's promise, and it goes badly. Hagar becomes pregnant and starts to look down on Sarai. Sarai blames Abram. Abram passively says, "Do to her whatever is good in your eyes." And "Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face."

SAFETY NOTE **Hagar's Story**

Hagar was an enslaved woman with no say in what happened to her body or her life. She was used for someone else's plan and then mistreated when it got complicated. Genesis tells her story honestly, and it doesn't pretend what happened to her was okay. If someone is using you, controlling you,

pressuring you sexually, or treating you harshly at home or anywhere else, it is not your fault, and you don't have to handle it alone. Tell a trusted adult, like a parent, teacher, school counselor, or pastor. If you're in the United States, you can also call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453. God saw Hagar, and He sees you.

Hagar runs into the wilderness, pregnant and alone. And there, by a spring of water, "the LORD's angel found her." The angel calls her by name and asks, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where did you come from? Where are you going?" It's the kind of question God asked Adam: a question that invites her to tell her story. The angel tells her to go back, and promises that her son, Ishmael, whose name means God hears, will have countless descendants. God has heard her misery.

And then Hagar does something no one else in the Bible does. She gives God a name. "You are a God who sees," she says. The first person in Scripture to name God is not a patriarch or a priest. It's a pregnant, runaway, enslaved foreign woman. Nobody in Abram's household saw her as a person. But God did.

REAL TALK **The God Who Sees**

Have you ever felt invisible? Like nobody notices you, or nobody would care if you disappeared? Hagar felt that way. She was a foreigner and a servant. She was pushed around and finally driven away. And God came looking for her in the desert. He knew her name. He knew where she'd come from and where she was going. He listened to her pain. The God who sees Hagar sees you. Not just when you're doing great, but especially when you're alone and hurting.

Thirteen more years go by. Abram is ninety-nine. And God appears again: "I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless." God renews His covenant, and He gives Abram a new name: Abraham, meaning father of a multitude. Sarai becomes Sarah, meaning princess. God also gives the sign of the covenant: circumcision for

every male in Abraham's household, a mark in the body that this family belongs to God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Circumcision?**
>
> Circumcision was practiced by some other ancient peoples too, but for Israel it took on a new meaning as the sign of belonging to God's covenant. Later, Moses and the prophets talked about circumcising the heart, meaning that God wants more than a physical mark; He wants a heart that loves and obeys Him (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). In the New Testament, the early church decided that non-Jewish believers in Jesus didn't need to be circumcised (Acts 15), and Paul connects circumcision to baptism and new life in Christ (Colossians 2:11–12). The deeper point was always the same: God's people are marked as His.

Then God says Sarah, at ninety, will have a son. Abraham falls on his face, and laughs. Will a child be born to a hundred-year-old man? Will Sarah give birth at ninety? He even suggests that maybe Ishmael could be the promised son instead. God says no. Sarah will have a son, and "You shall call his name Isaac." Isaac means he laughs. Every time Abraham called his son's name, he'd remember the day he laughed at God's promise, and God made it come true anyway. God doesn't forget Ishmael either. He promises to bless him and make him a great nation. But the covenant will go through Isaac.

That same day, Abraham obeys. He circumcises himself, Ishmael, and every male in his household, just as God commanded. Abraham laughed at God's promise, but he didn't wait to obey it. Sometimes faith is a mix of doubt and obedience at the same time, and God accepts both.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Abraham in Three Faiths**

Abraham is honored by more than half the people on earth. Jews see him as the father of their people, the first to enter covenant with the one God. Christians see him as the father of all who believe, as Paul says in Romans 4, Jew and non-Jew alike, because he was counted righteous by faith. Muslims honor him as Ibrahim, a great prophet and an example of submission to God, and trace their faith back to him through Ishmael. These three faiths understand Abraham's story differently in important ways, and it's not respectful to pretend they're all the same. But knowing that your Muslim or Jewish classmates also honor Abraham can open up some fascinating and kind conversations. Ask them what Abraham means to them, and share what he means to you.

KEY VERSE

He believed in the LORD, who credited it to him for righteousness.

Genesis 15:6 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God called Abram to leave everything familiar without telling him where he was going. What would be the hardest thing for you to leave if God asked?
2. Abram failed badly in Egypt, yet God didn't give up on him. How does that change the way you think about your own failures?
3. Genesis 15:6 says Abram was counted righteous because he believed God. What's the difference between earning God's love and trusting His promise?
4. Hagar called God "a God who sees." When have you needed to know that God sees you?

TRY THIS *Look up at the night sky this week and try to count the stars. Then write down one promise of God you're having a hard time believing, and ask Him to help you trust it, like Abram did.*

CHAPTER 5

Tested

Genesis 18–23

These chapters contain some of the most beautiful and some of the hardest stories in Genesis. There's a dinner party with God, a bold prayer, the fire that falls on Sodom, a baby long promised, a mother and child left in the desert, and a test so intense it still makes people gasp. Through all of it, one question hangs in the air: can Abraham trust God completely? And can you?

It starts on a hot afternoon. Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent by the oaks of Mamre when he looks up and sees three men standing nearby. He runs to meet them, bows low, and begs them to stay for a meal. He hurries to Sarah to bake bread, runs to pick a tender calf, and serves them a feast. Middle Eastern hospitality was, and still is, a big deal. But it turns out these aren't ordinary visitors. One of them is the LORD Himself, and the other two are angels. Hebrews 13:2 remembers this when it tells Christians to show hospitality to strangers, because some have entertained angels without knowing it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **God in Human Form?**
>
> Genesis 18 says the LORD appeared to Abraham, and then describes three men. How can God appear as a man? Jewish and Christian readers have puzzled over this for centuries. Many Christians have seen moments like this as appearances of the Son of God before He was born as Jesus. A famous

Russian icon by Andrei Rublev, painted in the 1400s, shows the three visitors as a picture of the Trinity. Genesis itself doesn't explain how it works. But it shows a God who is willing to come close, sit down, and eat with people. That's a preview of Jesus, who ate with tax collectors and sinners.

During the meal, the LORD asks, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" Then He promises that by this time next year, Sarah will have a son. Sarah is listening behind the tent door, and she laughs to herself. She's long past childbearing age. The LORD asks why she laughed, and asks the question that sits at the center of this whole story: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" Sarah is afraid and denies laughing. "No," He says, "but you did laugh." God isn't mean about it. He just won't let the truth go. And within a year, Sarah's laugh of disbelief will turn into a laugh of joy.

REAL TALK **When God's Promises Seem Laughable**

Sarah's laugh is understandable. She had waited for decades. She'd watched her body grow old. She'd probably cried herself to sleep more times than she could count. When someone said she'd finally have a baby, it sounded like a cruel joke. Have you ever felt that way about something God says? That He'll never leave you, when you feel alone? That He can bring good out of a situation that seems hopeless? God didn't reject Sarah for laughing. He kept His promise, and He turned her bitter laugh into a joyful one. Hebrews 11:11 even lists Sarah among the heroes of faith. Faith isn't never doubting. It's bringing your doubts to the God who keeps His word.

Then the visitors head toward Sodom, and God lets Abraham in on His plan. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin very serious. God is going down to see. And Abraham, the friend of God, does something astonishing. He argues with God. "Will you consume the righteous with the wicked?" What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? "Shouldn't the Judge of all the earth do right?"

God agrees: for fifty righteous people, He'll spare the city. Then Abraham, carefully and humbly, bargains down. Forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Finally: "What if ten are found there?" And God says, "I will not destroy it for the ten's sake." God never loses patience. He's not annoyed by the prayer. He seems to welcome it.

Why does God share His plans with Abraham in the first place? Genesis tells us: God chose Abraham so that he would teach his children and his household to keep the way of the LORD, "to do righteousness and justice." Abraham isn't just supposed to be blessed. He's supposed to learn God's heart for justice and pass it on. And when he hears about Sodom, that's exactly what he does: he pleads for justice and mercy.

> **REAL TALK** **Can You Argue with God?**
>
> Abraham's prayer for Sodom shows that prayer isn't just politely reading God a wish list. It can be honest, bold, and persistent. Moses, David, Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk all argued with God at times, and God didn't strike them down. Abraham's boldness wasn't disrespect. It was rooted in God's own character: he knew God was just and merciful, and he appealed to that. You can bring your hardest questions to God too. He can handle them.

There weren't ten righteous people in Sodom. When the two angels arrive in the evening, Lot is sitting at the city gate, which means he's become an important man there. He insists that the angels stay at his house. But that night, the men of the city, young and old, surround the house and demand that Lot send out his guests so they can sexually assault them. It's a horrifying scene of violence. And Lot makes it worse. He offers his own two daughters to the mob instead. It's one of the most shocking moments in Genesis, and the Bible tells it without approving it. The angels pull Lot inside and strike the mob with blindness.

SAFETY NOTE **What Happened in Sodom**

The story of Sodom involves a mob threatening sexual violence, and a father who offered his daughters to protect his guests. Genesis isn't recommending what Lot did; it shows how badly even a man living near God's people had been shaped by a violent city. Ezekiel 16:49 adds that Sodom was arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned, and didn't help the poor and needy. If anyone has ever threatened you, pressured you into something sexual, or offered you to someone else, that is abuse, and it is never your fault. Tell a trusted adult right away. If you're in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

At dawn, the angels urge Lot to leave with his family. Lot's future sons-in-law think he's joking. And even Lot himself hesitates. Genesis says simply, "But he lingered." So the angels grab Lot, his wife, and his daughters by the hand and pull them out of the city, "the LORD being merciful to him." Lot didn't deserve rescue, but God remembered Abraham's prayer. Genesis says that when God destroyed the cities of the plain, "God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the middle of the overthrow." Abraham's prayer didn't save Sodom, but it did save Lot. Never think your prayers for someone else are wasted. Second Peter 2:7 even calls Lot righteous and says he was distressed by the evil around him. He was a mixed-up man, compromised and slow to obey, but God was merciful to him.

Then fire and burning sulfur rain down on Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities are destroyed. And as they flee, Lot's wife looks back, "and she became a pillar of salt." She couldn't let go of the life she was leaving. Jesus later gives one of the shortest sermons in the Bible: "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32).

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sodom and the Dead Sea**

The cities of the plain were probably near the southern end of the Dead Sea, a region full of salt formations, sulfur, and bitumen (natural tar), where the land is the lowest on earth. Some archaeologists have suggested that ancient sites in the area, like Bab edh-Dhra, or Tall el-Hammam north of the Dead Sea, show signs of sudden destruction, though scholars debate the evidence and its dates. Visitors to the area can still see strange salt pillars, which locals have sometimes nicknamed Lot's wife.

The story of Lot ends in a cave, and it ends sadly. Lot's daughters, who've lost their home, their fiancés, and their mother, believe there are no men left to marry. So they get their father drunk and become pregnant by him. Their sons become the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites, nations that would trouble Israel later on. Genesis tells this briefly and doesn't approve. It's a picture of how far a family can fall when it soaks in a broken culture.

SAFETY NOTE **When Families Break Boundaries**

The ending of Lot's story describes incest, sexual contact between family members. That's always wrong, and when it happens to a young person, it is abuse, no matter who started it, no matter what anyone says, and no matter whether drugs or alcohol were involved. If anything like this has ever happened to you, or is happening now, it is not your fault and it is not something you have to keep secret. Tell a trusted adult outside the situation, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or another family member. In the United States, you can also call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453, any time.

Then, finally, after twenty-five years of waiting, "The LORD visited Sarah as he had said." Sarah has a son, and Abraham names him Isaac, he laughs. And Sarah, who once laughed in disbelief, now laughs with joy. "God has made me laugh. Everyone who hears will

laugh with me." God kept His promise. Late, from our point of view. Right on time, from His.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Abraham Does It Again**
>
> Just before Isaac's birth, in Genesis 20, Abraham moves to Gerar and tells the same lie he told in Egypt: Sarah is my sister. King Abimelech takes Sarah, and God warns the king in a dream that he's a dead man if he touches her. Abimelech protests that he acted with a clear conscience, and God agrees, which is why He kept him from sinning. The pagan king turns out to be more honest than the man of faith. Abraham admits he thought there was no fear of God in that place. He was wrong. Sometimes believers assume the worst about people who don't share their faith, and then those people turn out to have more integrity than we do. God protects His promise anyway: Sarah is kept safe, and Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah, just as God said.

But joy quickly turns to tension. At the party celebrating Isaac's weaning, Sarah sees Ishmael, now a teenager, laughing or mocking. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham is deeply troubled; Ishmael is his son. But God tells him to listen to Sarah, because the promise will come through Isaac, and promises He'll make Ishmael a nation too. So early the next morning, Abraham gives Hagar some bread and a container of water and sends her and the boy into the desert.

When the water runs out, Hagar puts Ishmael under a bush and sits down a bowshot away, because she can't bear to watch her son die. She sobs. And then: "God heard the voice of the boy." The angel of God calls to her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Don't be afraid." God opens her eyes, and she sees a well of water. God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness, and he became an archer. Once again, the God who sees came through for Hagar.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Ishmael and the Nations**

Ishmael is honored in Genesis. God blesses him and promises he'll be the father of twelve rulers and a great nation. Arab peoples have traditionally traced their ancestry to Ishmael, and in Islam he's honored as a prophet. Paul uses Hagar and Sarah as an illustration in Galatians 4, but that's about two covenants, not about which people God loves more. God's care for Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis is a reminder that God's heart has always been bigger than one family. The promise to Abraham was always meant to bless all the families of the earth.

Then comes the hardest test of all. "God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' He said, 'Here I am.'" Then God says something unthinkable: "Now take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go into the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering." Notice how God piles up the words, each one hurting more than the last. Abraham had already given up his homeland, his father's house, and his son Ishmael. Now God was asking for the one thing that was left, the son who held all his hopes for the future. Your son. Your only son. Isaac, the one you waited twenty-five years for, the one all the promises depend on. Whom you love. This is the first time the word love appears in the Bible, and it's the love of a father for his son.

What do we do with a story like this? Many neighboring cultures practiced child sacrifice, and later the Bible clearly condemns it as something God hates (Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 7:31). The reader knows from the start that this is a test, and God will stop it. But Abraham doesn't know that. And Abraham obeys. He gets up early. He cuts the wood. He walks for three days. Imagine those three days. Every step, every campfire, every time Isaac said something to him. Genesis doesn't tell us what Abraham was thinking. It just shows us what he did. On the third day he sees the place in the

distance, and he tells his servants: "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there. We will worship, and come back to you." We will come back. Hebrews 11:19 says Abraham reasoned that God could even raise Isaac from the dead.

Isaac carries the wood up the mountain. And then he asks the question that breaks your heart: "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham answers, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them went on together.

At the top, Abraham builds an altar, ties up Isaac, and lays him on the wood. Isaac was probably a teenager or older by now; he could have run, but he didn't. Abraham raises the knife. And at the last second, the angel of the LORD calls from heaven: "Abraham, Abraham!" Don't lay a hand on the boy. "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He sacrifices the ram instead of his son. And he names the place "The LORD Will Provide."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **On the Mountain of the LORD**
>
> Moriah shows up only one other time in the Bible. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon builds the temple "on Mount Moriah," in Jerusalem. So the place where Abraham offered a ram in Isaac's place became the place where countless lambs were sacrificed for Israel's sins. And just outside the walls of that same city, two thousand years later, another Father gave His only Son, whom He loved. This time there was no ram in the thicket at the last second. Jesus carried the wood of the cross up the hill Himself. John 1:29 calls Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Abraham's words came true more fully than he could have imagined: God provided the Lamb. Jewish tradition reads this story, which it calls the Akedah, the binding, as a

supreme example of faithfulness, and it's read in synagogues at Rosh Hashanah.

REAL TALK **Would God Ask You to Do This?**

No. If anyone ever tells you God wants you to hurt yourself or someone else, they're wrong, and that includes a voice in your own head. The Bible is clear that God hates child sacrifice and human violence, and the whole point of this story is that God stopped it and provided a substitute. Genesis 22 is about trusting God with what you love most, not about harming anybody. If you ever have thoughts telling you to hurt yourself or someone else, tell a parent, counselor, or trusted adult right away, or call or text 988 in the United States.

After the test, God swears by Himself to keep His promise, and repeats it: Abraham's offspring will be like the stars and the sand, and "all the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring." Paul says that "offspring" ultimately points to one person: Christ (Galatians 3:16).

The section ends quietly, with grief. Sarah dies at 127 years old, and Abraham weeps for her. He buys a field with a cave in it, the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, to bury her. He tells the local Hittites, "I am a stranger and a foreigner living with you." God promised him the whole land, but the only piece he ever actually owns is a grave. Yet even that is a sign of faith. Abraham is planting his family's future in the land God promised, believing that one day it will all be theirs.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cave of Machpelah**

The cave Abraham bought in Hebron is still honored today. Over it stands a massive stone enclosure built by King Herod the Great around the time of Jesus, one of the best-preserved buildings from that era. Jews call it the Cave of the Patriarchs, and Muslims call it the Ibrahimi Mosque. It's a holy site to both, and sadly it's also been a place of conflict and violence. Genesis 23 records the purchase in careful legal detail, with witnesses at the city gate

and the price weighed out in silver. That detail matters: it shows that Abraham's family had a legal claim to at least one small piece of the promised land.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Test Someone If You Know Everything?**

If God knows everything, why did He need to test Abraham? Genesis says the angel told Abraham, now I know that you fear God. Readers have offered different explanations. Some say the test wasn't for God's information but for Abraham's growth, the way a coach's tough drill reveals and builds strength. Others say God was speaking in human terms, the way the Bible sometimes describes God coming down to see Babel. Others say the test made Abraham's faith visible, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to everyone who would read the story. James 2:21–23 says Abraham's faith was made complete by what he did. Tests in your life aren't God trying to trip you up. They're more like the fire that shows gold is real.

KEY VERSE

Abraham said, 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they both went together.

Genesis 22:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God asked, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" What's something in your life that feels too hard right now?
2. Abraham boldly prayed for Sodom. Who is someone you could pray for boldly this week?
3. What did Lot's wife's backward look reveal about her heart? What are you tempted to look back at?
4. How does the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah help you understand what God did through Jesus?

TRY THIS *Abraham showed hospitality to strangers and ended up meeting God. This week, go out of your way to welcome someone new at school, church, or practice. Sit with them, learn their name, and listen to their story.*

CHAPTER 6

Twins at War

Genesis 24–28

After all the drama of Abraham's story, Isaac's life can seem quiet. He's the son of a famous father and the father of a famous son, and he gets fewer chapters than either of them. But the promise doesn't skip a generation. In these chapters, God keeps His covenant through a marriage, a pair of fighting twins, a stolen blessing, and a staircase to heaven. And a family that seems determined to wreck itself.

Abraham is old now, and he wants Isaac to marry a woman from his own relatives back in Mesopotamia, not a Canaanite who might lead him away from God. So he sends his most trusted servant on a long journey to find a wife for Isaac. Abraham makes him promise not to take Isaac back there. The family's future is in the land God promised.

The servant arrives at a well outside the town of Nahor in the evening, when the women come to draw water. And he prays one of the most specific prayers in the Bible: "LORD, the God of my master Abraham, please give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham." He asks for a sign. If he asks a young woman for a drink and she offers to water his camels too, she'll be the one.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Thirsty Camels**

Watering ten camels was no small favor. A thirsty camel can drink twenty or more gallons of water at a time. So if Rebekah offered to water all ten camels, she was volunteering for hundreds of trips with a heavy jar, up and down the steps of the well. The servant wasn't just asking for a woman who was nice. He was asking for a woman who was generous, strong, hardworking, and kind to strangers, someone with the same kind of hospitality Abraham had shown.

Before the servant even finishes praying, Rebekah comes out with her jar. She gives him a drink, then runs back and forth until all ten camels have had their fill. The servant watches in silence. When he learns she's Abraham's relative, he bows down and worships: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his loving kindness and his truth toward my master."

The servant tells the whole story to Rebekah's family, including her brother Laban, who seems very interested in the gold jewelry. They agree that this is from the LORD. When they ask Rebekah whether she'll go with the stranger to marry a man she's never met, she gives a two-word answer that echoes Abraham's faith: "I will go." Just like Abraham, she leaves her family and her homeland for a promise.

When the caravan arrives, Isaac is out in the field in the evening, meditating. He looks up and sees the camels coming. Rebekah covers herself with her veil. Isaac brings her into his mother's tent, and she becomes his wife. Then Genesis says something simple and sweet: "He loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death."

REAL TALK **Waiting for the Right Person**

The story of Isaac and Rebekah is not a formula for finding a boyfriend or girlfriend. (Please don't stand by the drinking fountain and wait for someone to offer to water your camels.) Marriage in the ancient world was arranged by

families, which is very different from dating today. But some things carry over. The servant prayed, and God guided. Rebekah's character mattered more than her looks (though Genesis says she was beautiful too). And the marriage was built on faithfulness to God. Whether you're interested in dating now or not, it's worth asking God to shape you into the kind of person who's worth waiting for.

Abraham dies at 175 years old, and Isaac and Ishmael, the two estranged brothers, bury him together in the cave where Sarah was buried. It's a quiet moment of reconciliation.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Isaac, the Quiet Patriarch**

Isaac often gets overlooked. Abraham is the bold pioneer, Jacob is the scrappy wrestler, and Joseph is the dreamer who rises to power. Isaac mostly stays home, digs wells, and keeps the peace. He's the only patriarch who never leaves the promised land, and the only one with just one wife. He also lived the longest of the four, 180 years. Some people are called to dramatic adventures. Others are called to faithfully carry on what they've received, to stay put, to love one person, and to pass the faith along. Both matter to God. Notice that God calls Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The quiet guy is right there in the middle of God's name.

Like Sarah before her, Rebekah can't have children. Isaac prays for her, and God answers. She becomes pregnant with twins, and they fight so much inside her that she asks God what's going on. God tells her: "Two nations are in your womb." The older will serve the younger. That's backward from how things normally worked in the ancient world, where the firstborn son got the most honor and the biggest inheritance. But God keeps choosing the unexpected: Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, and now Jacob over Esau. God's choices aren't based on who's first, strongest, or most impressive.

The twins are born. The first comes out red and hairy, so they name him Esau. The second comes out grabbing his brother's heel, so

they name him Jacob, which sounds like the Hebrew word for heel and can mean he grabs the heel or he deceives. They grow up as opposites. "Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field. Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents." And then comes a line that explains a lot of the trouble ahead: "Isaac loved Esau, because he ate his venison. Rebekah loved Jacob." Each parent had a favorite. And their children would grow up competing for love, for blessing, and for their parents' attention. A family where love feels like a contest is a family where everyone loses.

> **REAL TALK** **Favorites**
>
> Favoritism tears families apart, and Genesis shows it over and over. Isaac favors Esau, Rebekah favors Jacob, and later Jacob will favor Joseph, nearly getting him killed. If you feel like a parent loves your sibling more than you, that hurts, and it's okay to say so. Sometimes it helps to talk honestly with your parent about how you feel. If that doesn't feel safe, talk with another trusted adult. And if you're the favorite, don't use it as a weapon. You can be the one who breaks the pattern.

One day Esau comes in from hunting, starving. Jacob is cooking stew. "Please feed me with some of that red stew, for I am famished." Jacob, ever the opportunist, says he'll trade it for Esau's birthright, his rights as the firstborn son. And Esau says, "Behold, I am about to die. What good is the birthright to me?" He trades his whole future for a bowl of soup. Genesis sums it up: "So Esau despised his birthright." Hebrews 12:16 warns us not to be like Esau, who traded his inheritance for a single meal. Esau isn't the only one who has traded something precious for something that felt urgent in the moment. And notice Jacob's part too. He didn't share food with his starving brother out of love. He took advantage of his brother's weakness to get what he wanted. Neither twin comes off well.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Instant Gratification**

Esau's choice is a picture of what psychologists call instant gratification: grabbing what feels good right now instead of what's best in the long run. It's the same impulse behind scrolling one more video when you should be asleep, or sending a text you'll regret. It's not wrong to be hungry. It's foolish to let a moment's hunger make a lifetime decision. Before a big choice, try asking: will this still seem like a good trade in a year? In ten years?

Isaac's story repeats his father's in some uncomfortable ways. There's a famine, and God tells Isaac not to go to Egypt but to stay in the land, and repeats the promise to him: "In your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed." But Isaac, like Abraham, is scared and lies about his wife, saying Rebekah is his sister. The king of Gerar catches him and scolds him. Like father, like son.

Isaac also gets into a series of quarrels with his neighbors over wells. Each time Isaac's servants dig a well, the local herdsmen claim it. Instead of fighting, Isaac moves on and digs another. Finally he digs a well no one fights over and names it Rehoboth, meaning room, because God has made room for them. That night God appears and tells him not to be afraid. Isaac's quiet life shows a different kind of strength: the strength to make peace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wells and Beersheba**

In the dry Negev desert, a well could mean the difference between life and death for a family and its flocks. Digging one took enormous work, and owning one meant you had a real claim to live in the land. That's why the quarrels over wells were so serious. The town of Beersheba, which means well of the oath or well of seven, became an important place for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Archaeologists have excavated an ancient city at Tel Beersheba, including a deep well near its gate, though it dates from later than the patriarchs. In the Bible, the phrase from Dan to Beersheba came to mean the whole land of Israel, from the far north to the far south.

Then comes the most famous family fraud in the Bible. Isaac is old and blind, and he decides it's time to give his blessing to Esau, his favorite. He sends Esau out to hunt and cook his favorite meal first. But Rebekah overhears. She tells Jacob to bring two young goats so she can cook Isaac's favorite dish, and she dresses Jacob in Esau's best clothes and covers his smooth hands and neck with goatskins, so that he'll feel and smell like his hairy, outdoorsy brother.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Blessing**

In the ancient world, a father's final blessing wasn't just a nice wish. It was considered powerful and binding, a kind of spoken will that passed on the family's future, authority, and inheritance. Once given, it couldn't be taken back. That's why everyone in this story fights so hard over it. For this family, the blessing also carried God's promise to Abraham. Whoever received it would carry the covenant forward.

Jacob goes in to his father, and lies to his face. "I am Esau your firstborn." Isaac is suspicious. How did you find game so quickly? Jacob lies again, and even drags God into it: the LORD your God gave me success. Isaac feels his hands. "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." Finally, Isaac eats, kisses him, smells his clothes, and gives Jacob the blessing: rich harvests, nations bowing to him, lord over his brothers.

Jacob has barely left when Esau walks in with his dish. The truth hits Isaac, and he begins to tremble violently. And Esau "cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry," and begs, "Bless me, even me also, my father." It's one of the saddest scenes in Genesis. Esau weeps aloud. Isaac gives him a lesser blessing, but the main blessing is gone. And Esau's grief turns to hatred. He plans to kill Jacob as soon as their father dies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is God's Choosing Fair?**

God said before the twins were born that the older would serve the younger. Paul quotes this in Romans 9 to show that God's choices depend on His mercy, not on what people do. Christians read Romans 9 in different ways. Some, often in the Reformed tradition, believe it shows that God chooses individuals for salvation according to His own purpose. Others, often in the Wesleyan or Arminian tradition, believe Paul is talking about God choosing nations and roles in history, Israel and Edom, rather than deciding individuals' eternal destinies, and that God's choices always leave room for human response. Both sides agree that God isn't unjust, that He's merciful, and that He's free to work through unexpected people. And notice that being chosen in Genesis never means being better. Jacob was chosen, and he was a cheat. Being chosen was about God's plan, not Jacob's merit.

REAL TALK **The Whole Family Messed Up**

Who's the bad guy in Genesis 27? Everybody. Isaac planned to bless his favorite secretly, even though God had said the older would serve the younger. Rebekah schemed and pushed her son to lie. Jacob deceived his blind father and used God's name to do it. Esau had already despised his birthright and now wanted the blessing anyway. And yet God's plan still goes forward. That doesn't mean God approves of lying. Jacob will spend the next twenty years reaping what he sowed, being deceived himself. But it does mean that God can work even through messed-up families. Including yours.

Rebekah hears about Esau's plan and sends Jacob away to her brother Laban in Haran, telling Isaac he needs to find a wife among her relatives. She thinks it'll only be a few days. She never sees her favorite son again.

Genesis adds a detail that shows how much this family is hurting. Esau has married two Hittite women, and they've been a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah. When Esau sees that his parents are unhappy with his wives, he goes and marries a daughter of Ishmael,

apparently trying to win their approval. It's a little heartbreaking. Esau is still trying to earn the blessing he lost. Many people live like that, trying to earn a parent's approval or God's approval by doing the right things, never feeling like it's enough.

> **REAL TALK** **Lying for a Good Cause?**
>
> Rebekah may have thought she was helping God. After all, God had said the older would serve the younger. But God didn't need her lies to keep His promise. Have you ever told yourself a lie was okay because your goal was good? Maybe you lied to protect a friend, or to avoid a fight, or to get something you thought you deserved. Genesis shows the cost. Rebekah lost her son. Jacob lost twenty years. Esau lost his brother. The family was torn apart. The end doesn't justify the means. God is able to keep His promises without our cheating. Our job is to trust Him and tell the truth.

Jacob sets out alone, running for his life with nothing but a staff. At sunset, he stops in the middle of nowhere, puts a stone under his head, and goes to sleep. And he dreams. "He dreamed and saw a stairway set upon the earth, and its top reached to heaven. Behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." At the top stands the LORD Himself. Remember the tower of Babel, where people tried to build their way up to heaven? Here, heaven comes down to earth, not because Jacob earned it, but as pure gift. And it comes to a liar on the run.

God speaks to Jacob and gives him the same promise He gave Abraham and Isaac: land, descendants as many as the dust of the earth, and a blessing for all the families of the earth through him. Then God adds a personal promise: "Behold, I am with you, and will keep you, wherever you go, and will bring you again into this land. For I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken of to you." Jacob deserved a lecture. He got a promise. That's what grace is: getting what you don't deserve. Jacob had done nothing to

earn this. He hadn't repented yet. He hadn't even prayed. God simply showed up and gave Jacob His presence and His promise. Grace usually comes first, and change follows after.

Jacob wakes up and says, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I didn't know it." He's afraid and amazed. "This is none other than God's house, and this is the gate of heaven." He sets up his stone pillow as a pillar, pours oil on it, and names the place Bethel, which means house of God. Then Jacob makes a vow that sounds a little like a bargain: if God will be with me and keep me safe and bring me home, then the LORD will be my God. Jacob still has a lot to learn. But God has started something in him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jacob's Ladder and Jesus**
>
> In John 1:51, Jesus tells Nathanael, "You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." That's a clear reference to Jacob's dream. Jesus is saying that He Himself is the stairway, the meeting place between heaven and earth. Jacob found the gate of heaven in a dream at Bethel. We find it in Jesus. You don't have to climb your way to God. He came down the stairway to you.

KEY VERSE

Behold, I am with you, and will keep you, wherever you go, and will bring you again into this land. For I will not leave you until I have done that which I have spoken of to you.

Genesis 28:15 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The servant prayed a very specific prayer and God answered. Is there a specific thing you need to ask God for right now?
2. Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. What are some things people your age are tempted to trade their future for?
3. Which character in Genesis 27 do you relate to most: Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, or Esau? Why?
4. God met Jacob when he was running away after doing wrong. What does that tell you about how God responds to people who've messed up?

TRY THIS *Find a quiet place to be alone with God this week. Read Genesis 28:10–22 and then write your own "Surely the LORD is in this place" prayer about a place in your everyday life where you want to notice God.*

CHAPTER 7

Wrestling with God

Genesis 29–36

Jacob left home a con artist on the run. He'll come back twenty years later with a limp, a new name, a huge family, and a very different heart. In between, he gets a taste of his own medicine. The deceiver gets deceived. The heel-grabber has to learn to hold on to God instead. These chapters are messy, full of rivalry, tears, and family drama that would fill a whole season of reality TV. But they're also about a God who doesn't let go of Jacob, even when Jacob keeps trying to run his own life.

Jacob arrives near Haran and finds a well with shepherds waiting around it. Then Rachel, his cousin, comes with her father's sheep. Jacob, apparently showing off, rolls the heavy stone away from the well by himself, waters her flock, kisses her, and bursts into tears. It's love at first sight. Rachel runs home to tell her father, Laban, who comes rushing out to welcome his nephew. (Remember how excited Laban was about the gold jewelry in chapter 24? He hasn't changed.)

After a month, Laban asks what Jacob wants for wages. Jacob knows exactly what he wants: Rachel. Laban had two daughters: Leah, the older, and Rachel. Genesis says "Leah's eyes were weak," which might mean they were soft or tender, or that she just wasn't considered as attractive. Rachel was beautiful. Jacob offers to work

seven years for Rachel. "Jacob served seven years for Rachel. They seemed to him but a few days, for the love he had for her." That's one of the most romantic lines in the Bible.

When the seven years are up, Laban throws a wedding feast. But that night, in the dark, with the bride veiled and probably after plenty of wine, Laban sends Leah in to Jacob instead of Rachel. "In the morning, behold, it was Leah!" Jacob is furious. "Why then have you deceived me?" The man who deceived his blind father in the dark has now been deceived in the dark. The younger brother who stole the older brother's blessing is told by Laban, it's not our custom to give the younger daughter before the older. Genesis doesn't need to say Jacob got what he deserved. You can feel it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Bride Prices and Marriage Customs**
>
> In the ancient Near East, a man usually paid a bride price to the bride's family. Jacob had nothing, so he paid in labor instead. Marriage customs were very different from today. Men sometimes married more than one wife, and wealthy women often brought servants who could become secondary wives. Genesis records these customs without endorsing them, and it shows how much pain they caused. Every polygamous family in Genesis is full of jealousy and heartbreak. Jesus pointed back to God's design in Genesis 2: one man and one woman, becoming one flesh (Matthew 19:4–6).

Laban agrees to give Jacob Rachel too, after Leah's wedding week, in exchange for seven more years of work. So Jacob ends up with two wives who are sisters, and he loves Rachel more. And here Genesis shows God's heart again: "The LORD saw that Leah was hated, and he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." The God who saw Hagar sees Leah.

Leah names her sons with her heartbreak written in their names. Reuben, because the LORD has seen my misery; surely my husband

will love me now. Simeon, because the LORD heard that I'm not loved. Levi, because now at last my husband will become attached to me. But it doesn't work. Jacob still doesn't love her. Then her fourth son is born, and something changes. She names him Judah and says, "This time I will praise the LORD." She stops trying to earn her husband's love and turns to God instead. And here's the amazing thing: King David, and eventually Jesus, will come from Judah, the son of the unloved wife.

> **REAL TALK** **When You Feel Unwanted**
>
> Leah spent years trying to make someone love her who didn't. Maybe you know what that feels like, with a parent, a friend, a crush, or a group you want to belong to. You can't make someone love you, and your worth doesn't depend on whether they do. Leah found something better when she turned to praise God. That doesn't mean the hurt disappeared. But she found her identity in the God who saw her. If you feel unwanted, God sees you. And if you're feeling hopeless or rejected, talk to someone you trust about it. You're not meant to carry it alone.

Meanwhile, Rachel is jealous of her sister. "Give me children, or else I will die," she tells Jacob. Jacob snaps at her: am I in the place of God? The sisters start a baby competition, giving their servants Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob as extra wives, then fighting over everything, even some mandrake plants that people believed helped fertility. Eleven sons and a daughter, Dinah, are born in this tangle of rivalry. Finally "God remembered Rachel," and she has a son, Joseph.

After Joseph's birth, Jacob wants to go home. But Laban has been cheating Jacob for years, changing his wages ten times. They make a deal that Jacob will keep the speckled and spotted animals, and Jacob uses a strange breeding method with striped branches. Genesis makes clear it wasn't Jacob's cleverness that made him rich,

though. God tells him in a dream that He has seen how Laban has treated him.

When Laban later accuses Jacob, Jacob finally explodes, and his speech gives us a glimpse of what those twenty years were really like. He worked through scorching heat by day and frost by night, losing sleep. When wild animals killed sheep, he paid for them himself. Laban changed his wages ten times. And Jacob says that if the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham, and "the fear of Isaac," hadn't been with him, Laban would have sent him away empty-handed. Jacob, the cheater, spent twenty years being cheated, and he learned to work hard and trust God for the outcome.

> **REAL TALK** **When Someone Treats You Unfairly**
>
> Maybe you have a boss who doesn't pay you fairly, a coach who plays favorites, or a teacher who seems to have it out for you. Jacob's years with Laban show that God sees unfair treatment, even when no one else does. Jacob kept working hard, and God took care of him. That doesn't mean you should just accept being mistreated. It's okay to speak up respectfully, and to ask a parent or trusted adult for help when something isn't right, especially if you're being cheated out of pay or treated in a way that's unsafe. But you can also trust that your hard work isn't wasted. Colossians 3:23 says to work at everything with all your heart, as working for the Lord.

So Jacob packs up his family and flocks and sneaks away while Laban is out shearing sheep. Rachel secretly steals her father's household gods. Laban chases them down. God warns Laban in a dream not to harm Jacob, but he searches the tents for his gods. Rachel hides them in her camel's saddle and sits on them, claiming she can't get up because she's having her period. It's a funny and pointed scene: the gods Laban worships can be stolen and sat on. They can't even protect themselves.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Household Gods**

The household gods Rachel stole (called teraphim in Hebrew) were small figurines, probably used for worship, protection, or fortune-telling. Some scholars once thought that, based on tablets from the ancient city of Nuzi, owning them could give someone a legal claim to the family inheritance, though more recent scholars question that. Either way, they show that Jacob's family hadn't fully left behind the idols of their culture. A few chapters later, Jacob has his household put away their foreign gods before they go to worship at Bethel.

Jacob and Laban finally make a covenant and set up a heap of stones as a witness. Laban says, "The LORD watch between me and you, when we are absent one from another." People sometimes put that line on friendship necklaces as a sweet saying. In context, it's more like: may God keep an eye on you, because I don't trust you. They part ways, and Jacob heads home.

But there's one huge problem waiting for Jacob there: Esau. The last time Jacob saw his brother, Esau was planning to kill him. Jacob sends messengers ahead, and they come back with terrifying news. Esau is coming to meet him, with four hundred men. Jacob is terrified. He divides his family into two camps, so if one is attacked, the other might escape.

Then he prays, maybe the first truly humble prayer we hear from him: "I am not worthy of the least of all the loving kindnesses, and of all the truth, which you have shown to your servant." He reminds God of His promise, and he admits he's afraid. "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau." Then he sends wave after wave of gifts ahead to Esau, hundreds of goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys, hoping to calm his anger.

Even before the wrestling match, God gives Jacob a sign. As he sets out, angels of God meet him, and Jacob names the place Mahanaim, which means two camps. Twenty years earlier, Jacob saw angels on the stairway at Bethel as he left the land. Now he sees them again as he comes back. God has been with him the whole time, just as He promised. But Jacob is still afraid. Knowing that God is with you doesn't always make the fear disappear at once. Sometimes you have to bring that fear to God in prayer, which is exactly what Jacob does next.

That night, Jacob sends everyone across the river Jabbok, and he's left alone. "Jacob was left alone, and wrestled with a man there until the breaking of the day." Who is this mysterious man? Jacob doesn't know at first. They wrestle all night, and neither wins. Finally the man touches Jacob's hip and wrenches it out of joint. And the man says, "Let me go, for the day breaks." Jacob says, "I won't let you go unless you bless me."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Was the Wrestler?**
>
> Genesis calls him a man. Hosea 12:4 says Jacob struggled with an angel. Jacob himself says he saw God face to face. Many Christians have understood this as another appearance of God in human form, perhaps the Son of God before He became Jesus. Jewish tradition has often seen him as an angel, sometimes the guardian angel of Esau. Whatever the details, Jacob knew that in wrestling with this man, he was wrestling with God.

Then the man asks a strange question: "What is your name?" The last time Jacob was asked that, by his blind father, he lied and said Esau. Now he has to tell the truth: Jacob. Heel-grabber. Deceiver. It's a confession. And the man says, "Your name will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed." Israel probably means he struggles with God or

God struggles. From now on, this is the name of the whole nation that will come from Jacob.

Jacob names the place Peniel, which means face of God, "for he said, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.'" As the sun rises, Jacob limps across the river. He's been blessed and wounded at the same time. He'll walk with a limp for the rest of his life, a constant reminder that he didn't win by being strong. He won by holding on.

REAL TALK **Wrestling with God**

Have you ever wrestled with God? Maybe with doubts, or with something He's asking you to do, or with a prayer He hasn't answered. Jacob's story shows that wrestling with God isn't the opposite of faith. Sometimes it's what faith looks like. Jacob didn't walk away from the fight; he held on and asked for a blessing. And God didn't crush him; He gave him a new name. If you're struggling with God right now, don't let go. Keep praying, keep asking, keep reading. You might come out limping, but you'll come out blessed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jacob's Twelve Sons**

It can be hard to keep track of Jacob's family, so here it is. Leah's sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun (plus a daughter, Dinah). Bilhah's sons (Rachel's servant): Dan and Naphtali. Zilpah's sons (Leah's servant): Gad and Asher. Rachel's sons: Joseph and Benjamin. These twelve sons became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel, although Joseph's tribe was later split into two, Ephraim and Manasseh, and Levi became a tribe of priests without its own territory. Jesus chose twelve apostles, a sign that He was gathering and renewing God's people. And in Revelation 21, the names of the twelve tribes are written on the gates of the new Jerusalem.

The next morning, Jacob sees Esau coming with his four hundred men. Jacob goes ahead of his family and bows to the ground seven times as he approaches his brother. And then something completely unexpected happens. "Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on

his neck, kissed him, and they wept." Twenty years of fear, guilt, and anger melt into tears. Jesus may have had this scene in mind when He told the story of the prodigal son, where the father runs to meet his son, embraces him, and kisses him (Luke 15:20).

Jacob says to Esau, "I have seen your face, as one sees the face of God." The night before, Jacob saw God's face and lived. Now he sees grace in his brother's face. Forgiveness from someone you've wronged is one of the clearest pictures of God's grace you'll ever see.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **The Story of Dinah**
>
> Genesis 34 tells a painful story. Jacob's daughter Dinah goes out to visit the women of the land, and Shechem, a local prince, "took her, lay with her, and humbled her." That means he sexually assaulted her. Afterward he wants to marry her. Her brothers are furious, and Simeon and Levi trick the men of the city and then kill them all in revenge. Jacob is mostly worried about his reputation. Notice who never gets to speak in this chapter: Dinah. Genesis tells her story honestly, and later Jacob condemns Simeon and Levi's violence (Genesis 49:5–7). What happened to Dinah was wrong, and so was the brothers' massacre. If you have ever been sexually assaulted or pressured, or if someone has touched you in a way that wasn't okay, it is not your fault, no matter what you were wearing, where you went, or who it was. You deserve to be heard. Please tell a trusted adult, and in the United States you can call the RAINN National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-4673 or the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453. You don't have to be silent like Dinah was made to be.

After Shechem, God tells Jacob to go back to Bethel, where He first met him. Jacob tells his whole household, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments." They bury the idols under a tree, and they go up to

worship. At Bethel, God appears again, confirms Jacob's new name, Israel, and repeats the promise to Abraham.

But the chapter ends with grief. Rachel dies giving birth to her second son. As she's dying, she names him Ben-Oni, son of my sorrow. Jacob renames him Benjamin, son of my right hand. Jacob buries her on the road to Bethlehem. Centuries later, the prophet Jeremiah pictured Rachel weeping for her children as Israel was taken into exile (Jeremiah 31:15), and Matthew 2:18 applies those words to the grieving mothers of Bethlehem after King Herod's massacre, when Jesus was a baby. Rachel's tomb is still a place of prayer today, especially for women who long for children. Not long after, Isaac dies, and Jacob and Esau bury him together, just like Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham. Chapter 36 lists Esau's descendants, the Edomites. God kept His promise to Esau too, and blessed him with a large family and land of his own.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Edom**

Esau's descendants, the Edomites, lived in the rugged mountains southeast of the Dead Sea. Their land included the red sandstone cliffs where the famous city of Petra was later carved by a people called the Nabataeans. (Edom means red, which fits both the red stew and the red rock.) Israel and Edom, the descendants of the twin brothers, fought for centuries. The short book of Obadiah is entirely about Edom. And here's a surprising twist: King Herod the Great, who tried to kill the baby Jesus, was an Idumean, a descendant of the Edomites. The rivalry between Jacob and Esau echoed all the way to Bethlehem. Yet God's plan has always been bigger than old rivalries. Amos 9:12 pictures a day when even Edom is included among the nations called by God's name, and James quotes that hope in Acts 15 as the gospel spreads to the Gentiles.

KEY VERSE

He said, "Your name will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Genesis 32:28 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Jacob the deceiver was deceived by Laban. Have you ever experienced something like that, on either side? What did you learn?
2. Leah named Judah saying, "This time I will praise the LORD." What changed in her heart? What would it look like for you to make that change?
3. What do you think it means to wrestle with God? Have you ever done it?
4. Esau forgave Jacob after twenty years. Is there someone you need to forgive, or someone you need to ask for forgiveness?

TRY THIS *Jacob reconciled with his brother. This week, take one concrete step toward healing a broken relationship: send a message, apologize, or have a conversation you've been avoiding. If that relationship is unsafe, talk to a trusted adult about it instead.*

CHAPTER 8

From the Pit to the Palace

Genesis 37–41

Joseph's story is one of the greatest stories ever told. It has a favorite son, jealous brothers, a pit, a fake death, slavery, temptation, a false accusation, prison, dreams, and a rise to power that seems impossible. It's so well told that it reads almost like a novel, and Broadway turned it into a musical. But underneath the drama is one big truth that runs through the whole story: God is at work even when He seems absent. In fact, in Joseph's story God never appears in a vision or speaks out loud even once. He works quietly, behind the scenes.

Joseph is seventeen when the story opens, about the age of a high school junior. He's helping his older brothers with the flocks, and he brings back a bad report about them to their father. Already that's not a great start. Then Genesis says, "Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a tunic of many colors." That famous coat might have been long-sleeved or richly decorated; either way, it was the kind of thing a prince would wear, not someone who worked in the fields. It was a walking symbol of favoritism. "His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, and they hated him."

Then Joseph has two dreams. In the first, he and his brothers are tying up bundles of grain, and their bundles bow down to his. In the

second, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. And Joseph, maybe naively, maybe arrogantly, tells his family about both dreams. His brothers hate him even more. Even his father scolds him. But Jacob keeps the matter in mind.

REAL TALK **Don't Be That Guy**

Let's be honest. Teenage Joseph was kind of annoying. He tattled on his brothers, wore his special coat around them, and told them his dreams about ruling over them. That doesn't mean they were right to hate him, and it definitely doesn't mean they were right to do what they did next. But Joseph needed to grow in humility, and God used the hard years ahead to do it. If God has given you gifts or a special calling, that's great. Just don't use it to lord it over people. The dreams came true, but only after Joseph learned to serve.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shechem and Dothan**

Joseph's journey to find his brothers took him first to Shechem, about fifty miles north of Hebron, and then to Dothan, another fifteen miles beyond. That's several days' walk alone for a seventeen-year-old. Dothan sat near a major trade route connecting the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan, with the coast and Egypt, which explains why a caravan of traders carrying spices, balm, and myrrh happened to pass by. Archaeologists have found ancient cisterns in the area, bottle-shaped pits carved into the rock to store rainwater. When empty, they would have made a perfect prison: too deep and too narrow at the top to climb out of.

One day Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers, who are pasturing the flocks far away. They see him coming in the distance, maybe recognizing the coat. "Behold, this dreamer comes," they say. "Come now therefore, and let's kill him." Then they'll tell their father a wild animal ate him. "We will see what will become of his dreams."

Reuben, the oldest, talks them out of killing him and suggests throwing him into an empty cistern instead, planning to rescue him later. So they strip off his coat and throw him into the pit. And then, in one of the coldest moments in the Bible, they sit down to eat lunch. Years later, they'll remember that Joseph was begging them for mercy from the pit, and they wouldn't listen (Genesis 42:21).

A caravan of traders comes by, heading to Egypt. Judah says, why kill him? Let's sell him. So they sell their brother for twenty pieces of silver. Interestingly, twenty shekels of silver matches what ancient records suggest was the typical price of a slave in the early second millennium BC; the price rose over the following centuries. It's one of many small details that fit the story's ancient setting. Then they kill a goat, dip Joseph's coat in its blood, and send it to their father. Jacob recognizes it: "It is my son's tunic. An evil animal has devoured him." He tears his clothes and refuses to be comforted. Remember how Jacob deceived his father with goatskins and his brother's clothes? Now his sons deceive him with a goat's blood and their brother's coat.

SAFETY NOTE **When Siblings or Peers Turn Violent**

Joseph's brothers didn't just tease him. They assaulted him, threw him in a pit, sold him into slavery, and lied about it. Jealousy that's allowed to grow can turn into real violence, and it happens in families, teams, and friend groups today. Bullying, beating up, threatening, or ganging up on someone is never okay, even if that person is annoying or the favorite. If you're being hurt or threatened by siblings, classmates, or anyone else, tell a trusted adult. If you're the one tempted to join in when others gang up on someone, be a Reuben, or better, someone who stops it completely.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Judah and Tamar**

Genesis 38 interrupts Joseph's story to tell a story about Judah. Judah marries a Canaanite woman and has three sons. The oldest marries a woman

named Tamar but dies because of his wickedness. By custom, the next brother was supposed to give Tamar a child so the family line would continue, but he selfishly refuses and dies too. Judah promises Tamar his third son when he grows up, but then breaks his promise and leaves her a widow with no future, which in that culture meant poverty and shame. So Tamar takes matters into her own hands. She disguises herself, and Judah, thinking she's a prostitute, sleeps with her and leaves his seal, cord, and staff as a pledge of payment. When Tamar turns up pregnant, Judah orders her to be burned. Then she produces his seal, cord, and staff. And Judah admits, "She is more righteous than I, because I didn't give her to Shelah, my son." It's an uncomfortable story. But it's the beginning of Judah's change, the first time he admits he's wrong. And Tamar's son Perez becomes an ancestor of King David, and of Jesus. Tamar is one of only a handful of women named in Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1.

SAFETY NOTE **Tamar's Story**

Tamar was mistreated by the men who had power over her. One used her, one broke his promise, and one was ready to have her killed for something he had done too. The Bible tells her story honestly and calls her more righteous than the man who wronged her. Being used, exploited, or treated as if you don't matter is wrong. If anyone is pressuring you sexually, exploiting you, or offering you money or gifts for anything sexual, that is abuse, and it's not your fault. Tell a parent or trusted adult. In the United States, you can also call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453 or the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Joseph is sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. And here comes the theme of the whole chapter: "The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man." Joseph is a slave in a foreign country, far from everyone he loves. But God is with him. Joseph works so faithfully that Potiphar puts him in charge of his whole household, and God blesses Potiphar's house because of Joseph.

Joseph is also handsome, and Potiphar's wife notices. Day after day, she tries to get Joseph to sleep with her. And day after day, Joseph refuses. "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Notice Joseph's reasoning. He knows it would betray his master's trust. But most of all, it would be a sin against God. One day, when no one else is in the house, she grabs his cloak and says, "Lie with me!" And Joseph does the wisest thing possible: he runs. "He left his garment in her hand, and ran outside." For the second time, Joseph loses a piece of clothing because of someone else's sin.

> **REAL TALK** **Run**
>
> Joseph's response to temptation was simple: run. Second Timothy 2:22 says, "Flee from youthful lusts." Sometimes the best way to deal with temptation isn't to stand and fight. It's to get out of there. That might mean leaving a party, closing an app, deleting a contact, or not putting yourself in a situation where you know you'll be tempted. Running isn't weakness. It's wisdom. Also notice something important: this was sexual harassment by a person with power over Joseph. If someone with power over you, a boss, coach, teacher, or anyone else, pressures you sexually, it's not your fault. Get away if you can, and tell a trusted adult right away.

Potiphar's wife is humiliated and furious. She screams and accuses Joseph of attacking her, holding up his cloak as evidence. Potiphar is enraged and throws Joseph into the king's prison. Joseph did the right thing, and he got punished for it. Sometimes that happens. Doing right doesn't always make life easier in the short run.

Interestingly, Potiphar doesn't have Joseph executed, which was the normal penalty for a slave accused of attacking his master's wife. Some readers wonder whether Potiphar didn't fully believe his wife's story. Either way, God's protection is quietly at work again, even in what looks like a disaster.

REAL TALK **Integrity When No One Is Watching**

When Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph, Genesis notes that none of the household servants were there. No one would have known. Joseph's integrity didn't depend on who was watching, because he knew God was always watching, and more importantly, because he loved God. Integrity means being the same person in private that you are in public, the same person with your phone screen turned away as with it turned toward your parents. It's built in small choices: turning in the extra change, not copying homework, not saying behind someone's back what you wouldn't say to their face. Joseph's big moment of integrity came after years of small ones.

"But the LORD was with Joseph." Even in prison. The jailer puts Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners. Again, Joseph doesn't sit around feeling sorry for himself. He works faithfully wherever God puts him, whether it's a palace, a household, or a prison cell.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Egypt in Joseph's Day**

Joseph's story has lots of authentic Egyptian details. Egyptians shaved (that's why Joseph shaves before meeting Pharaoh), they embalmed their dead, they valued dream interpretation, and they had officials with titles like chief cupbearer and chief baker. Some scholars connect Joseph's time with the Hyksos, a foreign people from Canaan who ruled parts of Egypt around 1650–1550 BC, which might explain how a foreigner could rise to power. Others place him earlier. The famous Story of Two Brothers, an Egyptian tale, also includes a married woman who falsely accuses a young man. Historians debate how to date Joseph, but the Egyptian setting rings true.

Two of Pharaoh's officials end up in prison with Joseph: the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. One night, they both have disturbing dreams. Joseph notices they look upset and asks why. They say there's no one to interpret their dreams. Joseph answers, "Don't interpretations belong to God? Please tell it to me." Joseph interprets both dreams. In three days, the cupbearer will get his job

back, but the baker will be executed. Both come true. Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh. But the cupbearer forgets. For two more years, Joseph waits in prison.

Think about how easy it would have been for Joseph to become bitter. He'd been betrayed by his brothers, falsely accused by his master's wife, and now forgotten by a man he'd helped. Yet when we next see him, he's still pointing people to God. Bitterness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick. Joseph chose a different path, not by pretending he wasn't hurt, but by trusting God with his story while he waited.

REAL TALK **Forgotten**

Two years. Joseph had done everything right, and he was still stuck. Maybe you know what it feels like to be forgotten, by friends, by people who promised to help, or even, it seems, by God. Joseph's story is a reminder that being forgotten by people doesn't mean being forgotten by God. Psalm 105:19 says that God's word tested Joseph until the time came. God's timing is rarely as fast as we want, but it's never late.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Dreams in the Ancient World**

In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, people took dreams very seriously. They believed dreams could be messages from the gods, and experts wrote dream manuals that listed dream images and their meanings. One Egyptian papyrus, known as the Chester Beatty dream book, contains a long list of such interpretations. Pharaoh's magicians and wise men would have studied these manuals. That's what makes Joseph different. He doesn't use a manual or a technique. He says interpretations belong to God. In the Bible, God sometimes speaks through dreams, especially in Genesis and Daniel, and to Joseph the husband of Mary in Matthew. But Scripture also warns against people who claim to speak for God through their dreams when He hasn't spoken (Jeremiah 23:25–28). Dreams aren't a substitute for God's Word.

Then Pharaoh has two dreams. Seven fat cows come out of the Nile and are eaten by seven skinny, ugly cows. Seven healthy heads of grain are swallowed by seven thin, scorched ones. None of Pharaoh's magicians or wise men can interpret them. And suddenly the cupbearer remembers Joseph.

Joseph is rushed out of prison, shaved, given new clothes, and brought before Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world. Pharaoh says he's heard Joseph can interpret dreams. And Joseph, who once bragged about his own dreams, answers, "It isn't in me. God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace." Prison has humbled him. He points to God, not himself.

Joseph explains that both dreams mean the same thing. Seven years of great abundance are coming, followed by seven years of severe famine. Then he gives Pharaoh a plan: find a wise man, put him in charge of collecting a fifth of the harvest during the good years, and store it for the famine. Pharaoh looks around and asks, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?" And he puts Joseph in charge of all Egypt. Only Pharaoh himself is greater.

In one day, Joseph goes from prisoner to prime minister. Pharaoh gives him his signet ring, fine linen clothes (a third garment, this time given in honor), a gold chain, and a chariot. People shout "Bow the knee!" as he passes. Joseph is thirty years old. Thirteen years have passed since his brothers threw him in the pit.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Joseph's Egyptian Life**
>
> Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-Paneah, which may mean something like God speaks and he lives, and a wife named Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. On was the city the Greeks later called Heliopolis, city of the sun, the center of Egypt's worship of the sun god Ra, near modern Cairo. So Joseph is completely woven into Egyptian high

society, with an Egyptian name, an Egyptian wife, Egyptian clothes, and Egyptian language. And yet he remains faithful to the God of his fathers, and he gives his sons Hebrew names that praise God. Daniel would face a similar challenge in Babylon centuries later. Like Joseph, you may have to live in a culture that doesn't share your faith. You can take part in it, and even serve it well, without losing who you are.

Joseph marries an Egyptian woman named Asenath and has two sons. He names the first Manasseh, because "God has made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house." He names the second Ephraim, because "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." Notice that phrase: the land of my affliction. Joseph didn't pretend the pain never happened. But God made him fruitful right there, in the place that hurt.

When the seven good years come, Joseph gathers so much grain that it's like the sand of the sea, and they stop measuring because it's beyond measure. Then the famine hits, and it spreads across the whole region. All the world comes to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph. The boy his brothers tried to get rid of is now the one person who can save them, and save the world.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Joseph and Jesus**

Christians have long noticed how many ways Joseph's story points ahead to Jesus. Both were loved by their fathers. Both were rejected by their own brothers. Both were sold for pieces of silver. Both were falsely accused and suffered though they were innocent. Both were counted among criminals; Joseph was in prison with two men, one of whom was restored and one condemned, and Jesus was crucified between two criminals, one of whom was promised paradise. Both were raised from the lowest place to the highest, at the right hand of the king. Both forgave those who had wronged them, and both became the source of life and bread for the world. Genesis never says Joseph is a prophecy of Jesus, and it's important not to force every

detail. But the pattern of suffering first, then glory, which Jesus explained to His disciples in Luke 24:26, is written all over Joseph's life.

KEY VERSE

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man.
He was in the house of his master the Egyptian.

Genesis 39:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How do you think favoritism shaped Joseph and his brothers? Where do you see jealousy causing damage today?
2. Joseph ran from temptation. What are some situations where running away is the wisest choice for you?
3. Joseph was faithful in a pit, in Potiphar's house, and in prison. What would it look like for you to be faithful where you are right now?
4. How did Joseph change between age seventeen and age thirty? What do you think God was teaching him?

TRY THIS *Joseph named his son Ephraim because God made him fruitful in the land of his affliction. Write down one hard thing you've gone through, and then write down one good thing that has grown out of it, or ask God to show you one.*

CHAPTER 9

God Meant It for Good

Genesis 42–50

The famine Joseph predicted comes, and it's severe, not only in Egypt but in Canaan too. Back home, Jacob hears there's grain in Egypt, and he sends ten of his sons to buy some. He keeps Benjamin, Rachel's only other son, at home. He's not about to lose another son of Rachel's.

The brothers arrive in Egypt and bow down before the governor, with their faces to the ground. They have no idea it's Joseph. More than twenty years have passed. He's dressed like an Egyptian, speaking Egyptian through an interpreter. But Joseph recognizes them immediately, and he remembers his dreams. The bundles of grain are bowing down.

If you count, Joseph weeps at least seven times in these chapters: when he hears his brothers admit their guilt, when he sees Benjamin, when he reveals himself, when he embraces Benjamin, when he meets his father, when his father dies, and when his brothers ask for forgiveness. The most powerful man in Egypt is also one of the most tender men in the Bible. Being strong and being able to cry aren't opposites.

Joseph could have taken revenge right then. Instead, he tests them. He accuses them of being spies, and throws them in prison for three

days. Then he lets them go home with grain, but keeps Simeon as a hostage until they bring their youngest brother back to prove they're telling the truth. And the brothers, not knowing Joseph can understand them, say to one another, "We are certainly guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us, and we wouldn't listen." Joseph turns away and weeps.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why All the Tests?**
>
> Why didn't Joseph just tell his brothers who he was right away? He may have wanted to see whether they had changed. Would they abandon another brother, Simeon in prison or Benjamin, the new favorite, the way they abandoned him? He may also have been struggling with his own feelings, wanting reconciliation but not ready to trust them yet. Forgiveness and trust aren't the same thing. You can forgive someone and still need time to see whether they've really changed. Joseph's tests gave his brothers a chance to show that they had.

At home, the brothers find that their money has been returned in their grain sacks, and they're terrified. When they tell Jacob that the governor demands to see Benjamin, Jacob refuses. Joseph is gone, Simeon is gone, and now you want to take Benjamin? But the famine gets worse. Finally Judah, the same brother who suggested selling Joseph, offers himself as a guarantee for Benjamin's safety. If he doesn't bring Benjamin back, he'll bear the blame forever. Judah is changing.

The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin, double the money, and gifts. Joseph invites them to a feast at his house. When he sees Benjamin, his little brother, he's so overcome that he rushes out to weep in private. Then he washes his face, comes back, and seats them in birth order, to their astonishment, and gives Benjamin five times as much food as everyone else. Will they be jealous of the new

favorite? Twenty years earlier, a father's favoritism had driven them to violence. Now Joseph deliberately shows favoritism to see how they'll respond. Genesis says they drank and were merry with him. No grumbling, no plotting. Something has changed in them.

> **REAL TALK** **Has Someone Really Changed?**
>
> Maybe someone has hurt you and now says they're sorry. How do you know if they've really changed? Joseph's tests give some clues. Real change shows up over time, not just in words. It shows up when the person faces the same temptation again and chooses differently. It shows up when they take responsibility without making excuses, as the brothers did when they said they were guilty. And it shows up when they care about the people they once hurt. You don't owe anyone instant trust, especially if they hurt you badly. If you're not sure whether a relationship is safe, ask a trusted adult to help you think it through.

Then comes the final test. Joseph has his silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack. The brothers leave, and Joseph's steward chases them down and finds the cup. Benjamin will have to stay as Joseph's slave; the rest can go home. This is the brothers' chance to do exactly what they did to Joseph: abandon Rachel's son and go home free. Instead, they all tear their clothes and go back to the city with him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Silver Cup**
>
> Joseph's steward tells the brothers that the cup is the one his master uses for divination. In Egypt, some fortune-tellers poured water or oil into a cup and read the patterns to predict the future. Did Joseph actually practice divination? Probably not; Genesis has already shown that he gave God all the credit for interpreting dreams, and later Israel's law forbade divination (Deuteronomy 18:10). He may have simply been playing the part of an Egyptian official to keep his disguise. Either way, the cup is the bait in the final test, and the brothers pass.

Then Judah steps forward and gives the longest speech in Genesis. He tells Joseph about their father, how he lost one son he loved and how losing Benjamin would kill him. And then he makes an offer: "Now therefore, please let your servant stay instead of the boy, my lord's slave; and let the boy go up with his brothers." The man who once sold his brother into slavery now offers to become a slave so his brother can go free. Judah has completely changed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Judah, a Picture of Christ**

Judah offering himself in Benjamin's place is one of the most moving moments in Genesis, and many Christians see it as a picture of what Jesus would do. Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5), came from Judah's family line. And like Judah, He offered Himself in place of others. But where Judah offered to become a slave, Jesus went even further: He gave His life. Genesis 49:10 also promises that a king will come from Judah, and the scepter will not depart from him. Judah's transformation shows that God can change even someone who did terrible things.

Joseph can't hold it in anymore. He sends all the Egyptians out of the room and weeps so loudly the Egyptians hear it, and so does Pharaoh's household. Then he says, in Hebrew, "I am Joseph! Does my father still live?" His brothers are speechless and terrified. The brother they sold is now the most powerful man in Egypt, and their lives are in his hands.

But Joseph says, "Come near to me, please." And then he says one of the most profound things in the Bible: "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now don't be grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph doesn't pretend what they did wasn't real. He names it: you sold me. But he sees something bigger. "So now it wasn't you who sent me here, but God."

REAL TALK **Forgiveness Isn't Pretending**

Joseph's forgiveness didn't mean pretending nothing happened. He named what his brothers did. He tested them to see if they had changed. And he didn't forgive them because they deserved it, but because he trusted that God was bigger than their evil. Forgiveness means letting go of your right to get even and leaving justice in God's hands. It doesn't mean saying abuse was okay, and it doesn't mean you have to keep trusting or spending time with someone who's still hurting you. If someone has seriously hurt you, talk with a trusted adult about how to stay safe while you work through forgiveness. It's often a long process, not a single moment.

Joseph sends his brothers home loaded with gifts and Egyptian wagons to bring Jacob and their families down to Egypt. When they tell Jacob that Joseph is alive and ruling Egypt, he doesn't believe them at first. His heart goes numb. But when he sees the wagons, his spirit revives. "Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

On the way, Jacob stops at Beersheba to worship, and God speaks to him in a vision at night, the only time God speaks directly in the Joseph story. "I am God, the God of your father. Don't be afraid to go down into Egypt, for there I will make of you a great nation. I will go down with you into Egypt. I will also surely bring you up again." So seventy members of Jacob's family move to Egypt. Remember the number seventy from the Table of Nations in Genesis 10? Israel is a little picture of the whole world, being saved from famine through one man.

When Jacob arrives, Joseph rides out in his chariot to meet him, throws his arms around his father, and weeps for a long time. Jacob says that now he can die in peace, because he has seen Joseph's face. Joseph introduces his father to Pharaoh, and Jacob, a shepherd from Canaan, blesses the most powerful king on earth.

Think about that. Pharaoh had the palaces, the armies, and the gold. Jacob had a limp and a long list of regrets. But Jacob carried God's blessing, and the promise to Abraham said that through his family all nations would be blessed. Here it's happening in a small way: an old Hebrew shepherd blessing the king of Egypt, whose country had been saved through Jacob's son. Pharaoh asks how old he is, and Jacob gives a sad, honest answer: "The years of my pilgrimage are one hundred thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and evil." He's had a hard life, much of it his own doing.

REAL TALK **Pilgrims**

Jacob called his life a pilgrimage. Abraham called himself a stranger and a foreigner. None of the patriarchs ever owned more than a burial plot in the promised land. Hebrews 11:13 says they all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them from far away, admitting that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Christians have always seen themselves that way too. This world is good, and we're called to love it and care for it, but it isn't yet our final home. If you sometimes feel like you don't quite fit in, like you're made for something more, you're in good company. You're a pilgrim too, on your way home.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Goshen and the Famine Policy**

Pharaoh settles Jacob's family in Goshen, fertile land in the Nile Delta, good for flocks. Meanwhile, as the famine drags on, Joseph sells grain to the Egyptians in exchange for their money, then their livestock, then their land, until most of the land belongs to Pharaoh and the people pay a fifth of their harvest. The Egyptians thank Joseph for saving their lives. Some modern readers find this troubling, since Joseph concentrated enormous power in Pharaoh's hands, and that power will later be used to enslave Israel in Exodus. Genesis doesn't say whether this policy was right or wrong. It's one of those places where it's worth thinking carefully and discussing honestly.

Before Jacob dies, he adopts Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own. And once again, the younger son gets the greater blessing: Jacob crosses his arms and puts his right hand on Ephraim, the younger. Joseph tries to correct him, but Jacob knows what he's doing. Jacob, who stole a blessing by pretending in his blindness, now gives one with full knowledge in his. He blesses them in the name of "the God who has fed me all my life long to this day." The shepherd who spent his life wrestling has come to see God as his Shepherd.

Then Jacob gathers all twelve sons and speaks over each of them, a mixture of blessings and warnings that look ahead to the twelve tribes of Israel. Reuben loses his place as firstborn. Simeon and Levi are condemned for their violence at Shechem. And Judah gets the royal promise: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs. The obedience of the peoples will be to him." Jewish and Christian readers alike have long read this as a promise of a coming king, the Messiah. The New Testament sees it fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of David from the tribe of Judah.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Twelve Tribes at a Glance**
>
> Jacob's last words in Genesis 49 are poetry, full of puns and images, and they're not all easy to understand. Here's a quick guide. Reuben is unstable as water and loses his place as firstborn because he slept with his father's concubine. Simeon and Levi are cursed for their anger, and scattered; later Simeon was absorbed into Judah, and Levi became the priestly tribe, so even a curse was turned toward blessing. Judah is a lion, and the royal line will come from him. Zebulun will live by the sea. Issachar is a strong donkey who will work hard. Dan will provide justice, but is also pictured as a snake by the road. Gad will be attacked but will strike back. Asher will have rich food. Naphtali is a doe let loose. Joseph is a fruitful vine by a spring, blessed by the

Mighty One of Jacob. Benjamin is a wolf, fierce and strong; the apostle Paul would later come from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).

Jacob dies, and Joseph throws himself on his father's face and weeps.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Embalming**

Joseph orders the Egyptian physicians to embalm his father, a process Genesis says took forty days, followed by seventy days of mourning. Egyptian mummification involved removing the internal organs, drying the body with a natural salt called natron, and wrapping it in linen. It was usually reserved for royalty and the wealthy, so embalming Jacob was a huge honor. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing much later, described the process and said it took seventy days in all. Egyptians did it because they believed the body was needed in the afterlife. Jacob and Joseph were embalmed for a more practical reason: so their bodies could be carried back to the promised land. The Egyptians mourn for him seventy days, and Joseph leads a huge procession to bury Jacob in the cave of Machpelah, alongside Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah, in the land God promised.

But with their father gone, Joseph's brothers get scared. "It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." They send a message claiming that Jacob had asked Joseph to forgive them, and then they come and throw themselves down before him and offer to be his slaves. And Joseph weeps again.

Then Joseph says the words that sum up the whole book of Genesis: "Don't be afraid, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to save many people alive." Joseph doesn't call evil good. What they did was evil. But God is so powerful and so good that He can take even the worst things people do and weave them into His plan to save. Then Joseph comforts them and speaks kindly to them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Where Was God in Joseph's Story?**

As we noticed earlier, God never appears to Joseph in a vision or speaks to him out loud. There are no burning bushes or wrestling matches. And yet Joseph sees God's hand in everything. Theologians call this providence: God's quiet, constant care and guidance of everything that happens, working through ordinary events, human choices, and even human sins, without being the author of evil. Most of your life will probably look more like Joseph's than like Moses' at the burning bush. You may never hear God's voice out loud. But you can look back, like Joseph did, and see His fingerprints. Keeping a journal of answered prayers and unexpected turns can help you notice them.

REAL TALK **Does Everything Happen for a Reason?**

People sometimes say everything happens for a reason in a way that can sound cold, especially to someone who's hurting. Joseph's words are different. He doesn't say the evil was good, or that his suffering didn't matter. He says God was at work even through it. Romans 8:28 says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." That doesn't mean everything that happens is good. It means God can bring good out of anything, and that He'll have the last word. It's okay to grieve and be angry about what's happened to you. And it's okay to hope that God isn't done yet.

Joseph lives to see his great-grandchildren. Before he dies, he makes his brothers promise something: "God will surely visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." And he makes them swear to carry his bones back to Canaan when that day comes. Hebrews 11:22 lists this as an act of faith. Joseph had all the power and wealth Egypt could offer, but his heart was in the promise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **From Genesis to Exodus**

Genesis ends with seventy people in Egypt, honored guests of Pharaoh. Exodus begins centuries later with a huge nation, now enslaved by a new king who didn't know Joseph. But the promises of Genesis are still at work. God

told Abraham that his descendants would be foreigners and slaves for four hundred years, and that afterward He would judge the nation they served and bring them out with great possessions (Genesis 15:13–14). That's exactly the story of Exodus. God told Abraham his descendants would be as many as the stars, and Exodus 1:7 says the Israelites multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty. God promised to give them the land, and Exodus is the start of the journey home. If Genesis is the book of promises, Exodus is where God starts keeping them in a big way.

REAL TALK **Grief in Genesis**

Genesis is full of funerals. Abraham weeps for Sarah. Jacob mourns Rachel on the road to Bethlehem. Jacob refuses to be comforted for Joseph. Joseph throws himself on his dead father and weeps, and a whole nation mourns for seventy days. People of faith in Genesis don't pretend death doesn't hurt. They cry, sometimes loudly, and the Bible honors their tears. If you've lost someone you love, a grandparent, a friend, a pet, or a parent, it's okay to grieve hard and for a long time. Jesus Himself wept at His friend's tomb (John 11:35). If grief feels too heavy, or it's not getting any lighter, talk to a parent, pastor, school counselor, or other trusted adult. You don't have to grieve alone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Genesis in One Breath**

Here's the whole book in a few sentences. God made a good world and made people in His image to live with Him and care for it. People chose to trust a lie instead of God, and sin and death spread, through murder, violence, the flood, and Babel. But God didn't give up. He chose one family, Abraham's, and promised to bless the whole world through them. Through barren wives, scheming brothers, a stolen blessing, a wrestling match, a pit, and a prison, God kept His promise. Genesis ends with that family alive but far from home, waiting. The rest of the Bible tells how God brings them home, and how, through Abraham's offspring, Jesus, He opens the way home for everyone.

The very last verse of Genesis says, "So Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old, and they embalmed him, and he was put in a

coffin in Egypt." The book that began with God creating life in a garden ends with a coffin in a foreign land. It's a cliffhanger. Will God keep His promise? Will Abraham's family ever go home? Hundreds of years later, in Exodus 13:19, Moses carries Joseph's bones out of Egypt. God keeps His promises. He always does.

REAL TALK **You Can Change**

Judah's story might be the most hopeful one in Genesis. He came up with the idea of selling his brother. He broke his promise to Tamar and was ready to have her killed. And yet by the end, he's the brother who offers his own life for Benjamin, and he receives the royal blessing. People can change. That includes people who've done really wrong things, and it includes you. Your worst moment doesn't have to be the end of your story. God specializes in rewriting stories, and the family line of Jesus runs straight through people like Judah, Tamar, and Jacob. If you've done something you're deeply ashamed of, talk to God, talk to a trusted adult, and take the next right step. God isn't finished with you.

KEY VERSE

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to save many people alive, as is happening today.

Genesis 50:20 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Joseph tested his brothers before revealing who he was? Was that fair?
2. Judah went from selling his brother to offering himself in his brother's place. What do you think changed him?
3. How is forgiveness different from pretending something didn't happen? How is it different from trusting someone again?
4. Think of something hard in your life. How might Genesis 50:20 change the way you see it, even if you can't see the good yet?

TRY THIS *Read Genesis 45 and Genesis 50:15–21 slowly. Then write a short letter to God about someone who has hurt you, telling Him honestly how you feel and asking Him to help you begin to forgive. You don't have to send it to anyone else.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Genesis begins with a garden and ends with a coffin in Egypt. Joseph dies, and his body is placed in a coffin, waiting. The promises God made are still open. Someone from the woman's offspring will crush the serpent (3:15). Through Abraham's family, every people on earth will be blessed (12:3). A ruler will come from Judah (49:10). Genesis leaves you asking: who? when? how?

Jewish readers have long read these promises as God's commitment to Israel, and many have looked for a future Messiah in them, in a variety of ways. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed the answer had arrived. Paul says that when God promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him, He was announcing the gospel in advance (Galatians 3:8). John begins his Gospel with In the beginning, and says that all things were made through Jesus (John 1:1–3). Paul calls Jesus a second Adam, who undid what the first Adam did (Romans 5:12–19). And Christians have seen in Isaac carrying the wood up the mountain, and in Joseph, rejected by his brothers and raised up to save lives, pictures of what Jesus would do.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, in His image, and He loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all turned away.

Ever since the garden, we've all gone our own way instead of God's, just like Adam and Eve. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus came for you.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus, the way Abraham trusted God's promise.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You for making me in Your image. Help me trust Your promises, even when they seem impossible, like Abraham did. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Genesis straight through, a few chapters a day. Then read Exodus, where Joseph's family becomes a nation and God rescues them from slavery.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Remember who made you. Genesis says you're made in God's image. Start each day by thanking Him for that, and treat others as people who bear His image too.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Genesis was written so that every generation could know where they came from and who God is. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Genesis is right, you're not an accident. You were made on purpose, by a God who keeps His promises.

> *We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.*
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> **Romans 8:28 (WEB)**