

TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

By Faith

WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

MARCH 2021

Powerful Prayers of a Gap Woman

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“There is nothing in your life that is beyond His control. We can bring every need, no matter how desperate, to Him.”



Do you know a gap woman? Someone who devotedly stands in the gap for her family, praying fervently on their behalf? In 2 Kings,

chapter 4, we meet one such woman.

This woman lived in Shunem, a town in the Jezreel Valley. Scripture tells us she was a woman of significant social standing, but she privately struggled with infertility. She and her husband had invited the prophet Elisha to their home for a meal. They even furnished a room for him, so he could stay when he passed through town (v. 10). To thank them, this prophet asked God to open the woman's womb. And, despite her age, the woman gave birth to a son.

Then tragedy struck. One day the child was with his father in the fields (v. 18). The boy cried out to his dad saying, “My head! My head!” (v. 19). The father asked his servant to take the child to his mother. I can imagine her holding her little boy on her lap, this child she had wanted for so long. We don't know what was wrong—some think he had sunstroke or a brain aneurysm. But this woman's

“And the Lord heard this.”

only son died in her arms. The Shunammite woman had done all she could, but even so, her child died. Mothers will do whatever they can for their children based on their human abilities. But gap women go to God in faith for the supernatural. Verse 21 tells us the Shunammite woman laid her son on Elisha's bed, shut the door, and went after the prophet. She knew her son had died, but she was getting ready for a resurrection. I don't want to give away the end of the story; but what I want you to know is that, through prayer, you have direct access to the throne of God. There is nothing in your life that is beyond His control. We can bring every need, no matter how desperate, to Him.

Are you in a situation where you've done everything you can? You need the supernatural. When we've done everything we can, we need to carry our sons or daughters to God. Some of the greatest prayer warriors I know are mothers who are fiercely interceding on behalf of their family. But all of us, men and women, can stand in the gap for those we love, bringing them before our God who knows, hears, and has the power to change lives! ■

Male and Female

by Dr. John Koessler

“Sin has confused contemporary thinking about male and female categories so that many today feel that these distinctions should be done away with.”

When Adam and Eve were created, God made them male and female (Gen. 1:27). This differentiation is not unique to humans but is shared with most of the animal kingdom (Gen. 6:19; 7:8–9). This physiological detail is linked to God’s determination to create humanity in His own image but is not itself that image. Instead, it is more likely that creating Adam and Eve as male and female points forward to their calling of dominion over the earth and stewards of God’s creation. To accomplish this vocation, they were commanded to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28).

God had a unique method of creating the first humans. He formed Adam from the dust of the ground and Eve from Adam’s rib. This method of creation points both to a shared image and their mutual dependency. Unlike all the other creatures, who were formed out of the ground as Adam was, Eve was bone of Adam’s bones and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23). Out of all that God had made, only Eve was comparable to Adam. She alone

was capable of sharing the task of dominion with him.

In the New Testament, Paul points to Eve’s unique origin “from man,” and the fact that every subsequent male has been “born of woman,” as proof that neither sex can exist independent of the other (1 Cor. 11:8, 11–12). Both are required not only for humanity’s physical survival but also for executing their unique calling as bearers of the divine image. The entrance of sin damaged this mutual dependence, infusing it with selfishness, but it has not obliterated it. Sin has also confused contemporary thinking about male and female categories so that many today feel that these distinctions should be done away with altogether. The cultural landscape of human sexuality may seem complicated to us with its myriad of alternative lifestyles. Yet the Bible’s perspective is clear. God created male and female. There are only two sexes. Both are necessary for fulfilling God’s purpose for humanity. Each depends upon the other, “but everything comes from God” (1 Cor. 11:12). ■

For Further Study

To learn more about the divine image, read *The Liberating Image* by Richard Middleton (Brazos).

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: Do you see yourself as an “image-bearer” of God? How does understanding your identity as God's creation affect the way you live?

WEEK 2: Like Sarai, we can be impatient when the fulfillment of God's promises seems delayed. Describe a time when you took matters into your own hands when you should have waited for God to act. What did you learn from this? (see March 8)

WEEK 3: How have you seen the providence of God in your life? Describe a time when God gave you courage and presence of mind even when your circumstances were painful.

WEEK 4: Which woman's story has resonated most deeply with you? What have you learned about God by studying their lives?

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

By Faith: Women of the Old Testament

*For we live by faith,
not by sight. — 2 Corinthians 5:7*

A few years ago, I began to study the particular role of women in Scripture. Because I was healing from a long season of loss-upon-loss, I began in the Gospels, looking deeply at how Jesus ministered to women. When I turned my attention to the Old Testament, I saw that women were not incidental. Rather, they were co-workers and co-worshipers. Co-recipients and co-couriers of God's grace. Join me as we shine the spotlight on women from the first five books of the Old Testament. My prayer is that through this study, we will:

- Recognize the role of women in God's redemption story
- Understand and celebrate God's persistent providence
- Hear God's call to remain faithful to Him

Your devotional writer,



Kelli Worrall

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Eve—In His Image

Read Genesis 1:26–31

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.—Genesis 1:27

Most of us ask the question “Who am I?” at some point in our lives—often in seasons of crisis or change. This question contains just three simple words, but it’s a surprisingly complicated mix of identity and purpose, belonging and autonomy. The answer to this question can drive our decisions about the future and, simultaneously, force us to face our past.

Genesis 1 is full of vital answers to this universal inquiry: 1) We are created by God—male and female—in His image and likeness (v. 27); 2) We are given dominion over all of creation (v. 28); 3) We are blessed by God and instructed to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (v. 28); and 4) We are pronounced by God—along with the rest of His creation—to be “very good” (v. 31).

Really, numbers 2–4 are the outworking of that all-important number 1. Our primary point of identity—as a man or as a woman—is as an image-bearer of God. We exist

to reveal and reflect His likeness for all the world to see. There is no greater truth that highlights our worth and our value. It follows, then, that a main way in which we “image” God is by ruling over the earth. We are stewards of His kingdom and caretakers of His creation.

Genesis 5:1–3 uses the same word for “image” to describe how Seth bore the likeness of his father Adam (v. 3). Just as Seth grew in the image of Adam, and just as Jesus grew in wisdom and stature—in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52)—so, too, we are created to grow in our likeness of God.

► As we begin our study of the women of the Old Testament, think about these questions: Since “image-bearer of God” and “caretaker of creation” are key aspects of your identity, do you need to change the ways you think and act? Are there any ways in which you might act differently toward someone else, since they also share that identity?

Pray with Us

Lord, as we live and work with those around us, remind us of our shared identity as your image-bearers, so we may treat all people with value and respect.

Eve—Work, Worship, and Partnership

Read Genesis 2:4–25

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.—Colossians 3:23

Our twelve-year-old son would probably tell you that “work” is a dirty word. As parents, we want to encourage him to see work differently, to model a joyful approach, and to invite him into that mindset.

In Genesis 2:15, we learn about Adam’s role in creation (and Eve’s when she joins him). God put him in the garden to “work it and take care of it.” In Scripture, the verb used for “work” most often describes service to God, rather than agricultural tasks. Thus, Adam’s assignment (and Eve’s) was not merely a utilitarian or physical job. It was a *spiritual* one. Their work was their *worship*.

Then, in verse 18, God evaluated this arrangement. In chapter one, He had already declared that everything He made was “good.” Here, for the first time, something—man’s aloneness—was considered “not good.” Since man was unable to function in the complete way that God had created Him, God determined to make a “helper suitable for him.” In verses 19–20, Adam began

his work and worship by naming each of the animals, but in the process no “suitable helper” for him was found. The word “helper” describes someone who comes to the aid of someone else—both physically and spiritually, but “helper” in no way indicates a lesser position or inferior worth. The word used for “suitable” describes the woman as equal in worth, as well as “opposite” and “harmonizing.” Thus, a “complementary partner” was required for the first man.

To form Eve, God sent Adam to sleep and took a handful of bone, muscle, and flesh from Adam’s side (v. 22). Adam’s response—“This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”—recognized both their similarity and her derivative nature (v. 23). Eve was his partner—in work and in worship.

► This passage should be foundational to how we view ourselves, our work, and our relationships. What does it reveal to you about God’s intent in creation? Does it change the way you think about yourself?

Pray with Us

Our culture often holds men and women in opposition, but Father, we recognize that you created us to complement one another and to serve you. Orient our attitudes toward one another around your purposes in creation.

Eve—Then Came Shame

Read Genesis 3:1–7

In this way death came to all people, because all sinned. —Romans 5:12

In the movies, the villain often approaches with ominous music. In Genesis 3, the snake arrived with no fanfare at all. No explanation is given for his entrance. He was a “wild animal” whose presence was seemingly expected, and Eve did not seem alarmed in the least.

But this serpent was “crafty” (v. 1). This Hebrew word can have a positive or negative connotation. In the book of Proverbs, it is considered an antidote for naiveté. Clearly, though, a negative connotation is intended here, as the serpent immediately began to dismantle God’s creative order. The serpent asked Eve to articulate God’s command in her own words.

But when she explained God’s command, she deviated from His actual instruction. She added to God’s restrictions (“...and you must not touch it...” v. 3). Then, she distorted the consequence (“...or you will die”). God’s actual statement was “you will surely die,” and the serpent would capitalize on this difference. The serpent told Eve, “You will not surely

die.” Notice that he did not deny the penalty. Rather, he made it less imminent. He continued to cast doubt by focusing on the perceived positive outcome (v. 5). God knew that the tree was a good pursuit. Why would He withhold His best?

Eve looked at the tree with new eyes. She saw the fruit as beautiful and beneficial, and so she ate. She shared some with Adam, and he ate—without question. Immediately, their eyes were opened (v. 7). They received the knowledge they were seeking, but it was not a pleasant understanding. Instead, they were filled with shame. Their nakedness, which they previously experienced in innocence, now drove them to cover up.

► Has the tempter used similar tactics on you? Maybe he suggested: “The consequences won’t be as bad as God says they will be. This behavior leads to something good! He’s holding out on you.” How have you hidden in response to shame? Built walls of anger? Put up a facade of perfection? Run from God?

Pray with Us

Dear God, all things outside of you are trustworthy only to the extent that they derive from you. We ask that you strengthen our confidence in your promises so we won’t be led astray.

Eve—Driving the Wedge

Read Genesis 3:8–24

*You, God, know my folly;
my guilt is not hidden from you.—Psalm 69:5*

Our family often enjoys an evening walk around our neighborhood. We like to call our route the “McHenry Loop.” We wander through the park, along the river, and back via our quaint downtown. The Bible tells us in Genesis 3:8 that God walked in the garden “in the cool of the day.” Adam and Eve were hiding, but they heard Him. God’s walk was not a leisurely after-dinner stroll. The word for “day” can mean “storm.” I wonder if Adam and Eve heard Him howl in a mighty gale.

In verse 7, the couple covered themselves with leaves because they recognized their defilement. They hid because they knew God could not tolerate their sin. More tragic than personal corruption and shame was their lost access to God. When God called, Adam gave a half-truth. “I was afraid because I was naked.” He failed to mention his sin. When God persisted, Adam blamed Eve—now driving in an interpersonal wedge. He pointed to her, and—in effect—also to God. “It was the woman you put

here with me” (v. 12). Eve blamed the serpent. And God cursed all three. Since our focus is on the female characters, let’s look closely at verse 16. God would “make your pains in childbearing very severe.” This word for “childbearing” is concerned with conception, and the word for “pain” is mental anguish—not physical. The second clause seems to repeat the first. (“With painful labor you will give birth to children.”) However, this word for “pain” refers to strenuous physical work. Together, these clauses describe the entirety of the child-bearing process. Women experience anxiety and pain throughout.

Adam gave Eve her name. “Mother of all the living” (v. 20). In spite of their judgment life would continue. And as another act of grace and continued care, God made them clothes before He banished them from the Garden.

► We experience the consequences of sin every day. How do you respond to God about your sin? Is it similar to Adam and Eve’s response?

Pray with Us

Generations later, we are still drawn to sin, just like Adam and Eve. We evade the truth, make excuses, and lay the blame on others. Teach us to confess our sins and repent on a daily basis.

Eve—The Greatest Grief

Read Genesis 4:1–16

The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion.—Numbers 14:18

My husband Peter and I have grieved several losses in our twenty years of marriage—his father, both of my parents, and three babies by miscarriage. Experiencing such pain together can either deepen a couple's bond or push two people apart.

In Genesis 4, the effects of the Fall become more evident—on humanity, and also on the family. The first thing we learn about Adam and Eve—post-Fall—is that they have a son. Eve announced the birth herself in verse 1: “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.” Significantly, Eve expressed gratitude that the Lord's grace carried her through. Even though anguish accompanied the childbearing process, God was still faithful.

Then, as we move through Genesis chapter 4, we see the tragic descent of Adam and Eve's offspring—delving deeper and deeper into sin. As Eve's sin began with a desire to be more like God, Cain's sin begins with a desire to have what his brother

has—the good pleasure of God (v. 5). With Cain's jealousy and murder, sin infiltrates new territory as it destroys the family unit. Just as Adam and Eve were distanced from God's presence when they were removed from the Garden, now Cain is expelled from both God's presence and His protection (vv. 11–12).

Interestingly, while Eve's celebratory and grateful words open this chapter, she is not mentioned again in this passage. But can you imagine her grief? It is difficult to conceive of her sorrow when she learned about the death of one son—at the hand of another. Then she was faced with Cain's banishment. Eve seems somehow even more human when we consider her immense loss and ponder her pain.

► How have you experienced God's faithfulness and grace, even as you navigate the consequences of sin? How do you connect with Eve's grief? Can God use our study of it to bring healing to our own hurts?

Pray with Us

We can't escape the painful, all-pervading consequences of sin. Even in the depths of misery, give us eyes to perceive your mercies, Lord. May we know our greatest joys in times of suffering.

Sarai—The Call and the Covenant

Read Genesis 11:27–12:9

*Go from your country, your people
and your father's household to the land I will show you.—Genesis 12:1*

God's general call to each of us is to love, follow, and obey Him. But sometimes He communicates a more specific calling—to a specific person at a specific time and for a specific purpose. At the end of Genesis 11 we are introduced to Sarai as Abram's wife. The only description is this: "Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive" (v. 30). This status is significant for her story, given the covenant call that God would place on Abram's life.

Abram's father Terah took Abram, Sarai, and Lot on a journey from Ur of the Chaldeans toward Canaan. But along the way, they settled in Harran (v. 31). Immediately after Terah's death, at age 205, Abram's call comes: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (12:1–3).

It was a beautiful promise—one that came with care, protection, and favor. But it also required sacrifice. Abram and Sarai had to leave all that was familiar and walk by faith into uncertainty. Abram left—"as the Lord had told him" (v. 4)—and set out from Haran. Great risk and effort was involved in his obedience. This was a monthlong journey of 500 miles into unknown and potentially dangerous territory—with his wife and nephew, their people and possessions. At a pit stop at Shechem, God gave Abram a glimpse of what was to come, sharing a bit more of His plan—"To your offspring I will give this land" (v. 7). In response, Abram stopped and built an altar to keep himself and Sarai and their clan focused on the Lord.

► How is God calling you today? Consider ways you can keep focused on Him and His plans, even if obeying means risk or sacrifice.

Pray with Us

Father, we don't want anything that you have not chosen for us. We take our uncertainties, our fears, and our desires before you and ask for your peace and guidance; accomplish your purposes in our lives.

Sarai—Self-Preservation

Genesis 12:10–20

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.—Matthew 16:25

Early last year, our state’s governor issued a disaster proclamation in response to the COVID-19 virus. A shelter-in-place order followed, bringing long-term consequences that we are only beginning to comprehend. These circumstances left many simply asking: How do we survive?

While Abram and Sarai were still heading toward the Negev, they realized the severity of the area famine and detoured toward Egypt. Because of the Nile’s predictable flooding, Egypt was less threatened by drought. Remember, not long before this, Abram had built altars to the Lord, accepting His call into Canaan (vv. 6–7). Did this detour represent doubt? Did Abram fear that God would not provide as He promised to? Was going to Egypt Abram’s first mistake?

As they were about to enter Egypt, Abram hatched another plan. He instructed Sarai to tell everyone that she was his sister. Sarai was so

beautiful that Abram was afraid the Egyptians would kill him to get to her (v. 11). His justification sounds so self-serving: “Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you” (v. 13). Fear does that to us, doesn’t it? It pushes us into self-preservation mode and short-circuits our decision-making ability. Pharaoh’s household bore the immediate consequences. They were struck with disease (v. 17). But even when Abram was caught and sent away, he seemed unrepentant—even though his lie had put God’s covenant at risk. If Pharaoh had taken Sarai, what might have happened to the great nation God had promised?

► Abram was not so different from us. The virus of sin has infected us all. God gave His promises knowing our weakness. That is the majesty of grace. Have you ever boldly followed God’s call . . . until you hit your first problem? How would it be different if we responded, not out of fear, but in faith?

Pray with Us

Dear God, while our own plans give us a sense of security, your plans are often inscrutable. We desire to follow you with childlike faith, trusting you even when we don’t understand.

Sarai—The God Who Sees

Read Genesis 16

The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.—Proverbs 15:3

My husband and I longed for biological children for many years before God finally opened the door for us to adopt our two children. And while God has healed much of the pain of infertility, it still gets triggered at times, and I have a deep empathy for others who are experiencing that particular loss—even Bible characters in ancient accounts.

Genesis 16 begins by explaining that Sarai had borne no children to Abram, even after over ten years of marriage. Culturally, this was a big deal. But it was an even bigger deal because of God's covenant with Abram—that he would become a great nation. *The Moody Bible Commentary* titles Genesis 16 “The Fall Reprised” because of its many parallels with Genesis 3. Like Eve before her, Sarai began to doubt the intention, timing, and sovereignty of God, so she took matters into her own hands. Like Eve before her, Sarai pulled her husband into a plan, and together they tried to accomplish

God's will in their own way—through Hagar (vv. 1–3).

As in Genesis 3, human sin resulted in all sorts of conflict. Hagar lorded her pregnancy over Sarai. Sarai blamed Abram. Abram passed responsibility back to Sarai, who then mistreated Hagar. Hagar understandably ran away. Then, the angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar in the desert and gave her a promise of her own—a son and innumerable descendants, but a son who would be the center of conflict (vv. 11–12). In an unusual move, Hagar gave a name to God—a name fitting to what she knew of His nature: “The One who sees me” (v. 13). And by His grace, He continued to work out His will, in His own way and in His own time.

► We often become impatient with God's seeming delays. Have you ever taken things into your own hands when you should have just waited? What was the result? Where have you seen God work out His will in His own time?

Pray with Us

Father, grant us contentment in the present—especially those of us in waiting periods. Help us to use this time wisely and profitably, looking for ways to serve you in every aspect of life.

Sarai—The Covenant Confirmed

Read Genesis 17

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.—Galatians 3:29

A vow renewal ceremony has become an increasingly popular way for couples to recommit to one another and reclaim their marital promises. They often use new rings as a tangible sign of their ongoing devotion. In Genesis 17, Abram was 99 years old, and his son Ishmael was 13. Abram had spent over a decade, assuming that Ishmael was his covenant son and undoubtedly raising him as such. Then God appeared in a conversation that changed everything.

God began by claiming His identity as “God Almighty” (v. 1). Then He instructed Abram to “walk before [Him] faithfully and be blameless” (v. 1). Finally, He explained the purpose of His visit: to confirm His covenant. Abram fell face down on the ground, as God laid out in more detail what this covenant would entail: Abram would be the father of many nations; this covenant would be everlasting; the whole land of Canaan would be theirs; Abram and his male descendants would be circumcised as a physical mark and sign of

submission; Sarai would be the one to bear Abram the son of the covenant; and both Abram and Sarai would receive new names.

Don't forget that, by this time, 25 years had passed since God's first conversation with Abram in Harran. Don't forget that Abram had spent the past 13 years raising Ishmael as his covenant heir. Based on those facts, it isn't a surprise that Abram's first response was to laugh and proclaim, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” But then Abram obeyed. That very day he had all of the men of his household circumcised. God decreed circumcision as the sign of this covenant, as an outward marker on those to whom the covenant was applied, and a symbol of their submission to Him.

► God calls us to holiness—to be set apart for Him. What marks you as God's? In what way is He calling you to “walk before Him and be blameless” right now? Pray for the wisdom, courage, and consecration to do so.

Pray with Us

We ask for clarity as we seek your guidance, Lord. Grant us courage to obey you in every detail—even when it goes against our culture. We desire to shine your unmistakable light in the world.

Sarai—Living the Impossible

Read Genesis 18:1–15

With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.—Matthew 19:26

My nine-year-old daughter remembers everything I say—at least when it comes to fun events or potential treats. I have to be very careful how I communicate to her, lest they be misconstrued as certainties. It's painful to hear her disappointment when she says, "But Mom, you promised!" Promises are an important relational contract, and the ways in which we keep them—or don't—go a long way to building or destroying trust. As fallen creatures, we struggle to keep the promises we make. But trustworthiness is fundamental to the character of God.

Genesis 18 is a stunning account of a theophany (a visible manifestation of God). It also demonstrates God's post-fall relationship with His children as He continued to pursue them despite their sin. Three "men" came to visit Abraham and Sarah, and based on Abraham's direct address of "Lord" ("Adonay"), we deduce that he recognized one of them as God. Immediately, Abraham ordered his household to prepare a feast. During

the meal, the visitors asked: "Where is your wife Sarah?" (v. 9). As divine beings, they knew her location, so they were not asking for information. Rather, they were leading to the point of their visit. In the next line, the visitor named "the Lord" made the bold promise that—within one year—Sarah would have a child.

Remarkably, in this instance, Abraham expressed no doubt. Sarah, however, laughed (v. 12). Did she laugh in astonishment? A lack of faith? The passage does not explain. However, her laughter does highlight the irony behind Isaac's name ("laughter"). The query leads to the climactic, rhetorical question: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" The word here for "hard" indicates an endeavor beyond human capability. And the answer to the question is a clearly-implied "No!"

► How do you receive God's promises? Do you laugh in disbelief? In what way do you need to be reminded today that *nothing* is too hard for the Lord?

Pray with Us

When we doubt, may we be reminded of Sarah's laughter at God's promise. Father, comfort and reassure us with the question you asked Sarah: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

Sarah—Sovereign God

Read Genesis 20

*He is before all things, and in him
all things hold together.—Colossians 1:17*

We have a tendency to fall back into sin, doing the very thing we know is wrong. When we seem to “get away” with a sin, the temptation grows to try it again.

Genesis 20 records that for a second time Abraham lied about Sarah’s status—calling her his sister, rather than his wife. It’s possible that they used this technique regularly, “everywhere we go” (v. 13). Having no reason to doubt Abraham’s word, Abimelech, the king of Gerar, sent for Sarah, and rather than admitting his lie, Abraham let her go. Whether Abraham recognized it or not, the stakes were higher this time. When they were in Egypt, Sarah was barren (see Genesis 12). But as they moved to Gerar, Sarah was fertile. The long-awaited, promised son would be born within the year. If Sarah spent even one night with Abimelech, Isaac’s paternity could have been called into question. The entire covenant was on the line. God did not allow Abraham’s folly to muddle matters (v. 6).

His sovereignty is on full display throughout this narrative. God appeared in a dream to Abimelech at just the right time. He opened Abimelech’s heart to receive the message with humility and fear. God, thus, kept Sarah from spending the night with Abimelech and protected the clear paternity of Isaac. He closed and opened the womb of all the women in Abimelech’s household (vv. 17–18). He even blessed Abraham abundantly through Abimelech in spite of his ruse. And He worked through Abraham to make Himself known to the people of Gerar. Grace upon grace! What a wonderful reassurance that God *will* keep His covenant. He *will* carry out His plan. He is able—in spite of us.

► How do you need to hold onto that assurance today? God is at work—for His glory and our good—even when we don’t understand His ways and even when we make our own bumbling mistakes.

Pray with Us

We praise you for your omnipotence, for you can work our acts of fear and faithlessness into events that glorify your name. Nevertheless, we ask for submissive hearts and minds that delight in your will!

Sarah—A Promise Fulfilled

Read Genesis 21:1–8

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children.—Hebrews 11:11

My husband and I endured such an arduous journey to parenthood that, when we finally brought our son into our home, everything became cause for celebration. His first tooth. His first word. His first steps. His first birthday is still the most elaborate party I've ever thrown. I invited everyone who had walked with us through pain to celebrate our joy.

Interestingly, after all of the anticipation surrounding Isaac's arrival, his actual birth is reported with little fanfare. But even though it's a spare account, it is a significant one. Notice that Sarah's role is emphasized. She is portrayed as the object of God's grace and the recipient of His promise (v. 1). Sarah was not just along for the ride. She was not simply a helpful tool, needed for God to bless Abraham. Sarah herself was also the beneficiary of God's blessing. The Lord saw *her* and did this for *her*, as well as for Abraham.

The centrality of Sarah in this passage underscores God's

faithfulness. While Abraham and Sarah had doubted God along the way and pursued their own paths toward parenthood, and while Abraham had previously thought of Ishmael as his primary heir, God had His own plan—to bless Abraham through a son with Sarah. Finally, God brought that plan to fulfillment and kept that particular promise. There could be no mistake. As God had commanded, Abraham named his son Isaac, which means “he will laugh.” Even Sarah understood the irony. The name would always remind them of their skepticism. “Who would have said . . . ?” (v. 7). But the name would also be a testimony to God, who brought her joy. He had redeemed her sorrow, and He would also extend that joy to “everyone who hears about this.”

► How have you seen God keep His promises? How has He brought you laughter out of pain? What are you trusting Him for right now? Give Him praise today, and share that joy with someone else.

Pray with Us

Almighty God, today we pause to recount your faithfulness to us. However burdened or frightened we may be, our present trials do not change your grace in the past and your promises for the future.

Sarah—A God Who Preserves

Genesis 21:9–21

The LORD protects and preserves them—they are counted among the blessed in the land—he does not give them over to the desire of their foes.—Psalm 41:2

Do you and your siblings always get along? Has there ever been rivalry between you? Sibling rivalry began with humanity's very first sibling set: Abel and Cain. And it has infected every relationship between siblings—to a greater or lesser degree—ever since. Sibling rivalry often starts immediately after the arrival of a second child. The older child, who previously enjoyed the parents' sole attention, becomes jealous when that devotion is suddenly divided.

That is exactly what happened in Genesis 21. When Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a feast to celebrate, but Ishmael who was about 16 years old was watching from the wings, "mocking" his young half-brother. The word for "mocking" is the same word used to name Isaac ("laughter"), but here it has the connotation of ridicule (v. 9). The sibling hostility that God had warned of in Genesis 16:12 was already evident, and Sarah was not happy.

Sarah ordered Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. She feared

for Isaac's inheritance, revealing a shocking lack of faith that the God, who had miraculously given her a child in her old age, would continue to fulfill His promises. Abraham was distressed, but he followed his wife's lead—much like Adam who took the fruit from Eve. He sent Hagar and Ishmael away (v. 14). When Hagar's water ran out, she put Ishmael under a bush as a reprieve from the heat. She sat at a distance, waiting for him to die. Imagine her despair! Then—for a second time—Hagar received a visitation from God (v. 17). He comforted her with the promise that Ishmael would be a great nation, and He provided for her immediate needs with a well of water.

► How often do we pull a "Sarah"? We experience the miraculous provision of God. Then we doubt again and let fear overcome. We take matters into our own hands, making a mess of things. How has this pattern been a part of your journey? How have you seen God provide despite your weakness?

Pray with Us

Lord, we have short memories. We praise you that you remain unchangeable even when our confidence is blown here and there by the winds of our circumstances. You give us our daily bread.

Sarah—A God Who Provides

Read Genesis 22

*So Abraham called that place
The LORD Will Provide.—Genesis 22:14*

Two years ago, my husband Peter suffered a small stroke. By God's provision, he has made a strong recovery, but this journey tested our faith in new ways. God does that sometimes. He wants to know that He alone is enough. In Genesis 22, the same enduring God who gave and preserved life, now "tested" Abraham by instructing him to sacrifice his "only son," whom he loved.

Yes, Abraham had another son—Ishmael. But Isaac was Abraham's only son through Sarah, his only covenant son. In multiple ways, this account points ahead to God's own sacrifice of His only Son, Jesus. Abraham's faith had matured, so he responded purposefully to this call: "Here I am" (v. 1). Early the next morning, he followed the command. For three long days, Abraham and Isaac traveled to the place of sacrifice, giving Abraham time to confirm or abandon his commitment. When they came near, Abraham told the servants, "Stay here . . . We will worship and then we will come back." The plural pronoun "we"

indicates a confident faith, driven by a desire to worship God alone.

Abraham placed the wood on Isaac's back, and Isaac himself carried it to the altar—a foreshadowing of Christ and His cross. On the way, Isaac observed that they had no lamb (v. 7). Again Abraham responded with faith, pointing to God Who would "provide the lamb" (v. 8). And God did provide. Just in time. When Isaac was lying on the altar and Abraham had reached for his knife, God broke in. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," God said, "For now I know that you fear God" (v. 12). Here God revealed another purpose for this test. Yes, it strengthened Abraham's faith, taught Isaac about obedience, and showed readers a father's sacrifice. But God also gained something. "Now I know that you fear God" (v. 12).

► God's call is often challenging, and it can test our faith. What motivates our obedience? Is it the good gifts we hope to gain on the other side? Or is God Himself enough?

Pray with Us

You see into our hearts, and we ask you to purify our motives as we serve you. Banish pride, fear, self-serving attitudes, and anything else that we pursue instead of you. You alone complete us, God.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Michael Rydelnik, Moody professor
and host of Moody Radio's *Open Line*

Q I am a devout Christian. However, I struggle with those who use the literal interpretation of the Bible to conclude that the earth and all of creation is only about 10,000 years old. What are your thoughts on this?

A It is true that the Bible appears to present a young earth, or at least younger than the assumption that the universe came into existence millions or billions years ago. However, that doesn't mean a creation date of 4004 BC is correct (a traditional view presented by biblical scholar Bishop Ussher). It also doesn't mean (necessarily) that the earth is only 10,000 years old.

The truth is, none of us really knows the exact date of creation. Some scholars have pointed out that the genealogies in the early parts of Genesis did not necessarily include every name in a family. In fact, they might have recorded only every fourth or fifth generation. So, even if you calculate the date strictly using biblical record, the earth might be 25,000 years old or even 50,000.

There are also respectable and responsible Bible teachers who argue that the earth is much older. I disagree with them, but hopefully, without ever being disagreeable. I can believe in a young earth despite the evolutionary

dating of the fossil record for at least two reasons. First, it seems that God created the world with *apparent age*. Consider the creation of Adam. God made him from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). But, when Adam was just a few minutes old, he wasn't an infant. Rather, God created him as a fully grown man. In the same way, when God made the world, He built age into everything that was made.

Second, much of the fossil record can be explained by what is called *cataclysm*. This term means that earthly catastrophes can leave remnants that appear to have happened much earlier than they actually did. For example, the eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980 left underwater forests and canyons that, if we didn't know better, would appear to be millions of years old. In the similar way, the Bible depicts a major catastrophic event, the flood (Gen. 6–8). The flood could explain much of the alleged evidence for a seemingly much older earth. The Bible says “all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened” (Gen. 7:11).

More important than knowing exactly when creation took place is that we can be certain of what the Bible teaches—there is a Creator who made the world and all humanity. He

“More important than knowing exactly when creation took place is that we can be certain of what the Bible’s teaches—there is a Creator who made the world and all humanity.”

cares for us so much, that He gave His one and only Son, the God-Man, Jesus, who died for us and rose again. If we put our trust in Him, we can have an eternal personal relationship with our Creator.

Q If the Jewish people do not believe the gospel and they are God’s chosen people, how will they have the opportunity to spend eternity with God?

A God declares His special love for His people Israel through the prophet Jeremiah: “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3). This question reflects the concern of the Lord Jesus who wept over the Jewish people’s rejection of Him (Luke 19:41). The answer is clarifying some of the issues you raise.

First, although God did choose the Jewish people to represent Him to the nations as “a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6), being the chosen nation did not grant every individual Jewish person salvation. Only the believing remnant experienced eternal forgiveness. Nevertheless, today Jewish people still retain their status as the chosen nation, even in unbelief (Rom. 11:28), since “God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29; see also Rom. 9:4–5). Even so, just like all

people, Jewish people need to trust in Jesus to experience forgiveness of sins.

Second, all Jewish people have not rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Just as the apostle Paul was a Jewish person who believed (Rom. 11:1), “so too, at the present time, there is a remnant [of believing Jews] chosen by grace” (Rom. 11:5). Third, for Jewish people to experience salvation and eternal life, we followers of Jesus must lovingly present the good news to our Jewish friends. Paul wrote that one of God’s purposes in saving Gentiles was “to make Israel envious” (Rom. 11:11).

Finally, the Bible teaches that there will come a day, just before the return of Jesus, that virtually all Jewish people alive at that time will turn in faith to Jesus as their Messiah and Redeemer. Then they will look with faith on the pierced one (Zech. 12:10) and “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). Until then, we need to be like the apostle Paul who said his “heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (Rom. 10:1). If we love the Jewish people we need to pray for their salvation, present the good news to our Jewish friends, and provide support for those ministries that bring the good news to God’s beloved chosen people. ■

Sarah—Leaving a Legacy

Read Genesis 23

[T]ell to the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.—Psalm 78:4

My grandma Ruby wrote her life story and titled it *My Burden Bearer*. The title points to the difficult life she endured—losing her mother when she was a child, suffering an unkind stepmom, becoming a single mom at a young age, living her early married years in a tiny cabin in rural Minnesota, and raising three children with cerebral palsy—one who died at the age of 5.

But the title of her autobiography also underscores her faith in God—the One who redeemed her, sustained her, and bore her burdens. Grandma Ruby died when I was in college. I am grateful for the record we have of her life so that my children, too, can learn from her legacy of faith. In Genesis 23 we read that Sarah has died at the age of 127. The text announces her death with little fanfare. Abraham’s mourning is mentioned, but not developed in detail: “Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her” (v. 2). The rest of the chapter

explains the lengths to which Abraham had to go to obtain a proper burial place for her body.

Ephron the Hittite was willing to give Abraham a portion of land, but Abraham refused to accept the gift. He did not want to be indebted to Ephron or his descendants. So Abraham paid full price. He buried Sarah in the cave, where he also owned the surrounding field.

Abraham’s acquisition of this land was not only an important means to properly honor his wife, but further evidence of God’s ability to bring His covenant promises to fruition and sustain His redemption plan from generation to generation.

► Today is perfect time to ponder what legacy you and I are leaving for the next generation. What will they learn from us and pass on? Each of our lives is a part of God’s bigger plan. We must remember that we are not building our own kingdoms. Rather, we are playing a tiny part in His.

Pray with Us

Omniscient God, we find peace in trusting your plans. We rejoice that you have given us the privilege to serve you. Give us opportunities to pour into younger generations for your glory.

Rebekah—Seeking the Will of God

Read Genesis 24

*Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and he will establish your plans.—Proverbs 16:3*

As a college professor, one of the most common conversations I have with my students is about God’s will. How does He reveal His leading to us? In Abraham’s advanced years, his primary concern became a wife for Isaac. Only through Isaac’s marriage and fatherhood would God’s covenant continue, so Abraham gave his chief servant specific instructions on how to find the right woman.

When the servant came to Nahor, he stopped by a well with his ten camels, and in prayer, he devised a unique method for discovering God’s will. He would administer a test. The servant would ask a girl for a drink, and if she offered to water his camels too, then she would be “the one.” Before he had even finished praying, Rebekah arrived (v. 15). The servant noticed her beauty and immediately asked Rebekah for a drink. She offered one without hesitation. Then she offered to water his camels as well. Her jug was 3 gallons or so in capacity. Since a thirsty camel can drink 25–40 gallons, Rebekah had

to fill her jug about 130 times! The servant could add “hard worker” and “servant spirit” to her qualities.

The servant watched her intently, praying for internal confirmation for his external observations. He clearly received the assurance he sought because, when Rebekah finished, he gave her costly gifts and asked about her family (vv. 22–23). Upon hearing that she was Abraham’s close relative, the servant worshiped the Lord. The servant’s visit with Rebekah’s family served as further confirmation, as did Rebekah’s willingness to go immediately—even when her family asked for ten more days together.

► The process of discerning God’s will involves prayerful assessment of our circumstances and motivations. We should ask God to direct our thinking and help us walk in step with His Spirit. Sometimes He reveals His will through unusual events. But more often He opens and closes doors and His Spirit gives us discernment. Over what decisions are you seeking His will right now?

Pray with Us

Lord in Heaven, we desire nothing more and nothing less than to walk according to your will. As we face difficult decisions, please teach us to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. Guide us in your wisdom and goodness.

Rebekah—A War in the Womb

Read Genesis 25:19–34

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.—Ephesians 1:11

Twins have a fascinating relationship. Even as babies they seem to share an unspoken language, understanding one another in a way no one else can. And when they grow up, they remain instinctively connected. In Genesis 25, we learn that Rebekah’s married life began with barrenness. Isaac’s response differed from his father’s, however. While Abraham and Sarah tried to solve infertility their own way, Isaac prayed (v. 21). And the Lord answered—albeit 20 long years later.

Infertility wasn’t Rebekah’s biggest problem though. Instead, the text focuses on what happened after she became pregnant. Not knowing she was carrying twins, she was troubled by excessive movement, so she inquired of the Lord. He revealed to her that her two sons—yes: two!—would be embroiled in sibling rivalry, with the younger one prevailing. This conflict would mark their lives and people in deep and lasting ways.

From the moment the babies were born, the Lord’s prophetic word was proven. Jacob emerged,

grasping Esau’s heel. We can only imagine how the tension played out through childhood because the text summarizes their juvenile years: “The boys grew up.” They became very different men. Esau, a skillful hunter. Jacob, a quiet homebody. The passage also reveals parental preferences. Isaac appreciated Esau’s hunting skills, while Rebekah loved Jacob’s gentle nature.

The point of the passage is not parenting though. Instead, we find the infamous scene of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew and some bread. This brotherly conflict is the center of the story. *This* is the next obstacle that stands in the way of God’s covenant promises to His people.

► God’s character continues to be consistently revealed in Rebekah’s narrative. His choices are based on His own sovereign will—not human merit or convention. The comfort we take is that no conflict (in our nuclear or church families) can ultimately deter God’s plan from going forth.

Pray with Us

We are grateful that your plans always come to fruition, Lord, but we grieve over the conflicts that so often divide your children. We ask for your peace in our communities so that we can serve you in unity.

Rebekah—Fearful, but Blessed

Read Genesis 26:1–17

*Every good and perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.—James 1:17*

Fear is a powerful motivator. It can drive us to do dastardly things. Some of us shut down, attack, or distract ourselves. Others face fear by trying to wrestle a problem in our own strength. In Genesis 26, Isaac and his family faced fear in the form of famine. You may notice that this entire chapter bears a resemblance to the Abraham narrative. Just as Abraham had done, Isaac moved his family south to survive. But the Lord stopped them: “Do not go down to Egypt,” God told Isaac. “Live in the land where I tell you to live” (v. 2). Then the Lord reaffirmed His covenant: “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky” (v. 4).

So it may surprise you that immediately following God’s covenant reminder, however, comes a record of Isaac’s deception (v. 7). He lied about Rebekah’s identity, saying she was his sister rather than his wife (again, just like his father!). Isaac was afraid the men of Gerar might kill him and

take Rebekah for themselves. Isaac succeeded for some time it seems—until finally, King Abimelek himself saw Isaac and Rebekah in an intimate embrace (v. 8). Abimelek had not yet sent for Rebekah as Pharaoh had sent for Sarah. In that regard, Isaac and Rebekah were spared. God’s grace to them was already evident. Nevertheless, the king confronted Isaac, and Isaac reiterated his fear.

Abimelek’s reaction was to provide Isaac with additional protection. He did not send Isaac away, as Pharaoh did Abraham. Instead, he made a decree that anyone who harmed Isaac or Rebekah would be put to death (v. 11). Despite Isaac’s fear, the covenant of God was again being made manifest.

► How do you respond to fear? Today, release your fear to Him and rest in His promises and provision. Even though our emotions may waiver, you have a God who does not change “like shifting shadows” (James 1:17).

Pray with Us

Father, we are frail and finite beings, and fear is never far from us. May we take each fearful moment as an opportunity to lean on you and to listen for your voice.

Rebekah—Give Me Your Blessing

Read Genesis 27:1–28:5

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.—Numbers 6:24–25

In the Old Testament, the patriarchal blessing was not merely a father’s wish for his child. Rather, it was a permanent declaration, mediated by God, that often included an inheritance. When Isaac was old and blind, he asked Esau to hunt and prepare a meal, so he could impart his blessing. This is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the Lord had communicated to Rebekah before the boys were even born that “the older will serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). Second, Esau himself had already sold his birthright to Jacob (25:33). But—in his persistent preference for his eldest son—Isaac determined to bless him anyhow.

Rebekah overheard the exchange and plotted with Jacob to deceive Isaac and take the blessing from Esau (vv. 5–10). Jacob donned Esau’s coat. Rebekah wrapped him in skins, and she cooked a tasty goat meal. When Jacob approached, Isaac was skeptical (v. 21). He queried Jacob’s speed. He touched his skin. He questioned his

voice. He asked him straight-up to tell him the truth. Finally, he smelled his clothes, which convinced him. Isaac blessed Jacob.

When Esau returned, he was understandably livid. He begged for another blessing, but Isaac could give no more. So Esau threatened to kill his brother. When Rebekah heard Esau’s intentions, she sent Jacob away. This was the last time Rebekah saw her favored son. She bore the consequences of their deceit as much as Jacob did. And, sadly, we don’t hear much more about her life. The details of her death are not recorded. We simply learn in Genesis 49 that she was buried with Isaac.

► Rebekah’s story begins with beauty, faith, and love, but finishes with deception, isolation, and unbelief. Her story challenges us to remain faithful throughout our days. May we not allow the concerns of life to fill us with bitterness or tempt us to control. May we trust and obey for all our days that God gives us.

Pray with Us

We don’t want anything in our lives to steal one moment of joy from us. Father, forgive our attempts to control events and reliance on our own strength or wisdom. We depend fully on you, our all-seeing God.

Rachel—A Taste of Your Own Medicine

Read Genesis 29:1–30

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.—Deuteronomy 10:17

Most couples enjoy telling the “how we met” story. It is fun to hear what brought two lives together. In Genesis 28 and 29, we learn the love story of Jacob and Rachel. When Jacob left home, his father instructed him to go to his uncle’s home in Paddan Aram, and “take a wife for yourself there” (28:2).

On the way, Jacob had a dream—and the Lord spoke the covenant over Jacob. What had been promised to Abraham and Isaac would now be his. Jacob was astonished. “If God watches over me, then He will be my God,” he vowed. This is our first indication of Jacob’s spiritual state.

When Jacob arrived in the east, he met shepherds by a well and asked if they knew his uncle Laban. They did (29:5), and Rachel—Laban’s daughter—entered, providentially, right on cue (v. 9). Laban greeted Jacob with hugs: “My own flesh and blood” (v. 14). Jacob arranged to

work for seven years for Rachel’s hand in marriage. He was so in love that those years seemed like days. But on their wedding, Laban played a trick on the trickster. He sent Leah to Jacob in the dark of night (v. 23). When Jacob awoke, he was dismayed. “Why have you deceived me?” he asked (v. 25). The two men made another agreement—another seven years of work for Rachel. It is hard to feel too sorry for Jacob who suffered the consequences of his own tricky behavior. He was treated in the same way he had treated others. His own character stood between him and the full blessing of God.

► At some point, each of us has received a “taste of our own medicine.” Someone has acted toward us just as we have acted toward them or others. To Jacob’s credit, he didn’t lash out or deceive Laban in response. How have you responded in similar circumstances?

Pray with Us

Sometimes we despise others because we see in them the same sin we see in ourselves. We ask that you humble us. May we see these relationships as opportunities to extend the grace you granted us.

Rachel and Leah—Conflict Management

Read Genesis 29:31–30:24

He remembers his covenant forever, the promise he made, for a thousand generations.—Psalm 105:8

When young couples engage in premarital counseling, they discuss topics like family, finances, communication, and—of course—conflict. Scripture is full of passages that can guide the newlyweds through difficult days, but Genesis 29:31–30:24 is *not* one of them. This passage records how God began to provide a family for Jacob, but things did not go as hoped. New obstacles to God’s covenant arose, and conflict ensued.

Leah became pregnant quickly and often, providing Jacob with four sons. The names she gave her first three babies revealed her desperation to be loved by Jacob (29:34). But the name of her fourth son, Judah (“This time I will praise the Lord”), was a departure (v. 35). Perhaps this was evidence of growth. Then Leah stopped having children (v. 35). Whether Jacob no longer spent nights with her or God closed her womb, we do not know.

Tensions ran high in the household, as Rachel was unable to conceive (30:1). Each sister envied

the other. Leah had children. Rachel had love. Rachel’s jealousy grew until she gave Jacob an ultimatum, “Give me children, or I’ll die!” (v. 1). Although Jacob felt anger, his words communicated God’s sovereignty. “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?” (v. 2). Rachel offered her handmaid to Jacob—to provide a child on her behalf. The plan “worked,” and Rachel named the child Dan (“vindication”) (v. 6). Tensions continued to mount. Eventually, God remembered Rachel (v. 22). He opened her womb, and she gave Jacob a son—a boy named Joseph. The original audience would have understood his importance. Again we see that God is the main actor here. God’s grace alone will bring His covenant to pass—regardless of human scheming and despite familial conflict.

► Are you involved in a conflict that you need God to resolve? What is your role? Can you release any jealousy or anger that might be standing in the way?

Pray with Us

Lord, please convict us when we create barriers of anger or jealousy between ourselves and others. Turn our anger to forgiveness and our jealousy to compassion; teach us to serve rather than compete.

Rachel—Caught, Not Taught

Read Genesis 31

May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.—Genesis 31:49

My dad was a quiet man. His cerebral palsy made speech difficult. Consequently, most of what I learned from him I learned through observation. I absorbed some of his strengths and some of his weakness. From him, I learned tenacity and timidity, discipline and avoidance—none of which were overtly taught. A father's character has influence on his children.

In Genesis 31, Laban's sons grew resentful of Jacob's fortune. The tension between the households escalated so much that Jacob contemplated a move. Relational strain was not the only motivation, however. God told Jacob to return to his fathers' land (v. 3). To Rachel and Leah, Jacob articulated another frustration. Laban had cheated him repeatedly (v. 7). Only through God's grace had he prospered. Rachel and Leah responded with their own complaints. The bride price Laban should have saved for them was gone. "Do whatever God has told you," they said (v. 16). So, Rachel stole Laban's

gods, and the family ran. When Laban pursued and caught them, God told him: "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad" (v. 24). Disregarding God's warning, Laban leveled a fourfold accusation against Jacob, including a question about stolen gods. When asked, Rachel lied, saying she couldn't stand up because it was "that" time of the month (v. 35). In turn, Jacob recounted his own poor treatment by Laban.

The men finally made a truce called the Mizpah (v. 49). Although it sounds like a friendly blessing, "May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other" (v. 49), it was originally a warning and a declaration of mistrust.

▶ Isn't it sobering how deception, mistrust, and manipulation extended throughout this chosen family of God? We pass on to our children both our good traits and our bad—without even trying. Ultimately, our children learn far more from how they see us live than any "lessons" that might pass through our lips.

Pray with Us

We all know the painful truth that there is no perfect family. Lord, we cling to your grace, trusting you to heal and restore the hurts we inflict on one another. With each wrong we suffer, may you grant us the strength to forgive.

Rachel—Witness to Transformation

Read Genesis 33

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.—1 Peter 5:6

No salvation testimony could be more dramatic than Nicky Cruz's, ex-New York City gang warlord who was pursued by a country preacher and the love of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit changed Cruz from a violent street thug to an outspoken evangelist.

In Genesis 33, Rachel sees a similar dramatic transformation in her husband. Jacob had wrestled all night with “a man” (Gen. 32:22–31). This was a turning point for Jacob where He “saw God face to face” (32:30). As the sun rose, Jacob saw Esau—accompanied by 400 men. Notice Jacob's response to Esau's approach! He didn't run away, plot an attack, or mount a defense (as typical for him). Instead, he divided his children among their mothers for their protection.

Jacob went ahead and bowed before Esau. Remarkably, Esau ran toward Jacob with open arms, and the two estranged brothers hugged and cried (33:4). Immediately, Esau asked to meet Jacob's family, so Jacob introduced them, attributing all his blessings to the grace of God. Later,

when Esau wanted to return Jacob's gifts, Jacob insisted Esau should keep them: “. . . for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need” (v. 11). After this incredible reunion, Esau proposed they travel together to Seir, but Jacob preferred to part ways.

The chapter concludes with Jacob and Rachel arriving safely at Shechem in Canaan, which was the Promised Land. It was a strategic location for farming and a major crossroads for transportation. When Jacob purchased this land and pitched his tent, God's covenant continued to be fulfilled (v. 19). Here Jacob built an altar—his first altar, identifying with the God of his father. This was *his* God now. He named the altar El Elohe Israel (or “mighty is the God of Israel”), using and owning his new God-given name.

► What a transformation! From conniving, self-serving scoundrel to generous, God-glorifying worshiper. But really, isn't that the transformation we too have enjoyed? Thank God for the transformation He has wrought in you.

Pray with Us

We praise you, Lord, for your transformative power in our lives! You are always sanctifying us, even when we are unaware of your work. Thank you for your merciful intervention in our hearts.

Dinah—Deceit, Defilement, and Revenge

Read Genesis 34

*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?—Jeremiah 17:9*

“Revenge Plays,” like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, share key characteristics. A crime is committed (usually violent and against a family member of the avenger), but ordinary law cannot punish it. The protagonist seeks revenge, usually through complex planning. The avenger places him/herself outside the normal moral order and causes a catastrophe.

Genesis 34 reads like a revenge play. Leah’s daughter Dinah found herself in a storm of trauma and controversy. Shechem, the son of Hamor (ruler of the land), raped Dinah (v. 2) and then told his father he wanted her for his wife. This act of violation may have been a strategy to force the marriage. Hamor and Shechem came to Jacob to negotiate the deal, but Dinah’s brothers were understandably furious. Shechem begged for favor. To sweeten the deal, Hamor invited Jacob to stay in the land and intermarry with their people (vv. 9–10). Was God’s covenant with Abraham in jeopardy? The suggested arrangement would have economic

and social benefits, but it meant the assimilation of Israel by the Canaanites and a loss of their distinct identity.

Jacob’s sons responded with deceit. They would only consent if the men in the land were circumcised. It may shock the reader that Shechem and Hamor agreed. They didn’t realize the cunning plot behind the deal. Three days later, while the men were still recovering, Jacob’s sons (Simeon and Levi) attacked the city and slaughtered every single man (vv. 25–29). They rescued Dinah and took women, children, and flocks as plunder. The providence of God was still at work—even in this reprehensible act. It is a reminder that God is able to accomplish His will, even in the context of horrific human behavior.

► The moral of Dinah’s story is not a license to sin. God longs for our obedience and holiness. But there is also a comfort here, that—even in the midst of tragedy—His sovereignty is not superseded.

Pray with Us

We are limited by time and space, and it can be difficult to see beyond the tragedies and hardships that we encounter. Thank you, Lord, for your love and power, which overcome the greatest darkness.

Rachel—Cleaning House

Read Genesis 35:1–20

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.—Colossians 3:5

There are several popular shows today about how to organize your home. But before the experts can display your items neatly in clear matching bins, they have an important request: Edit! Go through all of your belongings and get rid of what you do not need. Only then can they put your home in order.

In Genesis 35, Jacob and Rachel had some purging to do. God had instructed Jacob to settle in Bethel and build an altar to Him. Even though Jacob had robbed his brother and was running away in self-preservation, God protected and prospered him. This altar would remind him of that truth. Before Jacob could move, Jacob led his household in a major purification project. Jacob instructed them to bring all the foreign gods they had acquired, and he buried them (vv. 2–4). This is the first purging process of its kind recorded in Scripture—and the first clear call to monotheism. As God deepened His call on Jacob's family line, He expected undivided devotion.

In Bethel, Jacob built the altar. Then God appeared to Jacob again, calling Himself “God Almighty” (v. 11), reiterating yet again His covenant promises. He also changed Jacob's name once more to “Israel” (v. 10). As the Jacob and Rachel narrative comes to a close, the entire scene speaks of transformation—the slow and deliberate work of God in the lives of His own. Jacob's family had moved on, but they had not yet reached Bethlehem when Rachel went into labor. Sadly, it was a difficult birth, and Rachel died. Her final words were to name this baby Ben-Oni (Son of My Trouble). Jacob later changed it to Benjamin, meaning Son of the Right Hand.

► Through Rachel's life—and Jacob's—we see the nature of God. He accomplishes His will in spite of our failings. We also learn what it means to follow Him with singular focus, to purge our idols. Are there idols you need to purge?

Pray with Us

Lord, forgive us for the things we cling to instead of you. Open our eyes to idols we are unaware of and grant us godly grief and repentance. Teach us to flee from everything that distracts us from you.

Tamar—More Righteous Than I

Read Genesis 38

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray.—1 John 3:7

One of my writing professors often said, “Sometimes in order to tell one story well, you need to tell two.” Sometimes two narratives, when placed side by side, deepen the impact of each individual story. At first glance, Genesis 38 feels like an intrusion into the life of Joseph. In chapter 38, we jump ahead to Judah’s story, you may wonder what will become of Joseph. We learn that Joseph’s brother Judah married and had three sons. But as soon as Judah arranged for his first son Er to marry Tamar, things spiraled downward. Because of Er’s wickedness, God put him to death (v. 6). Levirate law dictated that if a woman’s husband died, his brother must bear a child by her to continue the dead brother’s line. When Judah’s second son, Onan, refused to comply, God put him to death also (v. 10).

What a sorrowful time this must have been in Judah’s life! In response to Judah’s instruction, Tamar lived as a widow. A long time later, Judah, whose own wife had died,

came to town. Hittite levirate law also stipulated that when a widow married her late husband’s brother and he died, she was to marry his father. On the surface it may seem Tamar was obeying this law, but her actions (disguising herself as a prostitute) continued her family’s legacy of deception.

When Tamar revealed her pregnancy, Judah condemned her to death. But when she revealed his own culpability, he acknowledged his sin, which begins a stunning transformation. This same Judah promised to keep Benjamin safe (Gen. 43:8–9). This same Judah offered himself in place of Benjamin (44:18–45:3). This same Judah was blessed by Jacob with the royal line (49:8–12). And this same Judah carried—along with Tamar—the line of Christ (Matt. 1:3).

► Are you open to seeing the sin that may exist in your own life? Set aside time today to spend in God’s presence, asking Him to expose any sins that need to be revealed.

Pray with Us

With David we pray, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23–24).

Potiphar's Wife—A God of Absolutes

Read Genesis 39

God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.—1 Corinthians 10:13

When teaching communication skills, I caution my students against the overuse of absolute descriptors. Words such as “never” and “always” should be used sparingly since they rarely reflect the reality of human action. However, Genesis 39 is filled with absolutes. First, we are told that the Lord was with Joseph—in absolute ways. Notice the use of words like “everything” and “anything.” The Lord gave Joseph success in everything he did (v. 3). Potiphar entrusted to his care everything he owned (v. 5). Because of Joseph, the blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had (v. 5).

The contrast between what the Lord was doing in Judah's life (putting his sons to death; see Genesis 38) and what He was doing for Joseph could not be greater. Then temptation came in the form of Potiphar's wife. In response to her seduction, Joseph reiterated the absolute nature of Potiphar's trust in him. “My master does not concern himself with *anything* . . . *Everything* he owns he

has entrusted to my care. *No one* is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld *nothing* from me except you, because you are his wife” (vv. 8–9, emphasis added). Joseph stands strong, recognizing that to sin against Potiphar was to sin against God. But Potiphar's wife was persistent and tried again. This time, she kept his cloak and used it against him. Notice that this was the second time Joseph's coat had been used against him.

Potiphar sent Joseph to prison. However, God was with Joseph and his character remained the same. As a result, “the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there” (v. 22). God continued to give success to Joseph “in whatever he did” (v. 23), another absolute!

► Take comfort today in the absolute nature of a God who *always* cares for His children and never changes. While your circumstances may change, God *never* does.

Pray with Us

We are constantly adjusting to change, both good and bad. Today, Lord, we pause to rest in your unchanging ways. Thank you for being a God we can depend on.

Miriam—Persistent Providence

Read Exodus 2:1–10

The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.—Psalm 103:19

Our adoption story is full of moments where God coordinated the timing. The most obvious example is that our kids' adoptions were finalized on the exact same day. One three-year journey through the Chicago foster system and one six-year process through the China Center of Adoption Affairs—both ended on March 26, 2012.

God is involved in the details of our lives! In Exodus 2, we meet Miriam. Her parents were from the tribe of Levi, which provided spiritual leadership for God's people. They lived in Egypt, under the oppressive hand of a Pharaoh who ordered every Hebrew baby boy thrown into the Nile. Miriam's mother, Jochebed, had a "fine" (i.e., exceptional) baby boy. After three months of hiding the baby, she was forced to use drastic measures to keep him alive. She constructed a small boat (a "tebah," the same Hebrew word used for Noah's ark).

Baby Moses was hidden in the "tebah" whenever danger was high.

On this day, young Miriam was nearby when Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in the Nile and spotted the basket among the reeds. When her maidens retrieved it, the baby was crying. Perhaps his cries had attracted the princess's attention—another point of providence. The princess's heart softened, and Miriam jumped into action. Wise beyond her years, she asked: "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women?" (v. 7). The princess responded: "Go!"

Jochebed must have felt shock, fear, relief, and joy when Miriam shared the news. Moses would be raised as a royal with an exceptional education while maintaining a connection to his biological family and heritage. Clearly, the hand of God was all over this plan.

► Reflect on the providence of God in your life. Where has He orchestrated the timing of things? Where has He given you courage and presence of mind? When has He worked out His plan in ways that were both joyous and painful?

Pray with Us

It is easy to praise you the moment we see our prayers answered, but we quickly forget the ways you have blessed us. Don't let us forget the miracles you have worked in our lives, to the glory of your name!

Miriam—The Prophetess

Read Exodus 15:1–21

*The Lord is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.—Exodus 15:2*

My high school English teacher was the austere Opal Underbakke. When I was a senior, she encouraged my class to enter a national writing competition and worked with me to hone my essay, which won second place. When the piece was published, I wrote in my author profile that I wanted to be an English teacher because of what Mrs. Underbakke had done for me.

In Exodus 15, we find Miriam again—now an old woman and prophetess, leading side by side with her brothers Moses and Aaron. This is the first—and only—time she is mentioned by name in the book. A lot had happened since she and Moses were children and much of it is recorded in this worshipful song. Moses received his call from God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He had faced repeated challenges, negotiating with Pharaoh and navigating the ten plagues. Finally, God’s people left Egypt, only to be chased by Pharaoh’s chariots. God parted the

sea and spared their lives by drowning Pharaoh’s horses and men in the returning waters (Exodus 14).

After this miraculous salvation, the people paused to give praise. Moses led the people in this song. Then Miriam took the lead and taught the women the tune (v. 21)—a melody that would be sung and remembered in every household, in that time and beyond. Miriam is the first woman to be called a “prophetess” in Scripture. The role of a prophet was to receive instructive words from the Lord and relay them to the people to guide them. The prophet Micah confirmed Miriam’s leadership role during the Exodus in Micah 6:4. The courage and presence of mind that young Miriam had displayed—even as a little girl—was still evident as an adult.

► What qualities did you display as a child that God has continued to develop and use for His glory into your adult life? How can you encourage the gifting you already see in the children around you?

Pray with Us

Father, you have given us talents and skills for a purpose. Give us opportunities to serve you with our gifts—and to encourage and equip young people to do the same!

Miriam—Competing for Leadership

Read Numbers 12:1–8

*The power of the wicked will be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous. — Psalm 37:17*

At times, we all experience envy—resenting the blessing or success of others. But envy can be particularly damaging when we let it divide the people of God. In Numbers 11, the Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for two years, and they were frustrated. They claimed they were treated better in Egypt, and even complained about the manna God provided (11:1–6). They wanted meat! Finally, God sent quail—more than they could eat (11:31–34). But because of their continued discontent, God also sent a plague.

Not long after, Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses (12:1). The surface complaint was that Moses had taken a Cushite wife. However, the real issue was jealousy. “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” (v. 2). This sibling trio was being pulled apart by envy and competition. The use of the feminine singular verb in verse 1 implicates Miriam as the point person. Aaron followed her

lead. Verse 2 ends with an ominous declaration of God’s omniscience: “And the Lord heard this.”

We are told in verse 3 that Moses responded to these accusations with “humility.” But God—in true parental fashion—called all three siblings to the tent of meeting for a talk. Miriam must have been shaking in her sandals when the Lord appeared in a pillar of cloud (v. 6). Aaron, the priest, would typically have been allowed entrance. But on this day, God stopped them all at the door—a clear signal of divine displeasure. From the cloud, God spoke. He focused on the Moses’ faithfulness and uniqueness. God communicated more directly with Moses than with any other prophet.

► From this passage, we can take away a challenge and a charge. First, we must guard ourselves against envy. Yank it out early before it puts down roots. And second, we must strive for the distinction that Moses earned: a humble and faithful servant of the Lord.

Pray with Us

May we delight so fervently in your purposes that we give no thought to ourselves. May we have true humility that proceeds from recognizing our position before you, seeking you faithfully in all we endeavor!

Miriam—A Solemn Warning

Read Numbers 12:9–16

*Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.—Ecclesiastes 12:13*

Like all parents everywhere, my husband and I have frequent conversations about how to discipline our children. Often we ask ourselves: Does the punishment fit the crime? Will this particular consequence teach the lesson we long for our kids to learn? The answer isn't always as obvious as one might imagine. Are we being too lenient? Or too harsh?

From a human perspective, God's discipline toward Miriam in Numbers chapter 12 might seem too severe. Even after He verbally chastised her and Aaron for their jealousy, God's anger still burned toward them. So much so that He followed up His lecture with leprous sores all over Miriam's body—and only hers (vv. 10–11). It is the first case of leprosy recorded in the Bible. Immediately, Aaron began to plead for her deliverance. He did not just ask for healing though. He begged for mercy: "I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed" (v. 11). Note that he addressed his

plea to Moses. Not to God. He had been humbled and knew now his deferential place.

Without question, hesitation, or condemnation, Moses cried out to the Lord on Miriam's behalf: "Please, God, heal her!" (v. 13). God's response demonstrates both His holiness and His grace. Miriam would endure seven days of the disease. For seven days, she would be banished from her community, sending a strong message regarding the seriousness of sin to all of God's people who could not move until she was cleansed and restored.

▶ Hebrews 12:6 tells us that "the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." Has God allowed the consequences of sin to be made manifest in your life or the lives of people you love? What did it teach you? As we conclude this study, which woman's story has resonated most deeply with you? What have you learned about God by studying their lives?

Pray with Us

Dear God, you alone bring joy out of pain, and even your discipline demonstrates your mercy. Teach us to submit to your rebuke with the humility of Aaron. Thank you for your forgiveness!

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