



June-July 2020

Beginnings

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers
From Genesis (1)**

**Dr. Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue S
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
403-327-2082
bruce@firstb.net
www.firstb.net**

Monday, June 22: Genesis 1:1-25

Enjoy the rhythm, and poetic beauty of this description of creation.

- Who created the heavens and the earth?
- What is His evaluation of it?
- To whom does all of creation belong?
- What does this mean for us?

For almost 30 years, I have taught geography at Christian liberal arts universities (now online of course). One of the practices I ask my students to do is to NOT refer to the world around us as “the environment” or “nature.” I encourage them to think and talk about **“God’s creation”**—that is what it is after all. The phrase “the environment” implies God’s good world is a commodity we can exploit and dispose of as we wish. The word “nature” can imply something separate from us – we may be God’s creation but we think “nature” isn’t. In fact, Genesis says, every created thing is as much God’s precious handiwork as we are.

When we think of and talk about “God’s creation,” we see the world differently. Seeing, thinking, and living within God’s world as His creation, we walk through the world with eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to know God and His wisdom in deeper ways. We see God’s hand and Spirit at work in all things, in all places, all the time. We treat His world differently. This is God’s art gallery. Creation is His world, not ours.

Genesis 1 helps us know God better. What do we learn about God?

- He is the Creator of everything, over everything, not part of His creation.
- He is a God of order, not chaos.
- He creates interconnected, interdependent, perfect natural systems
- He creates everything good.
- He delights in His creation.

God is the great Artist, the great Designer, the great Creator of the universe. Theologian, J.I. Packer, writes, *“Genesis 1 and 2 tell us WHO without giving many answers about HOW ... The message of these two chapters is this: ‘You have seen the sea? The sky? Sun, moon, and stars? You have watched the birds and the fish? You have observed the landscape, the vegetation, the animals, the insects, all the big and little things together? You have marveled at the wonderful complexity of human beings, with all their powers and skills ... ? Fantastic, isn’t it. Well now, meet the one who is behind it all.’ ... Genesis shows us the Creator rather than the creation and teaches us knowledge of God the Father rather than physical science ...”* (cited in *The Case for Christianity*).

Read Genesis 1 outside. Simply enjoy the wonder of God’s glorious creation. Worship the Creator.

*We light a candle and enjoy the flickering light,
the fragrance, and warmth it creates.
But without the spark that ignites, there will be no flame
Without the wax, the source of power,
the wick will not burn.
Without the flame there will be no fragrance,
no warmth, no light.
And so with us, Lord.
You are the catalyst that ignites us and the fuel that sustains us.
You fill us with your fragrance as you enter our lives.
You empower us to carry your flame in our hearts
To be the fragrance, warmth,
and light of your love
in this dark world.
May we be Your light in the darkness.
Amen*

Tuesday, June 23: Genesis 1:26-31

From the very beginning, humanity is defined as “male and female” – each gender complementing the other, neither complete in and of themselves. We are complete in relationship with others and with God.

Alone among God’s creatures, humans are defined as being made *“in the image of God.”* What this means is a matter of considerable debate. It probably does **not** mean that God looks like us – with two arms, legs, eyes, ears, nose, etc. (God is usually described in the Bible using human-ish descriptors, probably because we could not imagine anything different).

Jesus, however, is described as: *“the image of the invisible God”* (Colossians 1:15); He represents the “image of God” in all its perfection. What does Jesus show us? He shows us God’s nature, character, heart, goals, ethics, creativity, mission, grace, forgiveness, mercy, way of relating, love – and a whole lot more. And He shows all this in perfect relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. He shows us how to be perfectly human. We are created to be human as Jesus is truly human.

Regent College professor, Rikki Watts, writes: *“If humans are made in God’s image, then the repercussions are serious indeed. In the ancient world, to deface the image of the king or deity was tantamount to high treason. If one did not want to live in his realm or under his kingship, that could be arranged, either by exile or death. If we take the Genesis 1 account seriously, namely, that every human being is made in God’s image, then we need to know that any act of abuse against another human being is an act of high treason against the God whose image we bear and to whose kingship and sovereignty we therefore inherently bear witness. With this in mind, it is not hard to comprehend why Jews and Christians have historically put such a high value on human life, whether women, slaves, gladiators, newly born, or even unborn children.”*

Being made “in the image of God,” our calling is to model God’s nature, character, heart, goals, ethics, creativity, mission, way of relating, love – and a whole lot more, too. We do this in relationship with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and with one another.

Of course, Jesus was able to do all this perfectly. I am not perfect. I’m a work in progress. I have good days and bad days. I have my noble moments and my abysmal failures. But overall my calling is to *“love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength”* (as Jesus did) and *“love my neighbour as myself”* (as Jesus did). According to Jesus, those commands summarize all of God’s law. And if I were to do them, I would be living “in His image,” fulfilling God’s will and mission of building His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, leading people to faith in Jesus, tending and caring for His creation, etc. I try. But I fail. Thankfully God forgives me, picks me up, and gives me a second, third, fourth, fifth new start ...

Julian of Norwich once commented on a little hazelnut: *“In this little thing I see three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it.”* Those truths are true of me, too. God made me; God loves me; and He will sustain me every moment of every day. I am “good” in His eyes. God’s blessing is an encouragement for my journey. My challenge is to live “in His image” every moment of every day. How can I be a bit more like Jesus, today?

*God of healing, God of wholeness,
we bring our brokenness, our sinfulness, our fears, and despair,
and lay them at your feet.
God of healing, God of wholeness,
we hold out hearts and hands, minds and souls
to feel your touch, and know the peace that only you can bring.
God of healing, God of wholeness,
this precious moment in your presence and power
grant us faith and confidence
that here broken lives are made whole.
In your love. In your touch. In your grace.
Amen*

Wednesday, June 24: Genesis 1:31-2:3

The climax of the creation story is not the creation of human beings (Day 6). The culmination of the whole story comes on Day 7 when God – Father, Son, and Spirit – rests. God's Sabbath rest is to delight in His creation, to look with joy on His world and say, *"This is very good. Let's enjoy it."* This is the highlight. (This is one of those instances when the chapter breaks, introduced in the 13th century, are not helpful: we may not naturally carry on into Day 7. The story of creation goes from Genesis 1:1 through 2:3).

Notice the seventh day does NOT end with the familiar formula, *"And there was evening, and there was morning – the ___ day."* We are living Day 7 still. The story has begun and will go on and on ... we are part of it. Our lives are about more than labour, more than caring for the world, more than trying to improve society (though those are good things, to which we are called). The culmination/purpose of our lives – on a weekly basis and a lifelong basis – is Sabbath, a time to enjoy and celebrate God and His goodness.

Sabbath is not really a time to rest up, so we go back to work Monday renewed and refreshed.

Sabbath is a time for us to delight in God and in His creation. It is a time for us to worship (in a much grander sense than just doing church, though it includes that), to *"taste and see that the Lord is good."* It's a time to enjoy creation – with other people, in His creation around us, celebrating art, music, science, culture, and in many, many other ways.

Old Testament scholar, John Walton, writes, *"Scripture tells us little about what we are to do on the Sabbath. It gives us a clue by indicating what we are not to do, but if the Sabbath has its total focus in recognition of God, it would detract considerably if he had to tell us what to do. Be creative. Do whatever reflects your love, appreciation, respect, and awe of the God of all the cosmos ... Think for a moment about the cultural phenomenon of holidays. Take Memorial Day (Canada's Remembrance Day) – a day set aside to honor those who have died in wars, who have given their lives to preserve the ideals and freedom we enjoy. A significant aspect of the honor accorded is that the day is designated as a federal holiday when, as a rule, people do not work. But, as with the Sabbath, that defines what we do not do, rather than what we do.*

"So what do we DO on Memorial Day to give honor? For the most part it depends on whether one has loved ones who gave their lives. The more gratitude one feels toward the sacrifice of those who died, the more effort will go into planning ways to give honor. Some have parades; some have graveside services; some buy flowers to plant by tombstones. What should be the personal response? The more the day means to a person, the more deliberate he or she will be about scheduling appropriate activities.

"This is similar to how the Sabbath works ... it is up to the individual to determine what his or her personal response will be in order to give the honor that is due. The parades and ceremonies of a holiday are matched by the worship services of the Sabbath. The more gratitude we feel toward God and the more we desire to honor him, the more the ceremonies will mean and the more we will seek out ways to observe the Sabbath." How can you give thanks to God? Honour Him? Worship Him?

*As I adventure with you today -
be the compass that guides me,
the light that shines on my path, the only one I follow.
As I adventure with you today -
be the word that encourages,
the hand that reaches out each time I stumble
As I adventure with you today -
let me glimpse our destination
and appreciate the places through which you lead me
As I adventure with you today -
be the strength I need to follow;
and as the day draws to a close, let me rest in your embrace.
Amen*

Thursday, June 25: Genesis 2:4-17

In Scripture there are several versions of the creation story, each with a unique purpose, each complementing the others to give us a richer picture of God, His glory, and His creation (see, for example, Psalm 19, Psalm 103-104, or Job 38-41). Genesis 2:4-17 is another version of the creation story, filling in some of the details of creation of humanity.

Note particularly 2:15: "*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*" One of the primary purposes of our existence is to tend and watch over God's creation.

In the ancient world, "the image" of a god or an emperor, represented that person. The image was perceived to be their real presence. One of the meanings of being created "in the image of God," then, is we are God's people, His representatives, His ambassadors, His stewards on earth. Just as the Governor General is the Queen's representative in Canada, we are God's representatives in His creation.

As those created in the image of God, we have the responsibility to look after His creation, wisely and well, on His behalf. Ultimately God does sustain and care for His creation, but as His image-bearers we are called to be His hands and feet, practically making that happen, caring for His world day-by-day. Created in God's image, we are to live as Jesus would live were He here. That's our mandate. Our vocation. Our purpose.

We are God's stewards/managers of what we "possess" – not owners (Jesus told several parables where **He/God** is the "owner" and **we** are good or not-so-good tenants. He gives "talents" [in Jesus' day, a unit of money] to care for wisely; He expects us to manage what we are entrusted to us, for His glory).

How does a perspective that sees myself as a steward, entrusted with a home, family, friends, money, talents, health, skills, knowledge, resources, etc., change the way I view my life? My possibilities? My responsibilities? What is God saying to me?

I may work many jobs, enjoy many recreations, and do many things in my life, but underneath it all, dare I ask myself:

- ***Is what I am doing "working" and "taking care of" God's creation?*** (natural creation, other people, beauty, culture)? Am I giving more than I am taking? Am I being a good steward of the blessings God has entrusted me with? Am I building up the Kingdom of God?
- ***Or, Is what I am doing resulting in the opposite?*** Am I taking more than I am giving? Am I being a poor steward of my blessings? Am I not representing the Kingdom well? Is how I am living bringing honour and glory to Jesus? What is God saying to me?

*Creator God, we glimpse your beauty
in setting sun, mountain top, eagle's wing.
We sense your power in thunder crash,
lightning flash and ocean's roar.
Creator God we praise you.*

*Precious Jesus, we see your love
stretched out upon a cruel cross.
We stand in awe at your sacrifice,
pure love poured out for humankind.
Precious Jesus we praise you.*

*Holy Spirit, we see your power
in lives transformed, hearts on fire.
We listen for your still, small voice,
comforting, guiding, calling.
Holy Spirit we praise you.*

Amen

June 26: Genesis 2:4-25

There are three characters in Genesis 2. The first, the main character, is God. He is the One who creates, forms and shapes everything. The second two are the man (in Hebrew "*adam*," the common Hebrew word for "*man*"; it is not really a proper name, "Adam") and the suitable helper/partner for him, the woman.

We can get all tied up in knots if we think this passage about the "science" or biology of human origins. Those modern scientific debates really seem irrelevant and silly when you read this passage. "Science," as we know it, didn't even really exist until the 19th Century. We can totally miss the point. I appreciate Sara Maitland's candor: "*While there is a great deal said about 'the pre-scientific worldview' and 'the modern scientific mind,' we seem to find it hard to accept fully that Genesis was written down in a pre-scientific era so that whatever it is, it is not likely to be a scientific text.*" We lose the wonder, poetry, art, and passion of these passages – and the glory of God as Creator – if we try to strip them down and try to make them clinical texts for the biology lab, rather than passionate celebrations of relationship.

Genesis 2 is "poetic theology" not "scientific theology." Poetic theology is far more profound and far more powerful because it explores truths through metaphor and imagery that are beyond what modern science can express in lab manuals. Contemporary science is incredible for describing some kinds of truth. It is not helpful for discussing other things like relationships with people (love for others) or our relationship with God (His love for us/our love for Him). We need other language to talk about such profoundly wonder-full (full of wonder) realities. More helpful than scientific explanations, poetry, story, and metaphor are great, true ways we can express what is deeply rooted in our hearts, souls, and minds. These are true, too.

This passage evokes wonderful images of a potter (God), lovingly shaping a beautiful work of art (the man). The word "formed" (2:7) is the same verb used to describe the potter's work in Jeremiah 18:1-6. Then – miracle of miracles – God breathes life into him. Genesis 2 creates an equally amazing image of two human beings – man and woman – joined, not at the hip, but at the rib.

This is not dull, boring genetics or human biology. This imagery expresses profound *theological* truths that boggle the mind about who God is, who we are individually, who we are in relationship with God, and with one another. Spend some time with this passage as poetic theology – and be overcome with wonder ...

- God, our loving heavenly Father, shapes us in a very loving, personal, purposeful, profound way
- God, our loving heavenly Father, breathes life into us
- God, our loving heavenly Father, gifts us with relationships with other people
- God, our loving heavenly Father, invites us to "to tend and watch over" His creation
- God, our loving heavenly Father, establishes boundaries for us, for our own good (even though we may not understand them)

Read this passage over, prayerfully, reflectively, thoughtfully, a few times. What is God saying to you: about who He is? About who you are? About who significant people in your life are?

*For each step that I might take
Be my guide, O Lord of life.
For each load that I might bear
Be my strength, O Lord of life.
For each mountain I might face
Be my power, O Lord of life.
For each river that might impede
Be my safety, O Lord of life.
For each place where I might rest
Be my peace, O Lord of life.
For each sunrise and sunset
Be my joy, O Lord of life.
Amen*

Saturday, June 27: Genesis 3:1-7

It's all going so well ... and then it all goes so wrong.

Paul will write, *"I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate ... I have discovered this principle of life – that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong ... Oh, what a miserable person I am."* (Romans 7:15-24). Do you ever identify with Paul? Do you think Adam and Eve, in hindsight, could?

It's interesting that the first "challenge" the serpent throws at Adam and Eve face is not illness, poverty, thirst, or hunger, but the temptation to be like God. Had the serpent tempted them with more practical needs, they may well have turned back to God in faith – after all He had provided them with all they needed. But the one thing that God had not blessed them with – the ONLY thing HE had not blessed them with – was the power to establish what is good and what is evil, to make all the rules, to be in complete control. The serpent finds Adam's and Eve's Achilles' heels – **THEY** want to say what is right and wrong; **THEY** want to set the guidelines; **THEY** want control.

The result of their disobedience and sin will be catastrophic for them, for humanity, and for all creation.

Why do people want to make the rules? Decided for themselves what is good or evil? Be in control? What is it about our human nature that so stubbornly resists acknowledging that God – our Creator – knows best?

Am I ever like Adam and Eve?

Paul cries out in Romans 7:24, *"Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"* It's a question that dominates the Scriptures, generation after generation. Paul answers his own question: *"Thank God. The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 7:25). This side of Jesus' death and resurrection, we know the power of sin and death has FINALLY been defeated through Jesus' cross and victory over death. Praise God. Our relationship with God is restored once more, through Jesus. Thank God for His good news in Jesus, our Saviour.

Pray that God would help us to resist temptation and be faithful to His call and Word in our lives.

*Who do we follow ... a teacher?
You were a good teacher, full of wisdom,
A moral compass, guidance for the journey.*

*Who do we follow ... a prophet?
You were indeed a prophet, bringing God's word
Of love, justice, and freedom for the journey.*

*Who do we follow ... a friend?
You were certainly friend, to outcast and sinner;
Feeding the weak, lightening the load for the journey.*

*Who do we follow ...?
All of these. None of these.
For as this world's Saviour
You are all of these and so, so much more.
As you take the very least of us
And make the very most of us.*

*Who do we follow?
I follow Jesus Christ, my Saviour,
my Lord, my King.
Amen*

Sunday, June 28: Genesis 3:8-19

What are we here for? What is life all about? All of creation – including us – exists to glorify and enjoy God. Genesis 3 gives us a wonderful picture of what life ought to be: *"When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man (Adam) and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden ... the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'"* (3:8-9). We were created to enjoy walking with, talking with, and living with God (unfortunately Adam and Eve's sin and disobedience messed that all up).

*"That God-focused goal of human life (to glorify and enjoy God) is not something that sets us **apart** from the rest of creation," writes Christopher Wright. "Rather it is something we **share** with the rest of creation. That is the 'chief end' of all creation. The only difference is that we **human** beings must glorify our creator in uniquely **human** ways. We are the only creatures who are made in the image of God, and so the praise and glory we bring to God reflects that status. So, as humans we praise God with hearts and hands and voices, with rationality as well as emotion, with language, art, music and craft – with all that reflects the God in whose image we were made. Our praise is explicitly **human** praise."*

The rest of creation – animals, birds, trees, flowers, rivers, mountains – all praises God, too. We cannot begin to comprehend how a bear, fir tree, or mountain praises God – nor can we begin to understand how God relates to His non-human creation. But He does (see also Psalm 65, 104, 148 etc.). Just because we don't understand non-human worship doesn't make it any less real. It humbles us to remember that the great God we worship – and the wonders of His creation – are so far beyond our comprehension.

Prayer – conversation with the God who formed us and sustains us – is a rediscovery of that open, honest, free relationship God which the first people enjoyed. *"How good of God to provide us a way back into his heart,"* writes Richard Foster. *"He knows that we are stiff-necked and hard-hearted, so he has provided a means of entrance. Jesus, the Christ, lived a perfect life, died in our place, and rose victorious over all the dark powers so that we might live through him."* This is great news. Through Jesus we can re-enter into God's presence. We can enjoy the kind of freedom and fellowship for which we were created.

- Sometimes we're afraid of God. Does He really love **me**? Yes, He does.
- Sometimes we think we're not good enough for God. Through Jesus He has dealt with your sin once, for all, forever. As you confess your sin, you are totally forgiven.
- Sometimes we wonder if God really wants to spend time with **me**. Absolutely. He formed you.
- Sometimes we think God is hiding from us. God is looking you out, to spend time with you.

God asks **YOU**, *"Where are you?"* He really, really, really wants to share life with you. As you pray today, pray that you would know His presence, peace, wisdom, guidance, and grace today ...

*Today is going to be a struggle.
The act of rising, journeying,
conversation, bustling crowds,
those I work with, people I meet.*

*Be my confidence, my assurance,
the words that I speak.
Be my freedom, my guidance,
as I walk through these streets.*

*Today is going to be a struggle.
Keep my head above water,
and my eyes fixed on you.*

*We want for nothing if we journey with our God,
his footsteps leading, his hand to steady
if we should fall.*

Amen

Monday, June 29: Genesis 3:20-24

Movie Director, Cecil B. DeMille, once said, *"The way to make a film is to begin with an earthquake and work up to a climax."*

We're only in the third chapter of Genesis and we've hit our earthquake. The good creation of Genesis 1 and the peaceful, idyllic Eden of Genesis 2 is shattered by Adam and Eve's disobedience and the dire consequences recorded in Genesis 3. The next 926 chapters of the Old Testament will chronicle the pain, suffering, and evil that come from the crisis in these first few paragraphs of Genesis.

We know the climaxes to which the story will lead us. First of all, we will come to the death and resurrection of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus destroys the power of sin and death. Through His death and resurrection, He restores our relationship with God so we can talk with Him, share with Him, and live with Him in peace and freedom again. Jesus – whom Paul calls the "second Adam" – undoes the evil let loose by the first Adam.

The second climax, which is yet to come, is when Jesus returns again and all is set to right once, for all, and forever. When heaven and earth are all renewed and evil and sin are not just defeated but wiped away completely and eternally. We wait for that glorious time to come.

In the meantime, we live in this awkward in-between world. Evil is still very much a reality in our world. The Covid-19 virus reminds us of that. The April 19 mass shootings in Nova Scotia remind us of that. The realities of wars, earthquakes, cancers, injustices, poverty, and addictions remind us of that.

However, because of Jesus, we do now have a personal relationship with God (unlike Adam and Eve after they are kicked out of Eden). His Holy Spirit – His personal presence and power – are within each of us. He is with us always. That's great news. We know His comfort, His hope, His peace, His healing, His mercy, His correction, His love, His encouragement, His guidance, His courage, and His joy.

Imagine how frightened, alone, and desperate Adam and Eve must have felt as they left the safety, security, protection, and provision of Eden – and the personal presence of God – forever.

For us, in 2020, the good news is that, even though there is still much evil around us, we DO KNOW the personal presence of God through His Spirit. We do know His strength. We do know His sustaining reality in our lives. Jesus' promise is that He is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

How does the fact that Jesus is with you ALWAYS, encourage you today?

*God of Love, God of Peace -
This fractured word cries out in pain,
burns deep into my soul and challenges me to make a difference.
God of Love, God of Peace -
God of this world,
scarred by grief and tears, ignorance and fear,
soften hearts of stone:
and begin with mine.
God of Love, God of Peace -
create within me a heart for people,
a desire for change, for new beginnings.
To start this day.
Amen*

Tuesday, June 30: Genesis 4

Compared to his mysterious parents, Cain is depressingly easy to understand. His life seems dreary and dull. No colour is added to his biography: he "cultivated the ground" and he "had sexual relations with his

wife.” There is no indication the poor fellow experienced love and joy, made friends, or had fun.

When he tries to make an offering to God, his gift is rejected. It is not clear why. As the Bible does not offer a reason, we can only imagine that somehow Cain’s motive in bringing his offering is not right. He allows his initial, instinctive anger to grow until, in a coldly calculating way, he does a terrible thing.

The story of Cain and Abel is really a continuation and amplification of the sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Many of the same themes are present in both stories, just ramped up in Genesis 4. In the earlier story, Adam and Eve are tempted, they give in, they commit a crime, they are punished, and they are exiled. Cain is tempted, he gives in, he commits a heinous crime, he is punished, and he is exiled.

God’s questions stand out. To Adam and Eve, God asks, *“Where are you?”* (3:9) – they blame the serpent. To Cain, God asks, *“Where is your brother?”* (v 9). Cain’s answer, *“Am I my brother’s keeper?”* uses the word “keep” that means constant watching over, like a shepherd with sheep, or a guard, or God with his people (Genesis 30:31; 1 Kings 14:27; Psalm 121:4–8). Cain is exaggerating his responsibility: *“Do you expect me to know where he is every minute of the day?”* Just as Adam and Eve’s passing the buck is a common ploy when one has done something wrong, so is claiming that unreasonable demands are made of us. It’s not our fault. Cain is trying to excuse his bad behaviour.

Adam and Eve’s sin in chapter 3 was turning away from God. Cain’s sin, in Chapter 4, is turning from one’s fellow human. Significantly, however, God even loves and will care for a sinner like Cain. God doesn’t give up anyone, no matter how far short they fall of His desire for them.

Cain’s sin is inexcusable. It is horrible. It is pure evil. But before we get too judgemental, Paul reminds us, *“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one”* (Romans 3:11-12). Our sin may be less serious than Cain’s, but we are all imperfect people, too.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Paul says, *“and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith”* (Romans 3:23-25). Thank God, we are saved by the amazing grace of Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, we are forgiven. We are set free. AND, we are invited to know God, walk with Him, and talk with Him, through His Spirit.

Praise God for His provision of healing, hope, and new life through Jesus>

*Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come.
Darkness covers the earth and its people,
but the radiance of God's Light burns away its shadows,
illuminates the smallest corner,
and heralds in the start of a new dawn.
In God's presence, hearts no longer fear,
souls are set free,
and sister shall be at peace with brother,
and kings and princes and nations shall bow down in awe
before the One who comes to reign.
Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come.
Alleluia.*

Canada Day, Wednesday, July 1: Genesis 5

It’s Canada Day. Normally we might all get together for a glorious celebration in the park. Lots of food. Lots of fireworks. We’d have a great party. But it’s 2020 and there probably won’t be a big festival this year. It’s going to seem dull compared with previous years.

Canada Day is a time when we celebrate our nation. But we also remember the past. We think of those who have helped shape the nation we love. First Nations people. And – imperfect as they were – European-background people like Samuel de Champlain, John A. MacDonald, and my immigrant great-grandparents and grandparents (including a grandmother born in Diamond City, just north of Lethbridge). More recent immigrants. Canada's story is written in the lives of millions of people. Some people are well known. Others are less famous. Others have been forgotten. But all have been important in making Canada what it is today. We are a rich tapestry created by generations of people.

Genesis 5 may seem rather dull, too. These are people we have rarely heard of. Who cares?

These people are also part of our history. Our spiritual legacy is full of real human beings, living and belonging to families. We are part of a rich story of God's people: they and we were intended to inherit God's image (5:3). Some will be good. Some will be not-so-good. By naming individuals rather than giving a summarized account, the Bible shows our names matter. Each of us matters. We may only have limited years to live (albeit some of us more than others), but when we offer our gifts to God, He can use them to help His Kingdom come and His will to be done here on earth. We all are important in God's Kingdom.

Another, more somber, connection we share with the ancients is death. Death had no place in the creation story, yet here the references are quite remorseless: after every life comes *"then he died."* Welcome to the post-Adam-and-Eve-sin-reality. The exception is the mysterious Enoch, who *"walked with God"* – the same word used to describe Adam and Eve BEFORE they sinned. He is simply *"taken away"* (5:24).

Through our faith in Jesus, we are forgiven. Our relationship with God is restored. We too, can *"walk with God,"* as His Holy Spirit is within us. We are more like Enoch than the others in this list. Perhaps Enoch is also the prototype for all of us as we look to the future, in the post-cross, post-resurrection age in which we live. We can see death as simply being "taken away" to be with Jesus, forever.

Canada is a great country. Thank God for our home. Pray for our nation today.

We are also citizens of the Kingdom of God (Ephesians 2:19, Philippians 3:20). Thank God for His Kingdom. Pray that we might live, wisely and well, and walk with God, as His faithful people, each and every day.

*This world I live in, this town I live in,
this street I live in, this house I live in -
may each be the focus of my prayer.*

*Those I live with, those I rub shoulders with,
those I work with, those I don't get on with -
may each be the focus of my prayer.*

*Those who laugh, those who cry,
those who hurt, those who hide -
may each be the focus of my prayer.*

*Prayers centered less on self, and more on others,
less on my circumstances, more on the needs of others.
May my life be likewise centered less on self and more on You
and through You to the world, in which I live and move.
Amen*

Thursday, July 2: Genesis 6

I'm going to be honest. You are welcome to think I'm a heretic. But I find Genesis 6 very odd. Who are the "sons of God" in 6:2? Who are the Nephilim in 6:4? Are these supernatural beings (angels?), or are they symbolic representatives of scarily powerful humans? Giants? It's all very odd.

What exactly was *"the wickedness"* of our depraved ancestors? The text is frustratingly vague.

Shouldn't just the perpetrators of the "wickedness" be punished? Doesn't the fact that God destroys so much of His creation seem unfair and disproportionate?

Of course, we normally avoid such hard questions by bringing out the Fisher Price model with a loveable Mr. and Mrs. Noah, with their pairs of fluffy sheep and speckled cows. For us as adults, this overlooks the awkward truth that here we have a horror story, a catastrophe for ALL God's creation – not just humanity. Almost every living thing is going to die. This is a terrifying R-rated story. Not child-friendly in the least.

What has gone wrong? The positive thrust of the genealogy in Genesis 5 is shattered. Previously "*God saw all ... and it was very good*"(1:31), now "*The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil,*" "*God observed all this corruption in the world, for everyone on earth was corrupt*"(6:5, 12). God had commanded humans to "*fill the earth*"(1:28), but now "*the earth ... was filled with violence*"(v 11).

We don't know the specifics. But we can assume they are pretty horrendous. God is broken hearted: "*He was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth*"(6:6). When "*every inclination ... of the human heart was only evil*"(v 5), God's "heart" was "*deeply troubled*"(the same Hebrew root as the "pain" of 3:17) – as the New Living Translation put it, "*It broke his heart*"(6:6). Human sin causes pain for God as well as for humans, most vividly seen in the cross. God is not as an angry and vengeful judge, but a grieving and pained parent.

One crystal-clear aspect is the attitude of the Lord towards the unholy mess which humankind has made of his creation. He is decisive and resolute in acting against the people who have spoiled his plan.

In 6:11-12, Genesis says, "*Now God saw that the earth had become **corrupt** and was filled with violence. God observed all this **corruption** in the world, for everyone on earth was **corrupt**. So God said to Noah, 'I have decided to **destroy** all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth.'*" The highlighted words ("corrupt"/"destroy") are actually the SAME Hebrew word, translated differently into English. In essence, God is saying that what HE is about to destroy has been virtually self-destroyed already.

The Good News? God will "wipe away" (6:7, 13) all sin. David will pray, "*Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unending love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.*"(Psalm 51:1-2). God does just that. God's promise is, "*I – yes, I alone – will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again*"(Isaiah 43:25).

The blood of Jesus washes away all sin. All guilt. In Him and through Him, we are forgiven. We never have to face a potential judgment like this again. [We stand forgiven at the cross.](#)

*Lord, I am assailed from within and without;
self-doubt and loathing, disrespect and insult.
The world closes in, swamps, and would consume me.
I am sinking yet will not drown.
For you endured all this and much more,
beaten, hated, scourged and whipped,
humiliated and killed, yet rising victorious,
to demonstrate the paradox of strength through weakness,
love conquering all.
I am weak but through the grace of Christ I am strong
and together we shall overcome.
Lord, be in the decisions I must make today.
Open my ears to your guidance
and steer my footsteps from temptation.
Amen*

Friday, July 3: Genesis 7

When Christians study Genesis, much time is often spent discussing how literally these famous stories should be understood. Were there aardvarks in Noah's ark? What did the critters eat? Who really cares?

Personally, I believe a different type of question is more useful in equipping us for our own journeys of faith: God uses His word *"to prepare and equip his people to do every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:17). **What is God trying to tell us here about his relationship with his creation and his people?**

God brings a return to watery chaos (7:11), destroying everything *"I have made"*(7:4): earth, birds, wild animals, humans (7:19–23; the same order in which God created them in Genesis 1). The terrible flood does not only destroy people and creatures. It shakes the whole order of the cosmos. Humanity is forced to acknowledge the authority of one infinitely mightier than themselves. We are not the be all and end all.

Then, right in the middle, even as these shattering events are unfolding, we see also the intimate care of God for his own people. He gives his servant, Noah, precise, practical instructions for survival and then – in a lovely touch – when Noah has fully complied, God closes the door of the ark himself (7:16). God saves because Noah follows His instructions.

It's interesting that Noah never says a word. He simply does *"as God commanded"*(6:22; 7:5,9,16). Beyond that, we know nothing of his thoughts, even when shut up in the ark for a year. The focus is on the God who is sovereign throughout.

This wasn't a pleasure boat. It must have felt like a prison or even a coffin. As we have experienced isolation over the past few months, we can identify with Noah and his family's sense of separation and being confined in ways few previous generations could.

How does Genesis 7 help me God be *"prepared and equipped"* *"to do every good work"*? It reminds me

- God provides for and care for His people – us.
- God travels with his people – us. He is always with us.
- God's people – we – are always safe in His hands.
- No matter what challenges and dangers come our way, God will get us through.

*Just a mustard seed, you said:
just a mustard seed of faith to remove the mountain of doubts and difficulties
which beset our often frail existence.
We readily confess, Lord Jesus, there are times when we reach out
seemingly in vain for that mustard seed.
And yet, if we did but think for a moment, in that very act of reaching out,
we reveal the presence of the very seed of faith that we seek.
Lord Jesus we have faith in your power to heal, but lack the self-confidence to ask.
We have faith in your ability to mend broken hearts,
but lack the experience in our own lives.
We have faith in your power to bring wholeness into lives that are incomplete,
but hesitate to trouble you with our prayers.
We are like children, Lord Jesus -
standing here in awe of your power and love,
afraid to ask that which we know is possible
because we are afraid of the consequences of our asking.
Lord Jesus, accept the mustard seed that we hold out to you, hearts outstretched.
Take it and the prayers that we offer and grant us the grace to accept
that our prayers are heard and answered at the moment of asking
by a God who knows our own incompleteness and is working to make us whole.
Amen.*

Saturday, July 4: Genesis 8

Water is truly one of God's blessings. It was there before life on earth; daily it refreshes and sustains us. It was not incidental that our original garden was designed around rivers and streams.

Conversely, there are few things more terrifying than the force of water out of control. Many scientists see excess water (floods), or lack of it (droughts) as among the deadliest threats of our age. Modern events give us some insight into the total devastation wrought upon the lives of this society in the days of Noah.

The author of Genesis is telling a very carefully constructed story.

- Up to this point, he has told a story of **7** days of dryness (7:4), **7** days of waiting (7:10), **40** days of rain (7:17), **150** days of waiting (7:24).
- Now we read "*But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and livestock with him in the boat*" (8:1).
- Then, **150** more days (8:3), **40** days more (8:6), and then **7** days further (8:10), and a final **7** days until they go out (8:12).

What appears to be chaos is actually God's carefully ordered plan. While this flood – thankfully – will never be repeated, imagery of God's control over chaotic waters remains a powerful expression of stability and hope of deliverance in the threats and turmoil of life and history (Exodus 15; Psalm 46,93; Matthew 8:24–27). Through and beyond the floods, he brings renewal and peace.

At the heart of this movement forward is affirmation of personal relationship. "*Remembering*" involves doing something about what comes into mind (Genesis 19:29; Exodus 2:24,25; 6:5–8). When you "remember" someone, you call them. You get in touch. You reach out. In this case, God sends "a wind" (in Hebrew, the same word as "Spirit" as in 1:2) and the waters receded, returning to their normal places.

God puts things right. He does so joyfully. Appropriately, the dove and olive leaf (8:11) have become symbols of peace. Of course, today, regrettably, we forget the original symbolism. The dove and olive branch represent the all-pervasive peace initiated and provided by the Creator.

God has saved us. "*When we were utterly helpless,*" Paul writes, "*Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God*" (Romans 5:6-11). How is this Good News to you today?

*Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
and a generosity of service
that gives without counting cost.
A life overflowing with Grace
poured out from the One
who gave everything
That we might show
the power of love
to a broken world
and share the truth
from a living Word.
Lord, grant us simplicity of faith
And a yearning to share it.
Amen*

Sunday, July 5: Genesis 9:1-17

A marriage is a covenant. Each partner pledges love and loyalty to the other. It's a two-way street. Both parties joyfully and fully commit themselves to the other's best welfare.

Directly after the flood, God establishes a covenant with Noah, his descendants and "*with every living creature on earth*" (Genesis 9:10). We tend to think of God's relationship only with people: people matter; the rest of creation is an afterthought. But throughout Scripture, God's creation is seen holistically – we humans, created in the image of God as His stewards, have a profound responsibility for the well-being of ALL of His creation. Ultimately God will redeem everything in His creation (Romans 8:20–22).

There is a lot of formal repetition in this passage (9:9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17). Rather like in wedding vows, repetition reinforces the solemnity of the covenant. This is serious business.

God's commitment is "*Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood*" (Genesis 9:11). The rainbow is a sign that shows that God will remember even if humans forget (9:16).

What is Noah, his family's (humanity's), and creation's part of the covenant? We need to go back to understand why the flood happened: "*The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil*" (Genesis 6:5). Noah, however, "*was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on earth at the time, and he walked in close fellowship with God ... Noah did everything just as God commanded him*" (Genesis 6:9, 22). God's will for us is that we "*walk in close fellowship with God*" (follow Jesus), live by His commands (1 John 5:3), and to live in God's image, as His ambassadors of good news, hope, and blessing, just as Noah did. This is our part of the covenant: to walk with God and follow His commands.

One shadow, however, is continuing violence leading to fear and terror (9:2). The grim reality of possible further violence and murder haunts the good news in the story (9:5-6).

How can I be encouraged by this covenant? How am I challenged by it?

- What does it look like to "*walk in close fellowship with God*"? How can I do this better?
- What commands of God do I find it easy to follow? Which are difficult? What do I need to work on?

*We want for nothing
if we journey with our God,
his footsteps leading,
his hand to steady if we should fall.*

*We want for nothing
if we listen to our God,
his gentle whisper
breaking through the storms of life.*

*We want for nothing
if we rely upon our God,
his grace enough
to bring healing into broken lives.*

*We want for nothing
in the service of our God,
in blessing others
through our lives so we are blessed.*

*We want for nothing
in the worship of our God,
his Holy Spirit
the comforter will satisfy our souls.
Amen*

Monday, July 6: Genesis 9:18-28

Yesterday we reread Genesis 6:9, 22 – *"Noah was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on earth at the time, and he walked in close fellowship with God ... Noah did everything just as God commanded him"* (Genesis 6:9, 22). Now Noah is lying drunk and naked in his tent. Perhaps it's a comment on the rest of humanity before the flood that God finds Noah as the best of a very bad lot. He's no saint either.

Noah has just had a mountaintop experience. Like Adam of old, God establishes a great, new relationship with Noah. Like Adam, God desires to walk in close fellowship with Noah. I'm sure Noah felt a bit like Adam – God's chosen ambassador, His steward, His image here on earth.

What goes wrong? *"After the flood, Noah began to cultivate the ground"* (9:20). So far so good. But farming is not necessarily always a mountaintop experience like making a new covenant with God. There can be long, hard days of labour. And long days of working. Waiting. Watching. Waiting. Watching. Working. Life is not always lived on mountaintops. Much of it – in everything, not just farming – is routine.

Genesis 9:20 also says Noah planted a vineyard. The picture we have here is hardly the mountaintop experience of Genesis 9:1-17. It is rather a pathetic picture.

One of his sons, Ham, saw what had happened and not only did nothing about it (the decent thing would have been to cover his father up), but apparently thought the event was so novel he proceeded to pass the news on – perhaps thinking it a good joke – to his brothers, probably urging them to get a chuckle at their inebriated, naked father's expense. At least Shem and Japheth had the decency to cover their father up.

When Noah woke and discovered what had happened, it was apparent that the wonderful new order they hoped to create would not happen. Some of the evil, some of the vice, some of the sin from before the flood came along for the ride on the ark, too. Far from the ecstasy of being God's new Adam, Noah found himself a hung-over, embarrassed old man, with a son who laughed at him.

The real test of our faith is not how we respond to go God in unusual circumstances, but how we relate to Him day by day. In the mundane routine, it is easy to forget His Spirit is at work in our lives, His hand is evident in the world around us, and His word ought to be leading us. Those of us who give thanks before meals ... isn't it so easy to take our blessings for granted and treat that prayer as just a formality? Those of us who enjoy our families, our health, etc. ... isn't it so easy to take those things for granted and forget how fragile our health is and how blessed we are to have our families? In the day to day busy-ness of life, isn't it easy to do what everyone else seems to do and not reflect on what is really right and wrong in God's sight?

The encouragement of Noah for our relationship with God is to accept the wonderful mountaintop experiences. Enjoy them. Experience them to the fullest. But realize they won't last (our poor hearts couldn't take it). Most of our lives are lived in everyday routine. But live those times with God too. Be thankful for your blessings. Rejoice in His presence. Live by His principles. And, when the down times come and we fail (and who has never experienced that?) remember Jesus' promise: *"Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20).

*Come, Holy Spirit:
breathe into our prayers your breath of life.
Come, Holy Spirit:
fan the flame of love within us,
and draw us into the life of God: Father, Son and Spirit.
Come Holy Spirit:
renew us and revive us,
that in our worship and in our living,
we may live a life of love for the praise and glory of God.
Amen*

Gathering For Worship

Tuesday, July 7: Genesis 10

Among the early chapters of Genesis, chapter 10 is probably the least familiar. There's no eating forbidden fruit. No Cain killing Abel. No flood. The names are strange. The places foreign. While a few, such as heroic Nimrod, become celebrities, many are obscure at best (whatever happened to dear old Put?).

Why mention all these names? Can we see an outworking of God's involvement in and concern for all the diversity of nations, clans and languages (10:5, 20, 31, 32)? Their very number and naming of different cultures emphasizes their God-given value. God knows the names and language of all people. No one and no group is anonymous. At Pentecost there is another listing of peoples, each hearing the Good News "in our own tongues" (Acts 2:9–11). All will be represented in the worship that is to come.

- Japtheth's descendants do not feature prominently in the subsequent story although Magog appears again in Ezekiel 38 and 39 as one of the enemies of God's people.
- The descendants of Shem lead us to Abraham and to God's promise which will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus. They also include other Semitic peoples.
- Ham's descendants interacted more frequently with Israel. They occupied land stretching across North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.
- Cush covers the area on both sides of the Red Sea, and Nimrod gives rise to the cultures of Assyria and Babylon. Mizraim is Egypt and Put, Libya.
- Egypt and Assyria had a major impact on Israel; they were slaves in Egypt which later vied for superiority in the region with Assyria, Israel being caught between the two. Defeat by Assyria led to the end of the northern kingdom. Babylon was responsible for the conquest of the southern kingdom and the exile.
- The descendants of Ham's son Canaan included the original inhabitants of the Promised Land and the Philistines who were a thorn in Israel's side, during the period of the judges and the early kings (c1200–900 BC).

In Revelation 7:9-10, John writes, "I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb.'" One day, some day, we will be part of this amazing celebration of people for all cultures, languages, and backgrounds, praising God.

Pray for those who share the Good News of Jesus with people in other cultures, here and overseas.

*Lord Jesus, we greet your coming,
pilgrim messiah, servant king, rejected saviour.
You trod the way of a pilgrim and ascended the hill of the Lord;
you followed the path of your calling
even though Mount Zion gave way to the hill of Calvary.
Lord Jesus, help us to follow.
You rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, symbol of humility and lowliness,
mocking our dream of pomp and glory,
demonstrating the foolishness of God before the eyes of the world.
You have shown us the way of humble service, the way of true greatness.
Lord Jesus, help us to follow.
The cries of 'Hosanna' soon turned to 'Crucify'.
The acclamation of the crowds gave way to fear and contempt.
You have shown us the cost of love and you have called us to follow in your way:
pilgrims of the kingdom, living out the foolishness of God,
and trusting only in your forgiving faithfulness.
Lord Jesus, help us to follow.
Amen*

Gathering for Worship

Wednesday, July 8: Genesis 11:1-9

Many people want power. They want to be praised for their accomplishments. They want to make their own decisions. They want to decide what is right and wrong. We don't want anyone else telling us what to do or how to behave. We want to make our own choices about morality, ethics, and our lives, thank you very much. We want to be in control. We want to be like God. We want to be God.

Adam and Eve chose that path in the Garden of Eden: how did that work out? Cain went down that road; to what end? The tower of Babel represents the central drive of humanity – to be like God – once again. How does it work out this time?

The lesson from Babel is the same theme we have heard in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain, and the *"the extent of human wickedness on the earth ... that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil"* (Genesis 6:5). People want to do their own thing. They don't want to be humble. They don't want to obey God's commands. They want to make the rules. They want to be their own gods.

How quickly the faithfulness of Noah – who *"walked in close fellowship with God"* and lived by His commands – has been forgotten.

We snicker at ancient peoples trying to build a grand edifice using hard-baked bricks and tar. Chances are it was nothing to look at by our standards. But by God's standards, our greatest structures are really no more impressive. I'm sure He chuckles at our monuments made of steel and concrete.

The towers we build say a lot about us. In cities like London and New York, the tallest towers are bank towers: what does that say about what is most important in those cities? How did they fare in 2008? In Calgary, the tallest towers are built by oil/gas companies: what does that say about what is most important to Calgarians? How are those firms doing these days? Our towers reveal what is important to us ... but their tenants inevitably disappoint us. If I were to build a tower to symbolize my life, what would I build?

When Jesus is asked, what are greatest commands, He answers, *"The most important commandment is this: 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"* (Mark 12:29-31). Obeying these commands does require a certain humility: when we love God with all our being, we do submit to His wisdom, His will, and His way; when we love our neighbour, we can put their needs above our own. But following these commands does result in a full and satisfying life.

Do I ever find it hard to submit to God's wisdom? Why? How can I follow these great commands?

*Dear Lord,
Help us to follow your example,
by looking out for those who each day feel that they are marginalised,
who cannot find hope,
who believe that they have little to offer,
who are overcome by the challenges of poverty.
Help us to widen our horizons,
to make space for the stranger,
to watch out for those who feel invisible,
to give time to the outsider,
to talk to the person facing silence,
to restore justice and value.
Give us the courage to undertake this,
the determination to join with others in seeing grace in every human face,
and the faith to embrace the opportunity in your name.
Amen*

Baptist Union of Great Britain

Thursday, July 9: Genesis 11:10-32

More genealogies. Are you getting tired of them yet? The key to this one is found in Genesis 11:27-32. Here we are first introduced to Abram (later renamed Abraham) and Sarai (later renamed Sarah). These two people will dominate the next few chapters in Genesis. Abraham is looked back to as a "patriarch" – a dominant father-figure – by Christians, Jewish people, and Muslims.

Notice his father, Terah, was headed for the land of Canaan (now Israel), but they stopped at Haran and settled there (Haran is in what is now southern Turkey, near the Syrian border). Why did he stop? We don't know. He makes a choice.

We all make choices of one type or another. Madeleine L'Engle, reflecting on the problems of pain, war, poverty, disease, comments that *"a God who allows no pain, no grief, also allows no choice. There is little unfairness in a colony of ants, but here is also little freedom. We human beings have been given the terrible gift of free will, and this ability to make choices, to help write our own story, is what makes us human, even when we make the wrong choices, abusing our freedom and the freedom of others. The weary and war-torn world around us bears witness to the wrongness of many of our choices ..."*

"Jesus, too, had to make choices, and in the eyes of the world some of his choices were not only contrary to acceptable behaviour, but were foolish in the extreme. He bucked authority by healing on the Sabbath; when he turned his steps towards Jerusalem, he was making a choice which led him to Calvary. It is the ability to choose which makes us human."

Terah made a choice. Was Terah right to stop in Haran? Ought he to have gone on to Canaan? Which was correct? We don't know. Ultimately, God will lead to Abram and his wife, Sarai, to Canaan regardless. God makes sure His perfect will is done, despite Terah's decision.

What about our choices? Certainly on some (moral) issues there is a definite right and wrong. But on other issues – from where we live to what job we might take – we simply have to make choices. Prayerfully, we ask God to help us, then make the best choice we can. God can make sure His will is done regardless.

- We DO KNOW that wherever we are, God is always with us (Matthew 28:20).
- We DO KNOW that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).
- We DO KNOW we are always safe in his hands (John 3:35).

How do these truths encourage you as you face today?

*O my God,
I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul,
because you are all-good and worthy of all love.
I love my neighbor as myself for the love of you.
I forgive all who have injured me,
and I ask pardon of all whom I have injured.
Amen*

Friday, July 10: Genesis 12:1-9

My kids and I used to joke, *"Everyone has issues."* We all do have issues. None of us is perfect. I don't know of anyone who honestly thinks they have never done anything wrong or doesn't occasionally do something wrong. Some people won't admit they've done or said anything wrong ... but their failure to admit their mistakes just reinforces the fact they really do have issues. – lots of issues.

So far, Genesis has confronted us with the reality of sin. It's an unavoidable part of the human experience. Most of the Bible is the story of God's redemptive purpose being worked out on the stage of human history. The beginning of the end will come with Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. The ultimate end will come

when Jesus' returns again and set all things right, once and for all, completely and eternally.

In the meantime, the Old Testament takes us on a journey with God as He restores people to that relationship for which He created us – that open, free, honest walking and talking with Himself we thought about yesterday.

Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, comments: "*The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful and goal-oriented. The opening account of creation portrays God working toward a goal (creation), completing it with satisfaction and resting, content with the result. And from the great promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 we know this God to be totally, covenantally, and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham. In the wake of Genesis 3-11 (Adam and Eve's sin, Cain and Abel, the flood, Babel) this is good news indeed for humanity ... From that point on the mission of God could be summed up in the words 'God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year,' and as the generations come and go*" (The Mission of God, p. 63).

God's redemption of the effects of human sin and depravity starts with Abram (renamed Abraham). As God calls Abram and his descendants, including Israel, to be a blessing to "*all families/all peoples/all nations*"; He is calling them to be His love, grace, and mercy to ALL peoples. Notice God's selection of the children of Abraham is NOT a rejection of other nations; it is a calling into blessing **for the purpose of blessing other peoples**. After all, God creates and loves all persons, not just people in one family line. This is such an important concept that it is repeated five times in Genesis alone (Genesis 12:3 is paralleled in Genesis 18:18, 22:18, 26:4-5, 28:14, 35:11). Paul describes it as "*the gospel in advance*" (Galatians 3:8).

The words repeated again and again to Abraham are simply these: "*Be a blessing*" (in Hebrew only two words). It's not rocket science. Ultimately God's greatest blessing will come through Abraham's descendant, Jesus, who will save all people from sin and death. But in the shorter term, Abraham is called to leave his comfort zone (his old home) and to be a blessing to other people in his own day and age.

We certainly cannot save people from sin and death by our power; but we can be a blessing by introducing them to the Saviour – Jesus – who can. We cannot fix all the problems in other people's lives; but we can be a blessing by sharing something of the love and grace of God by leaving our comfort zone and reaching out in care, compassion, encouragement, mercy, and hope ... How can I be a blessing today?

*Gracious God, at our time of need
you came alongside us in Jesus, sharing our flesh.
Help us to come alongside those in need
so that they might know you as a God who cares,
when life throws them difficulties.
We pray for all those who go on a journey
to find a different life for themselves and their families,
for asylum seekers fleeing attack and hostility,
for economic migrants simply seeking something better: God, hear us.
We pray for those who struggle to find life's basic needs, food, water and shelter;
we pray for foodbanks and all those who seek to help: God, hear us.
We pray for all those who live life on the streets of our cities and towns,
encountering danger and finding themselves in situations of risk;
we pray for all those ministering to those on the streets: God, hear us.
We pray for all who seek to make justice a reality in this country and abroad:
God, hear us.
Hear us, gracious God, and let your Spirit working in us
inspire us to new leaps of faith and love
as we seek to make your love and care a reality in this world.
Amen*

David Warrington

Saturday, July 11: Genesis 12:10-20

There are moments in our lives that are highlights. We look back on them with joy, satisfaction, and pride. Perhaps the wonderful call of God in Genesis 12:1-3 would have been one of those times for Abram.

How about Genesis 12:10-20? Is this a highlight? Do you think Abram is proud of his actions? Can you imagine the conversations Abram and Sarai must have had? A major "marital," I suspect.

Abram is a man of tremendous faith and tremendous lack-of-faith. He is willing to trust God will lead him, and yet not trust that God will protect him. He is a paradox. He is human. He is just like each one of us.

- Can you identify times in your life you look back on with (legitimate) pride? You handled them well? They bring you joy to recall? They showed genuine trust in God?
- Can you identify times in your life you look back on with a bit of shame? You didn't handle them well? They don't bring joy? They showed a lack of faith in God?

Welcome to the human race. The good news is God understands. He forgives us. And He can still do incredible things in and through our lives.

The Psalmist writes, "*The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.*" (Psalm 103:8-12). We have such a wonderful God. Spend some time in prayer ...

*Lord Jesus Christ, you have walked where we walk
and now you help us in our weakness:
blessed be your name.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, you have been tempted as we have
and now you come to help us in our danger:
blessed be your name.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, you have suffered for us
and now you help us when we reach our wit's end:
blessed be your name.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, you were deserted and betrayed,
and now you are with us when all others have gone:
blessed be your name.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, companion Christ, friend and Saviour,
we adore you, we love you, we need you:
help us to follow you.
Blessed be your name.*

Amen

Gathering for Worship

Sunday, July 12: Genesis 13

What motivates our decisions in life? In Abram's better moments, he listens to God. God is the one who leads him to Canaan in the first place (Genesis 12:1-9). In Abram's worse moments, he listens to his fears and gets himself – and his loved ones (including his wife) – into real danger (Genesis 12:10-20).

Abram and Lot have a problem. They are too successful; the land cannot sustain all their flocks. It's a good problem, but it's still a problem. How do they resolve it?

Abram is the older uncle; he should have first dibs on what land he wants. What does it say about Abram that he is willing to let his younger nephew, Lot, have first choice?

What motivates Lot's decision? Would you have made the same choice – or not? Why? Why not?

What might be some of the factors to take into consideration (13:13)?

What is God's response to Abram's decisions this time (13:14-17)?

After the debacle of Abram trying to pass Sarai off his sister in Genesis 12, it is great to see how

1. Abram smartens up, and
2. God is still willing to work in and through Abram to be a blessing to all nations.

Even when we mess up, God gives the opportunity to repent and begin again. *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness"*(1 John 1:8-9). What do you need to talk with God about?

*Eternal and ever blessed God,
who sent Your Spirit with power upon your people,
let Your Spirit be upon us.
Let Your Spirit be in our minds,
to guide our thoughts towards the truth.
Let Your Spirit be in our hearts,
to cleanse them from every evil and unclean desire.
Let Your Spirit be upon our lips,
to preserve us from all wrong speaking,
and to help us by our words to share Your love with others.
Let your Spirit be upon our eyes,
that they may find no delight in looking on forbidden things,
but that they may be fixed on Jesus.
Let Your Spirit be upon our hands
that they may be faithful in work and eager in service.
Let Your Spirit be upon our whole lives,
that they may be strong with Your power,
wise with Your wisdom,
and beautiful with Your love:
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

William Barclay

Monday, July 13: Genesis 14:1-16

Robert Browning has a wonderful little verse called "Pippa Passes":

*The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven -
All's right with the world.*

That verse might describe the world of Genesis 13. But Genesis 14 is a different story. From the tranquility of the ending of chapter 13, with the building of another altar to the Lord, we are suddenly plunged into a massive international conflict in which alliances of kings and their armies fill the air with the noise of battle. This story is unlike anything else in the early chapters of Genesis, taking us out of the little local world of God's people into the world of global politics, international alliances, and the clash of empires.

Imagine how Lot and his family feel as the victorious invaders plunder Sodom and Gomorrah, taking with them all the spoils of war and the food supplies. Then they also capture Lot and carry off everything he owns. Imagine how Abram feels when he gets the news. He has only 318 men against a trained, battle-hardened army. But he still sets off. The good news in this passage is that God does deliver His people. But they go through some pretty difficult, harrowing experiences along the way.

Chapter 14 reminds us the story of the people of God does not unfold in some privileged space, isolated and protected from the turmoil and conflicts – and pandemics – which disfigure the general history of the world. Abram finds himself caught up in these events as battles swirl around him and place his own family in grave peril. The violence of this chapter is a reminder that God's promise of shalom – peace – is given to a world still desperately fallen and broken. God's hope of peace and love shines with an even brighter light amid the chaos and destructiveness of international war and global pandemic.

We may journey through some hard times and hard places, too. God may allow us to go through "*the valley of darkest shadows*" (or "*the valley of the shadow of death*") but, even there "*The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name*" (Psalm 23:1-4).

*When the world is weary of doing what is right and good:
Your kingdom come through us we pray.
When war, aggression and violence seem to be spiralling out of control:
Your kingdom come through us we pray.
When people around us feel lost and don't know where they belong:
Your kingdom come through us we pray.
When hope is hard to find and despair is knocking at the door:
Your kingdom come through us we pray.
When families struggle to know where the next meal will come from:
Your kingdom come through us we pray.
When prejudice seems to be the easy way and injustice its result:
Your kingdom come through us we pray.
Jesus taught us to pray for the coming of your kingdom;
through our willing hearts and hands may your kingdom come and your will be done.
Amen*

David Warrington

Tuesday, July 14: Genesis 14:17-24

What do think of when you think of the word, "prayer"? What does the word mean to you?

We often think prayer means we bring our concerns – our ordinary life concerns – to God. That is perfectly true. Bringing "life" in all its messiness to God is one very practical, very good approach to prayer. It is good – very good – to bring our concerns to God. God is happy to talk with us about all those issues.

In Genesis 14, four kings go on a rampage and, among other things, carry off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions (14:9-12). What would Abram have done? I suspect he would have prayed. Then Abram got down to business: he called out the 318 men in his household – by any stretch of the imagination a small force against four warlords. But, with God's help, Abram and his little band win the day, rescue Lot, recover all the loot, and retrieve all of Lot's family, servants, and possessions (14:13-16).

On the way home, Abram meets this mysterious character, Melchizedek, both priest of God Most High and king of Salem/Jerusalem ("Jerusalem" is from two Hebrew words "Yr" (City) and "Shalom/Salem" (Peace): it is literally the "City of Peace"). Not until Jesus is any other person described as both a king and a priest. What's interesting about Melchizedek is he both blesses Abram, and reminds Abram that he has been richly blessed by God. It's good for us to know that we are blessed by God. An old Hymn reminds us:

*When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.*

*Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your blessings, see what God hath done;
Count your blessings, name them one by one;
Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.*

(Sing along here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=900jWVSW3M>)

Bring your requests to God. And count your blessings, name them one by one ...

*O God, our Father, who hast bidden us to live in fellowship with one another,
keep us from everything which would make us difficult to live with today.*

*Help us never thoughtlessly or deliberately to speak in such a way
that we would hurt another's feelings, or wound another's heart.*

*Keep us from all impatience, from all irritability,
and from a temper which is too quick.*

*Keep us from eyes which are focused to find fault
and from a tongue which is tuned to criticize.*

*Keep us from being touchy, and quick to take offence,
and slow to forget it.*

*Help us not to be stubborn and obstinate,
and keep us from the selfishness which can see nothing but its own point of view,
and which wants nothing but its own way.*

*Grant unto us all through this day something of the
grace and beauty which shone upon our blessed Lord.*

Hear this our prayer, for your love's sake.

Amen

William Barclay

Wednesday, July 15: Genesis 15 (Thanks to Troy Taylor for today's reflection)

In Genesis 15, we read about a fascinating exchange between God and Abram. What it all boils down to is Abram needing to be assured that he made the correct decision to follow God into a life of wandering.

God: I will give you a whole nation of descendants and provide for them too.

Abram: But how can I know for sure?

God's response, a bizarre dream involving a smoking pot, a blazing torch, and dissected animals somehow convinces Abram to carry on.

This dream shows Abram a ritual that is likely part of a business deal in which two parties bind themselves together in covenant. Covenant, as contrasted to contract, is more than an exchange of goods or property; it is an exchange of people. Think, "I am yours, and you are mine." It is becoming family. Today, we could use covenant to describe a wedding, church membership, citizenship, or our relationship with God.

What a statement to back up the claim: God seals himself to Abram, and shows him in a metaphor that is familiar enough to him that Abram can understand: powerful, sovereign, creator God is his, and he is God's. No wonder Abram is convinced to carry on.

In this exchange, we see an amazing prayer: Abram articulates his deepest need (descendants to inherit anything else that God gives him), and his deepest fear (he is after all, homeless and vulnerable) to God, and then submits himself completely to God's promise.

Even though we may not have visions and dreams in response to our prayers (although we might), we do have stories of God's faithfulness to generations of people who depended on him for everything. God continues to use these stories to communicate his invitation in ways that we can understand. His invitation is to completely abandon our hopes, dreams and futures to God, trusting that whatever he provides is much better, bigger, and more amazing than anything we could dream up without limited perspective.

We are invited today to root our story of God deeply in the truth of God's provision and protection. This provision, first offered to Abram, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses and David, to Ruth, Naomi and Mary, is offered to us. Today, make an offering of prayer of your deepest fears and needs in exchange for faithful promises of a powerful, sovereign, creator God. It's a trade worth making.

*Eternal God, who gave us this day,
forgive us for all which today we did not do.
Forgive us for any word of comfort, of praise, of thanks,
which we might have spoken,
and did not speak.
Forgive us for any help we might have given to someone in need,
and did not give.
Forgive us if today we have made things more difficult for anyone.
Forgive us if by word or action we have set a bad example to anyone,
and have made it easier for another to go wrong.
Forgive us if today we have been disloyal to any friend,
or if we have hurt the hearts of those whom above all we ought to cherish.
Grant us this night Your gift of sleep;
and grant us grace that tomorrow we may walk closer to You.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

William Barclay

Thursday, July 16: Genesis 16

Life is often a roller coaster of pleasure and pain, celebration and heartache, joy and sorrow. That was certainly true in Hagar's life. And Ishmael's life. (And also in Abram and Sarai's lives, too).

How is Hagar feeling? Sarai gives her to her husband, Abram – that may be good (she can have the child of her master) or may be bad (she has no choice; we would call it rape). Note: God NEVER told Abram and Sarai to do this, this is a scheme they conjure up all on their own; God is not to blame.

Hagar gets pregnant – that's sort of good but rather bad (she'll have a baby, but it won't be considered hers). Sarai turns on her – that's pretty bad. Abram is no help at all – that's really bad. She runs into the ancient near eastern wilderness as an unwed, pregnant foreign woman (she is Egyptian) – that's really, really bad. How do you think Hagar feels? Betrayed? Rejected? Terrified? Angry? What else?

God never abandons Hagar. She is running away from Abram and Sarai – and probably the "God" they supposedly served who, in her mind, had gotten her into this horrendous predicament (remember, God didn't actually command this – this was an Abram-and-Sarai-not-having-enough-faith thing). Hagar is certainly NOT praying to God. The angel of God finds her, even in the middle of nowhere.

God promises to care for and bless Hagar and her son: *"I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."* Her son is going to be a handful, but God promises to be with them always.

God never promises us an easy time of it. Things happen. Some good. Some bad. Most a bit of both. God does promise He never leaves us. Even when we want nothing to do with Him and we are NOT praying to Him, He is always with us. He is with us even when we try to run away from Him. David writes:

I can never escape from your Spirit.

*I can never get away from your presence.
 If I go up to heaven, you are there;
 if I go down to the grave, you are there.
 If I ride the wings of the morning,
 if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 and your strength will support me.
 I could ask the darkness to hide me
 and the light around me to become night –
 but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.
 To you the night shines as bright as day.
 Darkness and light are the same to you.
 Psalm 139:7-12*

God finds us, meets us, speaks to us, and comforts us – even when we least expect (or want) Him.

"Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord, who had spoken to her. She said, 'You are the God-who-sees-me'" (Genesis 16:13). Hagar does not use this term because she is "creeped out" that God is some divine voyeur. Rather, it is a tremendous source of encouragement to her: God sees her pain, her loneliness, her fear, her struggle. And He is with her in it. We use a variety of names to refer to God, for instance God Almighty, Lord of Hosts, Saviour, Redeemer, King of Kings, Everlasting God. They are all good and true biblical terms. Each of them expresses a facet of who God is.

Hagar reminds us that God is also **"the God-who-sees-me."** God is the God who sees you in whatever circumstances you are – good or bad, wonderful or horrible, happy or sad. And He is with you in them. Rejoice with Him. Cry with Him. Celebrate with Him. Mourn with Him. Be glad with Him. Seek wisdom from Him. Be forgiven by Him. Know His mercy. Know His love.

*O God, our Creator and our Father, who has given us the gift of life,
 bless us this day as we go to the work which has been given unto us to do.
 We give Thee thanks for our work, and for the health to do it.
 We thank Thee for skill of hand,
 for accuracy of eye and mind and brain,
 to earn a living and to do the work of a house and home.
 We thank Thee for the friends and the comrades whom You have given to us,
 for those in whose company joys are doubly dear,
 and in whose presence sorrow's pain is soothed.
 Help us today to be so cheerful,
 that it may make others happier to meet us.
 Help us to be so true to You,
 that we may be a strength to others who are tempted.
 O Lord Jesus, we have begun the day with You;
 grant that Your reflection may be upon us throughout all its hours.
 This we ask for Your love's sake.
 Amen*

William Barclay

Friday, July 17: Genesis 17

I envy these Old Testament saints. They seem to have more "personal" encounters with God than I do. Wouldn't it be great to have the Lord physically appear to us and give us clear – really clear – instructions? Or would it? It probably would be rather terrifying. (Notice, as well, this is not an everyday occurrence in Abram/Abraham's life – it is a once-every-few-years kind of thing).

God changes Abram's name from Abram (meaning "Exalted Father") to Abraham (meaning "Father of Many"). He changes Sarai's name from Sarai to Sarah (both mean "Princess": scholars believe "Sarai" was

the version used in Ur, where they had come from, while "Sarah" is the version common in Canaan, where they have come to – the change symbolizes the past is past and they need to live now, in faith, with God).

My favourite verse in this chapter is 17:17: *"Then Abraham bowed down to the ground, but he laughed to himself in disbelief. 'How could I become a father at the age of 100?' he thought. 'And how can Sarah have a baby when she is ninety years old?'"* Abraham, this paragon of faith, has this amazing personal encounter with God, and all he can think to himself, is *"Yeah, right, God. That ain't gonna happen."* And he laughs.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever wondered if faith really matters? Can God really do things? Does prayer make a difference? Do we ever, rather cynically, laugh to ourselves in disbelief?

God knows Abraham's struggle. How does God handle Abraham's doubt? Does He blast the poor man? Does He give up on him? God patiently works with Abraham, despite his struggles. God patiently works with us, despite our doubts, too. God never gives up on us.

Dallas Willard writes, *"God's speaking to us is intended to develop into an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other with the richness of genuine agape (self-giving) love. We must make it our primary goal to be mature people in a loving relationship with Him."* You can be totally honest with God about how you are feeling. About your doubts. About your fears. About your hopes and dreams. About your need for wisdom and guidance. About your disappointments. About your aspirations. God simply wants to talk with you ... Even laugh if you need to.

*O God, our Father, we thank You for this day.
For any glimpse of beauty we have seen;
For any echo of Your truth that we have heard;
For any kindness that we have received;
For any good that we have been enabled to do;
And for any temptation which You gave us grace to overcome:
We thank You, O God.
We ask Your forgiveness for anything which has spoiled and marred this day.
For any word which now we wish that we had never spoken;
For any deed which now we wish that we had never done;
For everything which makes us ashamed when we remember it ;
Forgive us, O God.
Eternal God, who gave us the day for work and the night for rest,
grant us, as we go to rest, a good night's sleep;
and wake us refreshed on the morrow,
better able to serve You and to serve our fellow people.
This we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

William Barclay

Saturday, July 18: Genesis 18:1-15

It is hard to believe in God. It was hard for Sarah. I'm sure it was hard for Abraham "to keep the faith," too. Their lives were tough. Their physical journey from Haran to Canaan had been disappointing. They had a disastrous time in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20). And their spiritual journey seemed a failure. When Sarah overheard God's promise of a son, she laughed, just as Abraham had done. God was kidding, right? He was playing with her emotions. Surely He was conducting some twisted psychological experiment.

The problem of doubt is as real today as it was then. Part of our challenge is that, in our scientifically minded culture, we want to be able to taste, touch, see, feel, smell, and hear things firsthand. Even though inductive science didn't exist until the past 200+ years, one of Jesus' disciples, Thomas, was this personality type. After Jesus' resurrection, Thomas said: *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it"* (John 20:25).

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus showed us His hands and feet? Wouldn't it be great if God appeared to us as He did to Abraham? Wouldn't it be fantastic if the Lord were with us in a tangible way – say as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night – to prove His presence with us on our way. We can identify with one man who came to Jesus, saying, *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."* (Mark 9:24).

Sometimes we try to find "the answer" – meaning a logical, tangible, prove-able solution – to our struggles. But most of the challenges I have are not the kinds of things I can "prove." They are more passionately personal questions: Is there really a God who loves me? Can I believe His promises? Is there any purpose for my life? Can I know God's love in a more personal way? I need wisdom; what do I do now?

I can, rationally and logically, assent to theological statements of Christian faith. I can be doctrinally orthodox. But like Sarah – like that man who met Jesus – in my heart I may still cry out *"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief."* That is one of the great, honest prayers we can pray. What do you struggle with? God can handle it. Spend some time with God in prayer today ...

*Loving God of forgiveness,
I come before you humbled and sad
in the face of my own repeated failings.
I hold out my hands as a petitioner would,
asking for mercy.
It is then that I feel you reach out and take my hand
in your loving grasp.
Thank you for the love you pour out on me
so lavishly.
Help me to follow more closely
in the path you have set for me,
the path of your Son.
Amen*

Creighton University

Sunday, July 19: Genesis 18:16-33

Sometimes life is like a tropical vacation – everything is wonderful, the seas are calm, the weather is warm, the sky is sunny, we have no stress ... In those times it is easy to imagine a gracious God smiling down on us (if we remember God at all). But there are other times when life seems more like an Atlantic hurricane: the waves crash against us, winds howl, the rooves of our lives are ripped off, it seems to never end ... In these times we often seek out God with the question, *"Why, God, why?"* "How could You be like that?" All of us at one time or other has asked God, *"How could this happen? How could a loving God allow this?"*

As we read this story, we see Abraham struggling with painfully conflicting emotions – he is afraid of angering God by questioning His will, but more afraid of seeing his faith disintegrate before his eyes as he sees what God is about to do. He needs answers.

None of us can have a relationship with God without standing, at one time or other, precisely where Abraham is standing. Job will stand there. David will stand there. I stand there every time I walk with a family through a major life crisis. And I stand there every day as I deal chronic pain. Why is life like this? Why, God, why? I love God, and want Him to go on being the God I have always thought Him to be. But I am frightened by what I see, and I am alarmed by my own need to question the Judge of the universe. And yet, fearfully, hoping that my faith can remain intact, I ask, *"Lord, how can this be? Why, God, why?"*

God never turns me away when I come with my confusion and pain. But He also doesn't defend himself. I never get a clear, *"This is why ..."* answer from God. His answer is not to answer ... directly.

Sometimes I can figure out bits of the answer myself. We live in a world that has largely turned its back on God – a world with much evil, sin and pain, where people can choose to inflict pain, do stupid things, or just happen to have accidents. I can't be surprised by evil or pain. And I can't blame God when people do

hurtful things to others. I can't blame God when a body gets sick. I can't blame God when a person makes a mistake and causes an accident. In a world with freedom of choice, marred by sin, bad things happen.

Other times God does answer, but not by telling me why. More often He answers by showing me more of Himself than I have ever seen before. He rises above the pain. My fear and anger morph into awe and worship. Like Abraham, I discover God is God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. Like Hagar, I discover God is the One who sees me. What I need is not a reason why, but a bigger, better appreciation and understanding of who God is – here, now. I don't need an answer, I need God. The real God.

God is with us, even in the hurricanes of our lives. God is with us in our suffering. The same God who wept when Lazarus died, the same God who cried out in anguish before the crucifixion, the same God who suffered the humiliation, degradation, and agony of Calvary, the same God who overcame the grave, stands with us in our struggles. He has been there and done that. He suffers with us. And He gets us through.

God is still the loving, gracious God we always knew. His arms are open to us ... We can never hope to understand God fully, but we can have confidence that God is faithful ... As we weep, he weeps. He will be with us to strengthen us, to give us hope, and to sustain us no matter how nasty the storms ...

*You said: "The Spirit of God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."
You sat with the outcast, shared with the needy and stood by the side of the lowly:*

This is your justice, Jesus.

*You said: "God sent me to proclaim freedom for those in prison."
You offered forgiveness to those who could not forgive themselves,
you broke that which bound and constrained and brought the relief of liberation:*

This is your justice, Jesus.

You said: "God sent me to proclaim the recovery of sight for the blind."

*You gently opened eyes that were tight shut,
poured light into dark places and made the sick whole:*

This is your justice, Jesus.

You said: "God sent me to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

*You shared your treasures with women,
did not judge others and helped people believe in a God of hope:*

This is your justice, Jesus.

You are the Christ – the grace of God made flesh for us.

Help us to be your people of justice, Jesus.

Amen

David Warrington

Monday, July 20: Genesis 19:1-29

How do we live in a culture that has VERY different morals than we have?

Way back in Genesis 13, Abram and Lot separated because they were so "*wealthy with flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, and many tents, and the land could not support both Abram and Lot with all their flocks and herds living so close together*"(13:6). Success is a problem, I guess. "*Lot took a long look at the fertile plains of the Jordan Valley ... The whole area was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the Lord or the beautiful land of Egypt ... Lot moved his tents to a place near Sodom and settled among the cities of the plain. But the people of this area were extremely wicked and constantly sinned against the Lord*"(13:10-13).

Lot has moved from "*a place near Sodom*"(13:12) to living in Sodom (19:1). Sodom hasn't improved any. In fact, it may have gotten worse. Lot DOES offer hospitality to the strangers, the angels of the Lord – that's a good thing. When the Sodomites attack, Lot offers them his daughters instead – that's a bad thing. How do you think his daughters felt? Thankfully the angels save the girls from abuse and rape.

Ultimately, the angels will save Lot and his family from the destruction that Sodom will receive (and

deserves). Only Lot's wife is lost. Why? She looks back. Commentators suggest two reasons she might have looked back: (1) she wanted to see the destruction (and perhaps gloat in the suffering), or (2) she looked back in longing: she had been the envied wife of a wealthy man in that city – ah, the good old days.

What can a story like this possibly have to say to us?

1. **God does take sin seriously.** While God resisted judging Sodom for a long time, ultimately He does judge sin. One day, some day, those who do evil and are not forgiven by God are judged.
2. **God calls us to live differently than the culture around us.** Lot's new neighbours recognize he is different than they are (19:9). Lot does offer hospitality – one of God's virtues. Unfortunately, he also made poor choices that put his family at great risk.
3. **When we do live differently, God honours that choice and will provide for us.** The angels save Lot and his daughters in ways they could not have imagined.
4. Thinking about Lot's wife ... **we cannot gloat in the misery of others**, even if we think it deserved. Or, **we ought not look back**, wistfully, reveling in the praise and adulation of others.

We are called to live as people of God – people of honour, integrity, holiness, and purity – in a world with very different values. We are called to look forward in prayer and hope, serving God faithfully.

- How do I find myself living differently than some people I know?
- What are the challenges living by God's values in a non-Christian world?
- How can I live with spiritual integrity in these times?
- How can I look forward, in prayer and hope, seeing opportunities to serve God, faithfully?

*Good morning heavenly Father,
good morning Lord Jesus,
good morning Holy Spirit.*

Heavenly Father, I worship you as the creator and sustainer of the universe.

Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the world.

Holy Spirit, I worship you, sanctifier of the people of God.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

*Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence
and please you more and more.*

Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you.

*Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself
and cause your fruit to ripen in my life:*

*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

*Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God,
have mercy upon me.*

Amen.

John Stott

Tuesday, July 21: Genesis 19:30-38

Comedian Jeff Foxworthy says, "If you ever start feeling like you have the goofiest, craziest, most dysfunctional family in the world, all you have to do is go to the state fair. Because five minutes at the fair, you'll be going, 'You know, we're alright. We're dang near royalty.'" Or you could just read Genesis.

Talk about dysfunctional families: Adam; and Eve deliberately and knowingly disobey God; Cain murders his brother; Noah gets drunk; Noah curses his son; Abram tries to pass his wife off as his sister and allows another man to have her; Abram sleeps with his wife's slave. In Genesis 19:8, Lot offers his young daughters to a mob of crazed men. Now his daughters – whom he treated as sex objects – are treating him as a sex object. There is a lot of dysfunction going on. Compared to these folks, our families may appear like royalty, too.

Nowhere does God approve or condone any of these actions. In fact, the opposite is true. However, I do appreciate the brutal honesty with which Scripture records some of this despicable history. If the Bible only recorded the golden moments in human history, I would be less inclined to believe it. The fact that Scripture records the seamy side of the story – even among God’s people – makes it much more authentic.

Notice the older daughter names her son, Moab. He becomes the ancestor of the nation now known as the Moabites. Who in Scripture is from Moab, and a Moabite? Ruth (see the book of Ruth). Who is a direct descendant of Ruth, the Moabite? Jesus (Matthew 1:5). It’s interesting that Matthew – the most ardently Jewish of the gospel writers – acknowledges Jesus’ non-Jewish heritage. And it all begins here.

The good news? God *"causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose"* (Romans 8:29). Notice this verse does NOT say God causes everything. He does say that He can bring good out of everything that happens ... even out of dysfunctional families.

Be encouraged. God can bring good out of whatever circumstances you find yourself in, too. Pray about the issues in your life, your family, your friendships, our world ...

*Loving God,
I am just beginning to realize how much you love me.
Your son, Jesus was humble and obedient.
He fulfilled your will for him by becoming human and suffering with us.
I ask you for the desire to become more humble
so that my own life might also bear witness to you.
I want to use the small sufferings I have in this world to give you glory.

Please, Lord, guide my mind with your truth.
Strengthen my life by the example of Jesus.
Help me to be with Jesus in this week
as he demonstrates again his total love for me.
He died so that I would no longer be separated from you.
Help me to feel how close you are and to live in union with you.
Amen*

Creighton University

Wednesday, July 22: Genesis 20

Why do we keep making the same dumb decision over and over again???

When Abraham (then called Abram) was in Egypt, he introduced Sarah (then Sarai) as his sister. Pharaoh took her to be his wife (Genesis 12:10-20). What is Abraham doing now? He is up to the same shenanigans. Talk about family dysfunction. A psychologist or counselor would throw up her hands and despair with Abraham.

How do you think Sarah feels? What might their conversations be like? Another serious “marital” I’m sure.

Way back, reflecting on Genesis 3, we read Paul’s words, *"I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate ... I have discovered this principle of life – that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong ... Oh, what a miserable person I am."* (Romans 7:15-24). Do you ever identify with Paul? Do you think Abraham, in hindsight, could?

Paul will ask, *"Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"* (Romans 7:24). He will answer, *"Thank God. The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord"* (7:25).

"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus," Paul continues. *"And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death"*

(Romans 8:1-2). For us, the good news is that God forgives us. We have new life in Him and through Him.

I doubt your issues will be anything like Abraham's problems. However, we all do have things we need to talk with God about. Spend some time with Him. And know, for certain, that because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin. You are forgiven. You are free.

*My Lord,
I was born with so many faults and my nature is so full of weakness,
and yet your son Jesus has died on the cross.
Your son, Jesus, has suffered so much, shed so much blood.
For me.
I know your grace has the power to cleanse me of my many sins
and to make me more like your Son.
Thank you for your goodness and love for me.
I ask you, Father, to watch over me - always.
Amen*

Creighton University

Thursday, July 23: Genesis 21:1-7

Does God keep His promises? What was Abraham and Sarah's experience? Yes ... but it may take a while ... So be patient, very patient. (Patience is one of the more challenging fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23).

We often say that, when it comes to prayer, God answers are typically one of three things:

- Yes.
- No.
- Wait.

There is some good wisdom in that insight. But in my experience, the answers are often not that clear. I have rarely heard God explicitly say to me, "Yes." or "No." or "Wait ..."

Instead, sometimes

- I have seen things work out the way I hope –
- or not work out in the way I wished –
- or I wait, and wait, and wait, and have no clear direction at all ...

Like Abraham and Sarah, I need to learn patience (that is SO hard for me).

The full list of fruit of the Spirit include: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are all challenging virtues. I need to pray that God would help me cultivate all of these qualities in my life ...

Which fruit of Spirit do you struggle with the most? Why?

How are you doing with patience? What are you impatient about? Why? God always does keep His promises. Pray about it ...

*Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth:
Set up your kingdom in our midst.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God:
Have mercy on us sinners.
Holy Spirit, Breath of the Living God:
Renew us and all the world.
Amen*

N.T. Wright

Friday, July 24: Genesis 21:8-21

Yesterday we asked, does God keep His promises? We noted that in Abraham and Sarah's experience, God does provide a son, but it took a while. A LONG while. We noted that one of the fruits of the Spirit we struggle with most is patience.

Abraham is not patient. Despite God's repeated promises of a son with Sarah, Abraham takes matters into his own hands and has a child with Sarah's servant, Hagar (Genesis 16).

Now consider Hagar and Ishmael. Does God answer prayer? Does God keep His promises? Yes ... but maybe not in the way we might think (or like). Be flexible. God may have some surprises in store.

A Matt Redman song I find challenging goes like this ([listen to it here](#)):

*Blessed be your name in the land that is plentiful,
Where Your streams of abundance flow,
Blessed be Your name.*

*Blessed Be Your name, when I'm found in the desert place,
Though I walk through the wilderness,
Blessed Be Your name*

It reminds me that life can take very unexpected – very hard – turns. But God is always faithful.

Like Hagar and Ishmael, when life seems to be a mess, I may have to trust that God will open a way forward, even when it seems like the water is gone and I'm wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. God is there, even in the desert places of life. Can I believe that? Can I trust God, even in the desert place?

*O God, our Father, we thank You this day
that You loved the world so much that
You gave Your only Son for us and for all mankind.
We give You thanks this day for Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord,
and for His death upon the Cross.
That He was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross;
That He loved us and gave Himself for us;
That He came to seek and to save that which was lost;
That He gave His life a ransom for many, a ransom for us:
We give Thee thanks this day, O God.
Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.
Help us this day to remember, and never again to forget,
the love of Him who laid down His life for us.
Hear this our prayer, for Thy love's sake.
Amen*

William Barclay

Saturday, July 25: Genesis 21:22-34

Abraham Lincoln once said, "*The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him your friend.*"

In Genesis, the original Abraham is living in hostile territory, a land controlled by a Philistine king, Abimelech. They have already had a run-in over Abraham's wife, Sarah, whom he had tried to pass off as his sister. Abraham is not feeling too safe and secure in his new home. So when Abimelech and the commander of his army, Phicol, arrive, Abraham wisely does NOT pick a fight. Instead, he makes a friend.

This is one of the wiser things Abraham does in his life.

Here are some random thoughts on friendship to reflect on today:

- *"An enemy is a friend waiting to be made; that is the only hope for this conflict-ridden world."* Archbishop Desmond Tutu
- *"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."* Oprah Winfrey
- *"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."* Proverbs 17:17
- *"Everyone hears what you say. Friends listen to what you say. Best friends listen to what you don't say."* Unknown
- *"Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art ... It has no survival value; rather is one of those things that give value to survival."* C.S. Lewis
- *"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me."* Jesus (John 15:13-15)
- *"Many people will walk in and out of your life, but only true friends leave footprints in your heart."* Eleanor Roosevelt
- *"It's the friends you can call at 4 a.m. that really matter."* Marlene Dietrich
- *"We love those who can lead us to a place we will never reach without them."* Norman Mailer
- *"Look. I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends."* Jesus (Revelation 3:20)

Who can you be a friend to, today? Who can you call? Who can you encourage? Who can you help?

*O Lord Jesus Christ, who said,
"I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me,"
fix our eyes upon Your Cross.
Help us in Your Cross to see the lengths to which man's sin will go.
Help us in the Cross to see that sin is awful to You,
that sin is the destroyer of all beauty,
and the enemy of all loveliness.
Help us in the Cross to see the lengths to which Your love will go,
that You loved us so much that You kept nothing back.
Help us in the Cross to see the horror of sin,
and to depart forever from it.
Help us in the Cross to see the wonder of love,
and to surrender forever to it.
This we ask for Thy love's sake,
Amen*

William Barclay

Sunday, July 26: Genesis 22

We celebrate Abraham as a hero of faith. And rightly so. In faith, he left his home in Haran and travelled to Canaan. In faith, he and Sarah (kind of) waited for their son to be born. And now, in faith, he is willing to obey God's commands, even though that would mean killing that long-promised, long-awaited son, the fulfillment of all of God's promises, and their only hope for the future. If Isaac were to die, what of God's great promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations? How could that possibly come about? But Abraham is obedient. In faith, Abraham trusts that God will provide a solution.

At the last-minute God does provide a way out. And God rewards Abraham's faithfulness.

How would you have handled this? I would not have done well. (Just wondering what would have happened if Abraham had just said, *"No. Sorry. Not doing that ..."*?)

(As Christians we can ponder the foreshadowing of the life of Jesus in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God is the Father. We are the child. In our case (unlike Isaac) we deserve to die. We deserve the Father's

wrath and punishment. But God offers His one and only Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice for our sins. He is the spotless lamb/ram who dies in our place. We are saved by the blood of the perfect lamb/ram – Jesus.)

"Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means 'the Lord will provide')." Interestingly, Abraham is only now finding himself where Hagar has found herself at least twice before – facing the imminent death of her only child and having to depend completely on God for salvation. We often overlook her, but Hagar is a hero of faith, too. She lives *"the Lord will provide"* day by day, in total dependence on God.

How do I need to learn *"the Lord will provide"*? God has always provided the essentials throughout my life (thankfully not always just in the nick of time). As I look back I can see example after example of His faithfulness. But I still struggle today, to have faith and to live in faith that *"the Lord will provide."*

Two African scholars (from Benin and Kenya – they understand something of suffering and stress.) write, *"We may not know what tests the Lord may have for us, but if we trust him all the way, we can be sure that what he has planned for us is good and not bad. Sometimes the ways in which he leads us may appear to be very strange, but the Lord sees everything from the beginning to end, while we can see only our own present and past"* (Barnabe Ashohoto & Samuel Ngewa, *Africa Bible Commentary*). Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief ...

*Praise and thanksgiving be unto you, O God,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ
and set him at your right hand in the kingdom of glory.
Praise and thanksgiving be unto you, O Lord Jesus Christ,
you Lamb of God who has redeemed us by your blood,
you heavenly Priest who ever lives to make intercession for us,
you eternal King who comes again to make all things new.
Praise and thanksgiving be unto you, O Holy Spirit,
who has shed abroad the love of God,
who quickens us together with Christ,
and makes us to sit with him in heavenly places,
and to taste the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come.
Blessing and glory, and wisdom and thanksgiving,
and honour and power and might,
be unto you our God for ever and ever.
Amen*

Thomas F. Torrance

Monday, July 27: Genesis 23

Relationships – friendships, family relationships, marriages – define who we are. They are critically important aspects of our lives. When our relationships are going well, life seems pretty good. When our relationships are struggling, life can be a real challenge.

Abraham and Sarah had an "interesting" marriage. Neither is perfect. Abraham makes mistakes: he has his moments of doubts, fearfulness, and downright stupidity that compromise Sarah's safety (Genesis 12:10-13, 16, 20:1-2). But Abraham clearly loves God with his whole heart. He loves Sarah, too.

Sarah, too, has her moments of doubt (Genesis 18:12) and comes across as mean-spirited and vindictive (Genesis 16:5, 21:9-10). But she loves God with her whole heart (Genesis 21:6). She loves Abraham, too.

Who knows how many years they were married – a lot. No wonder Abraham mourns and weeps when she dies (23:2). *"A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers"* said Robert Quillen. That would be true of all relationships – not just marriage: *"A good friendship is the fellowship of two good forgivers"*

Mother Teresa teaches much about living a life of love in all our relationships: *"Do not imagine that love must be extraordinary to be true. No, what we need in our love is the continuity to love the One we love."*

See how a lamp burns, by the continual consumption of little drops of oil. If there are no more of those drops in a lamp, there will be no light. What are those drops of oil in our lamps? They are the little things of everyday life: fidelity, the words of kindness, just a little thought for others, those little acts of silence, of look and thought, of word and deed.

"We must reach the heart. To reach the heart we must do – love is proved in deeds. People are more attracted by what they see than by what they hear. Come and see; come and do – the reality is more attractive than the abstract idea."

Are there ways you can live your love in the little things of everyday life? To live your love in deeds?

*O Lord Jesus Christ, who conquered death and rose from the dead,
and who is alive for evermore,
help us never to forget Thy Risen Presence for ever with us.
Help us to remember,
That you are with us in every time of perplexity to guide and to direct;
That you are with us in every time of sorrow to comfort and to console;
That you are with us in every time of temptation to strengthen and to inspire;
That you are with us in every time of loneliness to cheer and to befriend;
That you are with us even in death
to bring us through the waters to the glory on the other side.
Make us to be certain that there is nothing in time or in eternity
which can separate us from you,
so that in your presence we may meet life with gallantry and death without fear.
This we ask for Thy love's sake.
Amen*

William Barclay

Tuesday, July 28: Genesis 24:1-28

Lucille Ball (1911-1989) said of her husband, Desi Arnaz, *"It wasn't love at first sight. It took a full five minutes."* They starred in together in a TV show, *I Love Lucy*. She said, *"How was 'I Love Lucy' born? We decided that instead of divorce lawyers profiting from our mistakes, we profit from them."*

Romance – in the Old Testament – was a bit different than today. The story in Genesis 24 is much more of an "arranged marriage" than most of us would be comfortable with. Where is the "love"? From our perspective, the emotion of "being in love" is an important, precious part of marriage. In arranged marriages it often grew as the couple's relationship grew. In time, Isaac and Rebekah, do (I believe) grow to love one another. But marriage is not just about emotion, of course. It's a covenant commitment.

Without becoming too clinical, consider some of the things that go into making this marriage work:

- Isaac's wife should be someone from his own country and relatives, not a Canaanite. This is not a racial issue; it is a religious concern. The Canaanites worshipped their ancestors, Baal, Dagan, and fertility goddesses. Abraham suspects that if Isaac marries one of these people he will be led away from the worship of the one true God. For us, too, it is much easier if we marry someone who shares our faith in Jesus. There are extra challenges in a marriage if a couple don't share the same faith. That's not to say that such marriages cannot be good – but they have extra obstacles to overcome. A marriage between two sincere Christians is based on a common faith, truth, set of values, worldview, and ethics that make things easier
- The servant prayed for wisdom in selecting a wife for Isaac. Praying – of course – is a good thing: always, about everything. If you are not yet married, it is good to pray about a potential spouse. If you have kids, pray about your children's spouses-to-be (or grandchildren's/nieces'/nephews'/friends'/friends' kids' spouses-to-be). God is actively involved in the "match-making" business. He is also calls some people to singleness. Pray for those who are single, too. Whoever you are, pray for your single and married friends. And pray for God's guidance in your life.

- Rebekah displayed wonderful qualities of character. She could have ignored the servant. She could have treated him as a free woman could treat a slave – with disdain. She could have given him the jar so that he could get his own water. But she treated the slave with dignity, respect, and even served him by getting him and his camels water. For a good marriage, people need to treat one another with mutual dignity, respect, and a willingness to serve one another. People need to be willing to give of themselves with no thought of return.

Pray for a married couple you know. Pray for a dating couple you know. Pray for a young person you know. Pray for a widowed person you know.

Pray also for a single person you know: marriage is not God’s plan for everyone. Many people do get married (ideally led to do so by God). Some people do not. There is no sense in Scripture that marriage is “better” or “worse” than singleness. Jesus was single. Paul was single. Several of the other apostles and early church leaders may (or may not) have been single (it is unclear).

*May the God who created a world of wonder, diversity and beauty
Send us out in the spirit of freedom
to bring creativity and life to our communities and to our world.
May the Christ-child who turned tables and lifted up the lowly
Send us out in the spirit of justice
to be the voice for the voiceless to our communities and to our world.
And may the Spirit who stirs hope and brings healing
Send us out in the spirit of peace to bring reconciliation
to our communities and to our world.
Amen*

Clare McBeath & Tim Presswood

Wednesday, July 29: Genesis 24:29-67

On a very practical note, the key to a successful relationship – be it friendship or marriage – is communication. If good friend – or spouses – can communicate about anything and everything openly and honestly, things tend to go well. If communication is a problem for one person, it will be a problem for both people ... and things can become more difficult.

Communication involves a minimum of three things: a communicator, a message, and a listener.

Most of us know how to communicate (some of us better than others) – we need to talk and tell each other our thoughts and feelings. But it takes courage and, sometimes, practice, to be able talk about what is really important to us. We may feel what we have to say is not important, or we can’t express ourselves clearly, or we may be misunderstood, or we may upset the other person, or we don’t where to start, or we don’t want to disturb the peace, or the other person may laugh at us. Or we have to be the strong silent type. And so we don’t share our feelings. This is true in marriage and friendships.

Most of us have things we want to communicate (our message). Or maybe we don’t. Are we really in touch with what is really going on inside ourselves? Do I really know how I do feel?

In my experience, the biggest challenge is often the listening piece. Many of us would rather do the talking than the listening (the same is often true with out relationship with God – we may be comfortable talking at God, but we often don’t take time to listen to Him). In the Alpha Marriage Course, Nicky and Sila Lee talk about five bad habits we can get into in terms of listening:

1. We jump in before the person is finished and try to offer comfort. The person just needs to talk.
2. We try to give advice. We want to solve our spouse’s or friend’s problems, so we come up with what they should do. They don’t need that; they just need to be heard.
3. We intellectualize or spiritualize things. We try to explain things in terms of God’s will or why this happening. Again, the person just needs to be listened to.

4. Some of us are chronic interrupters. We never let people finish. Or we just talk over top of them.
5. Some of us go off on tangents. Rather than listen to what the person is trying to say to us, we rush off, "That reminds of ..." and we're gone on our own tangent.

Do you see yourself in any of those examples? So what to do ...? Practice

1. Listening without interrupting.
2. Putting your own feelings aside and putting yourself in the other person's shoes.
3. Making sure you understand what the person was saying ("What I heard you say was ...")
4. Finding out what is most important ("What is the most important thing you're saying?")
5. Working together to determine what to do ("Is there anything you would like me/us to do about what you have said?")

Aristotle observed, "*Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow-ripening fruit.*" The same is true of marriage: "*Falling in love is quick work, but marriage is a slow-ripening fruit.*"

In your friendships – and, if you are married, in your marriage – commit to see the fruit ripen: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

May our friendships bring glory to God. May our marriages bring glory to God. May our singleness bring glory to God.

*Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
Grant that we,
being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with him in glory;
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be praise and honor, glory and might,
now and in all eternity.
Amen.*

Creighton University

Thursday, July 30: Genesis 25:1-18

There is always a twinge of sadness when we hear of someone's death, even when they have lived a rich, full, and fulfilling life. However there can also be a sense of profound joy and celebration, too. As we read, "*Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years ...*" we can appreciate that Abraham lived a full life. He can look forward to "*a better country – a heavenly one*" (Hebrews 11:16).

Abraham was not a perfect person. But, in general, he tried to live faithfully with and obey God. At the end of his earthly life – despite his blunders along the way – there is a profound sense of peace in his passing.

Abraham had a hard life – uprooted from his own country, enduring famines, travels, betrayals, dangers, foreign armies, disappointments, tests. Through it all he grew in his faith (true, often taking one step backward for every two steps forward). I almost sense a sigh of relief as he dies. In this fallen world, life is hard. Our bodies falter and fail. Difficulties come. Abraham models for us a faith that recognizes that there is something much better than life as we now know it ...

Although death is an enemy (God did not intend for humanity to die, originally), it has been overcome through the death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus.

We do not need to fear death. It serves God's purpose of taking to Himself those who believe in Him, free of sickness and pain. We can face death with God's peace; He is with us even through that dark valley and

will lead us, through death, to eternal life with Himself.

Paul writes, *"Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies ..."*

"54 Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

"So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless." (1 Corinthians 15:44-58).

Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
forgive us for the times when we have forgotten your Risen Presence forever with us.
Forgive us for times when we failed in some task,
because we did not ask Thy help.
Forgive us for times when we fell to some temptation,
because we tried to meet it by ourselves,
Forgive us for times when we were afraid,
because we thought that we were alone in the dark.
Forgive us for times when we were driven to despair,
because we were trying to fight the battle in our own unaided strength.
Forgive us for times when we said and did things
which now we are ashamed to remember that you heard and saw.
Forgive us for times when death seemed very terrible,
and the loss of loved ones beyond all bearing,
because we forgot that you have conquered death.
Make us this night again to hear you say:
"Lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world,"
and in that promise help us find courage and strength to meet all things undismayed.
This we ask for Thy love's sake.
Amen*

William Barclay

Friday, July 31: Genesis 25:19-34

Conflict happens. If there are two or more people in any kind of relationship, the potential for conflict is present: we have different opinions; we have our own interests; we are naturally selfish (I don't even need two people: I can find myself in internal conflict – I can come up with different opinions all on my own). Conflict is not necessarily always a bad thing. When we come to an issue with different ideas, strategies, possibilities or opinions, we have the potential for an incredibly creative time of learning and growth.

But when we don't handle conflict properly relationships can go from bad to worse. Some people are like:

- Rhinos – when they feel tension they attack.
- Hedgehogs – when they feel threatened, they withdraw or curl up into a ball.
- Chameleons – they agree with everything (on the surface anyway), but you never know who they really are or what they really think ("Yes dear," "Uh huh," "I'm sorry"); then they bite you.

Do you recognize yourself in any of these types?

Isaac and Rebekah, like Abraham and Sarah before them, have a difficult time conceiving a child. In fact, twenty years have gone by from their wedding until these twin boys, Jacob and Esau, are born. From the very beginning there is conflict as *"the two children struggled with each other in her womb"* (25:22).

Esau and Jacob are like night and day. They look different. They act differently. They have different interests. They relate to different people. They think differently. They value different things. Differences don't HAVE to cause conflict. In fact they can enrich and enliven relationships. But that can only happen when there is mutual respect and when people are open and willing to learn from one another ...

1. *Communication doesn't happen.* They live separate lives. Jacob certainly has no respect for Esau. He is a classic chameleon ... saying nice things but working behind Esau's back to get him. Esau is a rhino – he explodes, slams the tent flap, then walks away. They never work things through.
2. *There is no commitment to relationship.* Jacob would be quite happy to have Esau dead. The feeling will become mutual – right now Esau likely doesn't even give Jacob a thought. There is no commitment here to say, "We're family – let's make it work."
3. *Things fester.* This incident doesn't come out of the blue. Jacob has been scheming for a while. He may have tried before. Esau should not be surprised. Mom and Dad – Rebekah and Isaac – undoubtedly saw problems between the boys. The financial and social inequality inherent in the "birthright system" needs to be talked about and addressed. But no one, apparently, did anything ...
4. *A decision is made in a moment of crisis.* When I'm in a crisis situation, I generally don't make good decisions. Esau certainly didn't! Yes, physically he is exhausted. Yes, emotionally he is vulnerable. Did he have options? Of course. There must have been something to eat. He could have bought time: "We'll talk about birthrights later." He could have negotiated.
5. *Selfishness and greed.* What about Jacob??? He is a nasty piece of work! Nowhere are his actions condoned. He is greedy, selfish, deceptive (and we'll see in Genesis 27), a liar, and a thief. There is no spirit of brotherly love here.

In our relationships, if we don't respect one another, if we can't (or won't) communicate, if we have no commitment to work things out, if we allow things to fester, if we make decisions during crises, and if we allow selfishness and greed to control our actions ... conflict will happen.

Could this incident have been avoided? Let's just turn these six "problems" into "preventions":

1. *Respect one another's differences.* Celebrate our diversity.
2. *Communicate, communicate, communicate.* Listen. Talk. Share honestly. Understand.
3. *Be committed to relationship.* "We're family – let's make it work."
4. *Don't let things fester.* If there is a problem, nip it in the bud. Deal with it immediately.
5. *Don't make decisions in crisis.* "The important is seldom urgent and the urgent is seldom important"
6. *Watch yourself and your motivation.* Ask yourself: what would Jesus do in this situation?

What does mean in your life today?

*O God, our Father, who makes the light to shine out of the darkness,
we thank You for waking us to see the light of this new day.
Help us to waste none of its hours;
to soil none of its moments;
to neglect none of its opportunities;
to fail in none of its duties.
And bring us to the evening time undefeated by any temptation,
at peace with ourselves,
at peace with our fellow human beings,
and at peace with You.
This we ask for Your love's sake.
Amen*

William Barclay

Saturday, August 1: Genesis 26

Elaine Roberts writes, "*As 21st-century Christians, we may be inclined to criticise Bible characters who fail the Lord. We are more inclined to cheer the heroes in their great exploits than to honour the weaknesses of those that fail – thinking that they should have been perfect. We may fail the Lord just like the patriarchs did, yet we can experience forgiveness, knowing that our destinies are secure.*"

Immediately after the Lord prophesied seven wonderful promises to Isaac (26:3-4), history now repeats itself. Just like his father Abraham before him, Isaac forgets the astonishing pledges made by the Lord. He lies to Abimelek's men about his relationship with his wife Rebekah, claiming she is his sister. What's with these guys? This family is seriously dysfunctional.

However, just as with his father, Abraham, God intervenes and prevents an adulterous affair taking place. Furthermore, God restores Isaac as he confessed his fears and insecurity. God is committed to Isaac in the same way he was committed to Abraham.

These verses do not advocate deliberate rebellion against the Lord. They are, however, a potent reminder of the mercy of God for the contrite heart that repents. They also reinforce that God is committed to the covenants He has made. He is devoted to His servants – to us.

God is under no obligation to dig us out of the hole we sometimes dig for ourselves. But often (not always), God does save us from ourselves and our own folly. God provides a way of escape. In doing so He brings glory to His name.

How has God helped you in the past?

Right now is a good time to thank God for His faithfulness to his plans for your life. He is with you. He is for you. And bring to the Lord any unrepented sin of which you feel ashamed.

*Lord God, as once your Holy presence filled the temple,
we thank you that your Holy Spirit now fills your people the Church.
Fill each of us with your Spirit
that our lives are daily transformed from one degree of glory to another.
Ignite in us a passion to seek your will,
a desire to know your word,
and a readiness to respond.
So fill us with your Spirit that our lives cannot help breathe out your praise.
Make your Church a temple of the Holy Spirit.
Where there is injustice, make your church a royal priesthood and a holy nation.
Where there is violence, make your church an ambassador for Christ.
Where there is greed, hatred or pride,
grant your church a truly prophetic voice.
Fill your people with your Holy Spirit,
that we might be a holy presence in your world.
Amen*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London

Sunday, August 2: Genesis 27:1-40

The parable of the prodigal sons begins, "*There was a man who had two sons*" (Luke 15:11). I wonder if Jesus had the story of Jacob and Esau in mind when He told that story. The details are eerily familiar.

Today in the West we have no tradition of inheriting a father's blessing or being appointed as head of the family. Parents rarely see themselves as role models or spiritual leaders, and their children don't necessarily respect their wisdom or experience. So the brothers' battle for the blessing can be hard to understand.

However, in the ancient world, such oaths were incredibly important. Jacob really wants to receive the blessing of prosperity, power and divine promise Isaac has acquired (and, by implication, the power that goes with it). Esau, however, does not. Despite his outcry he's already given mixed messages about the importance of his family and his inheritance (25:34; 26:34,35).

Who hasn't told a white lie – about liking the socks we got for Christmas or the cake the children made for us? Such lies are attempts to be kind. Despite Scripture's apparently global condemnation of all lying (e.g. Revelation 22:15), we all know there are lies and lies. There are things we say which are not absolutely true but which are our well-intentioned, if sometimes inept, attempts simply to be nice or not hurt someone.

Other lies are very different, lies which are meant to hurt or intended to deceive, lies which 'give false testimony' against others (Exodus 20:16). Many leading characters of the Bible lie, including Rachel, Jacob's sons, David, and Peter (denying he knows Jesus). Abraham and Isaac have already told the same lie and almost created disaster (Genesis 20:2; 26:7).

Should Rebekah have lied? Clearly a strong woman, she was also a woman of faith and prayer (Genesis 25:22-23). She had been given prophetic insight into the future but, as is sometimes the case with strong characters, including some ardent Christians, she felt she must be proactive to ensure God's purposes would prevail even if this involved deceptive behaviour. She could have acted differently, perhaps confiding the prophecy in Isaac or teaching her children early what they should do. But she chooses to lie.

Christians sometimes read these stories as if the end justifies the means. But this is to excuse sinful behaviour. God's ultimate purposes will indeed prevail (Job 42:2) but along the way people, even key people, do blatantly sin. That God's intent is not finally frustrated, and may even seem to be progressed by wrong actions, does not make them right. Rather it means that God overrules, not by turning evil into good, but by ensuring that His will prevails, despite the evil choices people make. We could make the case that this is a major theme of the Old Testament.

What do these "bad" examples mean for us? They are a call to integrity, holiness, and blameless living (1 Thessalonians 3:12-14). We don't have to connive, weasel, or lie to make good things happen. God will accomplish His purposes. We are called to put our faith in Him and trust His sovereign will.

In what ways do I struggle to trust God? Why?

How can I trust Him more fully, today?

*Eternal and ever blessed God,
who sends Your Spirit to be our teacher and our guide,
help us never to be afraid to follow where your Spirit leads.
Help us never to be afraid of new truth,
but always to open our minds to Your Spirit's teaching.
Help us never to be afraid of courageous action,
but ever to act without fear as Your Spirit prompts.
Help us never to be afraid of the criticism or the persecution of people,
but ever to be certain that it will be given unto us through Your Spirit
what we must do and what we must say to defend the faith.
Let Your Spirit move within the hearts of all people,
that He may inspire them to discover truth,
to spread abroad beauty, and to live in love.
And help us to yield ourselves wholly to Your Spirit,
that You may be able to equip us for Your work,
and to use us in Your service:
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

William Barclay